

Family Records, A Major Resource for Documenting the Black Experience in New England

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I AM especially pleased to have been invited to participate in this conference on the "Black Experience" in New England. In the limited time assigned to me this morning, I will indicate some of the resources which must be used for a study of the lives of black New Englanders and which have proved helpful in my research.

Many black New Englanders have contributed to the history and culture of black people in this country. But without the details of their lives and work it is difficult to understand many of their actions, some of their beliefs, and the actual course of events which helped to shape their lives.

In spite of the fact that black literature is becoming richer day by day with the appearance of excellent personal portrayals, such as the recent biographies of William Wells Brown, Monroe Trotter, and John Roy Lynch, there remain many black New Englanders of importance whose life story has yet to be told. In some instances, it is not only an individual which is in need of investigation but also several members of one family who have all made serious contributions to our history and culture. Obviously, the

task of the researcher is greatly simplified when he discovers a sizable body of family papers.

I have often wondered why many black men and women of achievement were so unconcerned about the daily happenings in their lives that they preserved few if any personal documents which researchers find so valuable, while a few whose self-esteem or egotism urged them to keep not only every significant record, printed or manuscript, but much useless ephemera as well. In some instances, collections of personal papers have been enriched and enlarged by other members of the family and friends who had an innate feeling that one day this person's life story would be written and therefore carefully accumulated correspondence, photographs, newspaper clippings, certificates, keepsakes and other items. Perhaps love had something to do with all of this. An example of this kind of love may be noted in connection with the Ruffin Family Papers in The Moorland-Spingarn Collection at Howard University.

Florida Ruffin Ridley, the daughter of George Lewis Ruffin, Judge of Charlestown District Court, Boston, Massachusetts, busied herself for many years in arranging and annotating with factual statements some of his papers, but not without difficulties. She then attempted to deposit the papers in libraries where they would be preserved and made available to scholars. Dr. Adelaide C. Hill,

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Director of Afro-American Studies at Boston University, found these papers useful for her study of "The Negro Upper Class in Boston" when she visited our collection. Mrs. Ridley's interest in black history is reflected in her unsuccessful efforts to interest descendants of Boston families in participating in a historical society which was started at the time of the Boston tercentenary. In her correspondence to me, Mrs. Ridley spoke of her fruitless search to find an official record that indicated her father as Consul Resident in Boston for Haiti at the time of his death. Although a schoolmate of Thomas Paul's granddaughter, Mrs. Ridley experienced great frustration in her attempt to record the activities of the famous Paul family. Mrs. Ridley is to be commended for her efforts to preserve her family papers.

The researcher of yesterday who depended upon footnotes alone in his approach to documentary materials has changed. In seeking new facts, he demands new sources and unknown or little-used journals and newspapers in addition to known manuscripts. Of special interest to students and researchers are family records. Librarians and archivists are aware that they are needed to reinterpret history and to correct past errors. All over the country librarians are actively engaged in acquiring family papers whenever possible. The recent interest in black genealogy has caused many to take a look at their own paper possessions.

Although black genealogy is in an embryonic state, it is opening up areas of history previously ignored in most written records. Some academicians have begun to encourage their students to search for and preserve their family papers. One professor at Carleton College requires a

genealogical paper from his history class. An assistant editor at a large New York publishing firm recently became curious about her ancestry and began tape-recording interviews with her octogenarian grandmother, whose recollections have led this editor through archives and county records all over New England. No doubt, Alex Haley is responsible for stimulating many Blacks to prepare genealogies of their families. *The Wall Street Journal* for March 9, 1972 contains an article entitled "Black Genealogy" which announces that Mr. Haley and his brother are to create The Kinte Corporation, a nonprofit black genealogical library in Washington by 1976. Perhaps soon there will be a black genealogical society similar in purpose to the New England Historical Genealogical Society in Boston. For most black families, the first and only source helpful in genealogical research has been the family Bible. Recording in it, from time to time, was the best method for keeping records of births, deaths, and marriages.

Family records, as tools of research, may be divided into many categories whether they are to be found in library repositories or in homes of living descendants. They usually include personal and business correspondence, speeches or addresses, memoirs and biographical data, manuscripts, legal papers—wills, insurance documents, certificates, real estate transactions, property taxes, and ephemeral mementos. When constructing the life and times of an individual, these family records must be used along with printed biographies, autobiographies, newspaper accounts; town, church, and court records, census schedules, tombstone inscriptions; and printed city, county, and state histories, as well as with local directories.

The family records of many important Blacks have been lost, and their names do not appear in printed records. While collecting information a number of years ago on David Ruggles, a Connecticut-born black abolitionist, I did not find in any one place the main facts of his life. Learning that Ruggles had been buried in Norwich, Connecticut, the place of his birth, I traveled there only to find that the records in the Office of the Superintendent of the Cemetery prior to 1849 had been destroyed by fire. Ruggles died in December 1849. A search in the old cemetery for a tombstone or marker proved fruitless. Manuscript records in the Office of the Town Clerk of Norwich yielded more information. It contained the names of the members of his family, their dates of birth and death, and the cause of their death, as early as 1798. *The Norwich City Directory*, an excellent local town history, and Francis M. Caulkins' *History of Norwich, Connecticut* proved helpful for information on Blacks in Norwich. Caulkins, for example, gives comparative statistics on free Blacks, slaves, and whites. Names of slaves are listed as members of a household when a biography of the head of the family is included. At the end of this volume, under the general heading of *Africans*, other names appear with interesting biographical data. For example, Caulkins records the name of Leb Quy, "a trusty continental soldier," who served during three years of the war and was one of the town's quota in 1780 and 1781.

Many black New Englanders migrated to California prior to the Civil War. Correspondence between William Cooper Nell of Boston and Jeremiah B. Sanderson, who went from Boston to California, includes references to David Ruggles and other black Bostonians.

These letters are to be found in California archives. Thus one often must travel far to obtain the desired facts.

Ruggles established a fine Water Cure Establishment in Northampton, Massachusetts during the later years of his life. The Office of the Registry of Deeds in Northampton has preserved all the various real estate transactions in connection with the numerous buildings Ruggles purchased, mortgaged, and sold.

In the first article I published on David Ruggles, I stated that a D. Wright Ruggles of New Bedford, Massachusetts might have been a brother. This Ruggles had left New Bedford for San Francisco about 1840. When I located his son, David R. Ruggles, in San Francisco, I thought that finally I would have access to family papers, pictures, and informational documents. After an interview with the aged David R. Ruggles, I learned that his father had been given aid by David Ruggles, the abolitionist. He had discarded his slave name and assumed the name of his benefactor.

A lengthy paper might have been presented on the family of Angelina Weld Grimké, born in Boston, Massachusetts on February 27, 1880, and her family. Her father, Archibald Grimké, was for many years a lawyer, editor, writer, and political figure in Boston. As editor and publisher of the *Hub* and special writer for the *Boston Herald and Traveler*, his contribution to the history and culture of black New England was widespread. Archibald Grimké (1849-1930), a graduate of Harvard Law School, practiced law in the office of William I. Bowditch after his graduation. He later became associated with Butler R. Wilson, a well known black Bostonian. Charlotte Forten Grimké, wife of Francis Grimké, a brother of Archibald, was a student and

teacher in Salem, Massachusetts where she made a unique contribution to black New England history.

It was Ellen B. Stebbins of Boston who, in many letters to Angelina Grimké, urged her to collect and save every scrap of paper about her father, Archibald Grimké. She also encouraged Angelina to have her father dictate his memoirs to her in his later years.

The Grimké family papers in The Moorland-Spingarn Collection at Howard University contain thousands of documents relating to the various members. The papers of the Grimké family were not all acquired at one time. The Reverend Francis J. Grimké, Minister of the Fifteenth Street Presbyterian Church in Washington, deposited at Howard University in 1936 a large collection including his books and pamphlets, his manuscripts, albums, photographs, statuary and other items. He willed other papers to Carter G. Woodson who later edited and published them. The papers of Archibald Grimké were acquired by Howard University in 1960. These include many manuscripts of Angelina Weld Grimké. Just recently the papers of

Anna J. Cooper, the author of a history of the Grimké family, were added to the library. These include some records relating to Charlotte Forten Grimké.

The Grimké family papers comprise probably one of the largest collections of any one black family. The fact that the papers of the different members are to be found in one repository provides an excellent opportunity for the researcher to structure the life and times of the family with less difficulty.

Librarians and archivists, once they have acquired a collection of personal papers, seldom have time to seek documents from various descendants or friends of the person concerned. Researchers only occasionally apprise to them the location of additional materials. It is of vital importance for directors of manuscript repositories to issue calendars of their holdings and to provide supplements as collections are acquired and processed. A Union Catalogue of Manuscripts relating to black New Englanders should be established. It would certainly be a major source for a study of the *Black* experience in New England.