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Preserving the history of Boston's under-documented communities: final report

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**Northeastern University Libraries
Archives and Special Collections Department
NHPRC Grant #98-100
Preserving the History of Boston's Under-Documented Communities
Final Report, March 2001**

Project Objectives

Preserving the History of Boston's Under-Documented Communities had two objectives: (1) to work with advisors from the African American, Chinese, gay and lesbian, and Latino communities in Boston to plan for the preservation of their historical records; and (2) to process manuscript collections from three of these communities, which had been transferred to Northeastern's Archives and Special Collections Department prior to the start of the project (Elma Lewis materials, La Alianza Hispana records, and AIDS Action Committee of Massachusetts records).

The first goal involved working with project advisors to identify the universe of possible organizations (both active and defunct) to document, and categorizing the organizations according to a modified version of the topical breakdown of areas of human endeavor that is the basis of Richard Cox's work on documenting localities. From the resulting list, advisors selected the most significant organizations across all topics as priorities for documentation. While Northeastern concentrated its collecting efforts on the topic of social welfare/social reform, project staff encouraged local archival repositories to collect in other areas, making use of the project's research.

The second goal required creating traditional finding aids, which are available in the University's public access catalog and via the Internet. The collections represent three of the four communities involved in the project. Northeastern had no collection relating to the Chinese community at the time the grant was written.

Summary of Project Activities and Record of Accomplishments

Collections Processed

M38 Elma Ina Lewis (1921-2004) papers, 1917-1998

<http://www.lib.neu.edu/archives/collect/findaids/m38find.htm>

M42 National Center of Afro-American Artists records, 1924-1998

<http://www.lib.neu.edu/archives/collect/findaids/m42find.htm>

M43 Elma Lewis School of Fine Arts records, 1954-1992

<http://www.lib.neu.edu/archives/collect/findaids/m43find.htm>

M44 Museum of the National Center of Afro-American Artists records, 1966-1998 <http://www.lib.neu.edu/archives/collect/findaids/m44find.htm>

M55 La Alianza Hispana records, 1965-1999

<http://www.lib.neu.edu/archives/collect/findaids/m55find.htm>

M61 AIDS Action Committee of Massachusetts, Inc. records, 1975-2000
<http://www.lib.neu.edu/archives/collect/findaids/m61find.htm>

Collections Placed at Northeastern

African American Community

- Metropolitan Council on Educational Opportunity
- Roxbury Multi-Service Center
- Urban League

Latino Community

- Puerto Rican Entering and Settling Services
- Nelson Merced (politician)
- IBA

Gay and Lesbian Community

- Boston Alliance for Gay and Lesbian Youth
- Gay and Lesbian Labor Activists Network
- Women's Center Archives
- Men of All Colors Together
- Bromfield Street Educational Foundation
- The Theater Offensive

Northeastern is continuing to negotiate with 17 other organizations, including several from the Chinese community.

Repositories Actively Cooperating on the Project

- Andover-Harvard Theological Seminary
- Boston Public Library
- Brown University
- Francis A. Countway Library, Harvard Medical School
- Harvard University Theater Collection
- The History Project
- Massachusetts College of Art
- Massachusetts Historical Society
- Massachusetts Institute of Technology
- Massachusetts State Library
- Schlesinger Library at Radcliffe Institute
- University of Massachusetts/Amherst
- University of Massachusetts/Boston

Collections Placed at or Under Negotiation with Local Repositories

- The Boston Public Library has been working with Northeastern to locate missing issues of community newspapers, which will be microfilmed to complete their collection.

African American Community

- Boston Afro-American Artists (Massachusetts College of Art)
- Massachusetts Black Legislative Caucus (Massachusetts State Library)
- Black Political Task Force (Massachusetts State Library)
- Blacks in Government (Massachusetts State Library)
- Metropolitan Community Church (Andover-Harvard Theological Seminary)

Latino Community

- Pan American Society of New England (Massachusetts Historical Society)
- Hispanic Society of New England (Massachusetts Historical Society)
- Advisory Commission on Latino Affairs (Massachusetts State Library)
- Republican National Hispanic Assembly–Boston Branch (Massachusetts State Library)
- Three Latino MIT faculty members (Massachusetts Institute of Technology)

Chinese Community

- Chinese Culture Institute (very small collection but more is expected)

Gay and Lesbian Community

- Bay State Democrats (Massachusetts State Library)
- Boston Women's Fund (Schlesinger Library at Radcliffe Institute)
- Alegra Productions (Schlesinger Library at Radcliffe Institute)
- Hanarchy Now Productions (Schlesinger Library at Radcliffe Institute)
- Sojourner (Schlesinger Library at Radcliffe Institute)
- Triangle Theater (Harvard University Theater Collection)
- Butterworth Farm (University of Massachusetts, Amherst)
- *Gaylaxians* (Brown University)
- Harvard Gay and Lesbian Review (Brown University)
- Log Cabin Republicans (Massachusetts State Library)
- Governor's Commission on Gay and Lesbian Youth (Massachusetts State Library)
- Bay State Gay and Lesbian Democrats (Massachusetts State Library)

Outreach

Presentations on the project were made by the Project Director and/or the Project Coordinator at:

- Northeast Popular Culture Association annual meeting, 1999
- University of Southern Maine to a group planning a gay and lesbian collection, 1999
- Massachusetts Historical Records Advisory Board public meeting concerning documenting Massachusetts, May 2000
- Northeastern University Research and Scholarship Poster Session, May 10, 1999
- New England Archivists meetings, spring 1999, fall 2000
- Society of American Archivists annual meeting, 1999, 2001
- Association of Moving Image Archivists annual meeting, 1999
- Society of Georgia Archivists annual meeting, 1999

- Simmons Graduate School of Library and Information Science class in advanced appraisal, October 2000
- New England Library Association, Fall 2000
- American Historical Association, 2001
- Retired Person's Association, February 2001

Publicity

- Article, *The Cambridge Tab*, February 16-20, 1999
- Article by Richards and Krizack, *Annotations*, September 1999
- Article, *Bay Windows*, March 9, 2000
- Article by an advisor from the Latino community, *El Mundo*, 19 July 2000
- Article, *The Sampan*, August 4, 2000
- Article, *Boston Globe*, November 26, 2000 (see Appendix A)
- Article by Richard and Krizack, *Provenance*, in an issue devoted to diversity (in press)
- Radio interview, WUMB (91.9 FM) on *Commonwealth Journal*, February 18, 2001 (see Appendix B)

Other Activities/Outcomes

- Brochures designed and more than 500 distributed to potential donors, archivists, and other interested parties
- Documentation plan written for Metropolitan Council on Educational Opportunity (METCO) records (see Appendix C)
- Records management manual updated and distributed
- Database containing 1073 records relating to active and defunct community organizations created. Each record contains information including: organization/individual name, status (active/defunct), mailing address, contact person and relevant contact information, community (African American, Chinese, Latino, gay and lesbian), topic and subdivision, significance (memo field detailing information about the purpose of the organization), location of records (if they exist in a repository), date(s) of the organization, whether or not the material is in a repository, and recommendation of a repository for its records. The database is being kept current by former Special Projects Coordinator Nancy Richard, who accepted a job at the Bostonian Society in November 2000.
- Listserv created for Boston area archivists to exchange information about collections that are available and collections that have been acquired or processed.
- Documentation summary and recommendations written for each of the four communities (see Appendix D).
- Draft box list and appraisal advice for the Asian American Resource Workshop on records in their custody.
- Worked with John Souter and Kathleen Roe to produce the Documentation Topics Framework (a revision and expansion of the work of Richard Cox in *Documenting Localities*). We anticipate that this tool will be used for other documentation projects. (The framework was published as part of the article in *Provenance*.)

- With encouragement from this project, one of the African American community advisors took the initiative to present a two-part preservation workshop at the Roxbury branch of the Boston Public Library.
- The Project Coordinator used the tools and techniques developed in the project in consulting with the Valley Women's History Collaborative to document the women's movement in the Pioneer Valley, and to document the City of Cambridge, Mass.
- The Processing Archivist drafted a processing plan and a preliminary box list (see Appendix E) for the records of the Metropolitan Council on Educational Opportunity because she finished processing the collections identified in the grant early.
- The Project Director developed a standardized approach to potential donor organizations: 1) send a letter and brochure to the organization's director explaining the desired collaboration on historical records; 2) follow up with a telephone call and invitation the director to tour the facility with anyone else s/he wishes to bring along; 3) make a presentation to the organization's board or subgroup of the board, preferably at the Archives; and 4) work with lawyers to execute a gift agreement. This standard approach was modified as necessary to suit special circumstances; often one of the advisors made the initial contact with the organization or participated in the presentation to the board.
- The Project Director and Project Coordinator inventoried the records of the Asian American Workshop and provided appraisal advice.

Project Assessment

To our knowledge, this is the only documentation project that is incorporating both macro selection techniques and documentation planning. Project staff modified the topical framework suggested by Richard Cox and used it to identify the universe of organizations that could be documented and to plan how best to document the four communities involved in the project. Community advisors set documentation priorities from organizations identified. Project staff then worked with the selected organizations to effect the transfer of records, wrote documentation plans for these organizations, and processed their records. Thus, the project encompasses the whole range of activities from the general planning of how best to document the four communities to the processing of specific collections.

Project goals have been met or exceeded. The Processing Archivist (Michelle Maing, then Susan Earle) processed six collections (as it turned out, one of the original three collections was really four distinct collections), put the finding aids on the Northeastern University Archives and Special Collections Department website, and entered collection level bibliographic records into OCLC and the University's online catalog. Reference use of the processed collections has already been significant: Fifteen researchers have made use of these materials.

Susan Earle reached the project's processing goal six weeks ahead of schedule, so she drafted a processing plan and a preliminary box list for the records of the Metropolitan Council on Educational Opportunity, a related 200 cubic foot collection that was in extreme disarray when transferred. In addition, a documentation summary and

recommendations was drafted for each of the four communities, 11 collections were placed in the Northeastern University Archives and Special Collections Department, and about 22 collections have either been placed in or are being negotiated for by another local repository. In conjunction with the New York Heritage Documentation Project, a Documentation Topics Framework was developed, which should be useful to other community documentation projects.

A number of lessons learned in the course of the project would enable us to design and conduct it better were we starting today. First, the project was, perhaps, a little too ambitious in that it underestimated the time needed to secure fully executed gift agreements and to draft documentation plans. Patience and perseverance are needed when working with donors. Collections that we thought we were on the verge of receiving still have not materialized more than a year later, yet other collections were acquired within just a few weeks of the initial approach. Preserving their historical records often was not the highest priority of the organizations we approached, as it was for us. Further, we needed to educate the organizations about the importance of preserving the history of their organizations and to explain to them how the proposed collaboration with Northeastern to preserve their history was a win/win situation. Some organizations tried to bargain for more than the processing and storing of their records. They also wanted Northeastern to engage in public programming relating to the records, an excellent idea and one for which we wish we had sought funding.

Probably the most significant realization is the importance of selecting appropriate and committed community advisors along with a main liaison. In our estimation, the project was most successful in the African American, Latino, and gay and lesbian communities for two main reasons: 1) at the start of the project, the Archives already had several significant collections relating to each of these groups, and 2) the Community liaison had a strong tie to Northeastern. In addition, Northeastern has the African American Studies Department, the African American Institute, the Latino/a Student Cultural Center, the Women's Studies Program, and offers various courses in gender studies. This enabled us to find appropriate liaisons between the project and the communities. In the case of the Chinese community, the Archives had no connection with it prior to the start of the grant, and none of the Chinese community liaisons had a previously established relationship with Northeastern.

Early on in the project, it was clear that we needed to strengthen our relationship with the Chinese community. Several of our advisors were board members of the Chinese Historical Society of New England (CHSNE), but none of them had been involved in designing the project. Also, the CHSNE had not articulated its collecting policies, and it did not have a clear mandate from the community to broker collections, as did The History Project for the gay and lesbian community. Although the project did not result in the transfer of collections from the Chinese community, we did establish an important relationship and come to a better understanding of the Chinese community's needs, and we will continue to work with them.

Funded by Northeastern, project activities are continuing, although at a slower pace. Additionally, we have been allocated a full-time professional position, which, I believe, is due at least in part to funding received from the NHPRC.