

Archival Resources on the Web

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Creating the National Bar Association Digital Collection

By Heather Campbell, Grinnell College

Note: Heather Campbell was previously the public services/archives associate at the Drake University Law Library, 2018–2019.

The National Bar Association Archives, located at Drake University Law School in Des Moines, Iowa, includes materials pertaining to the history of the National Bar Association (NBA) and the National Association of Bench and Bar Spouses (NABBS). After the law school acquired the archives in 2007, law library staff began planning to digitize the collection and make it available online. With only one staff member and two student workers dedicated to the project, progress initially was slow. In 2018, however, law library staff made a number of process improvements that led to the successful launch of the NBA Digital Collection.¹

About the NBA Archives

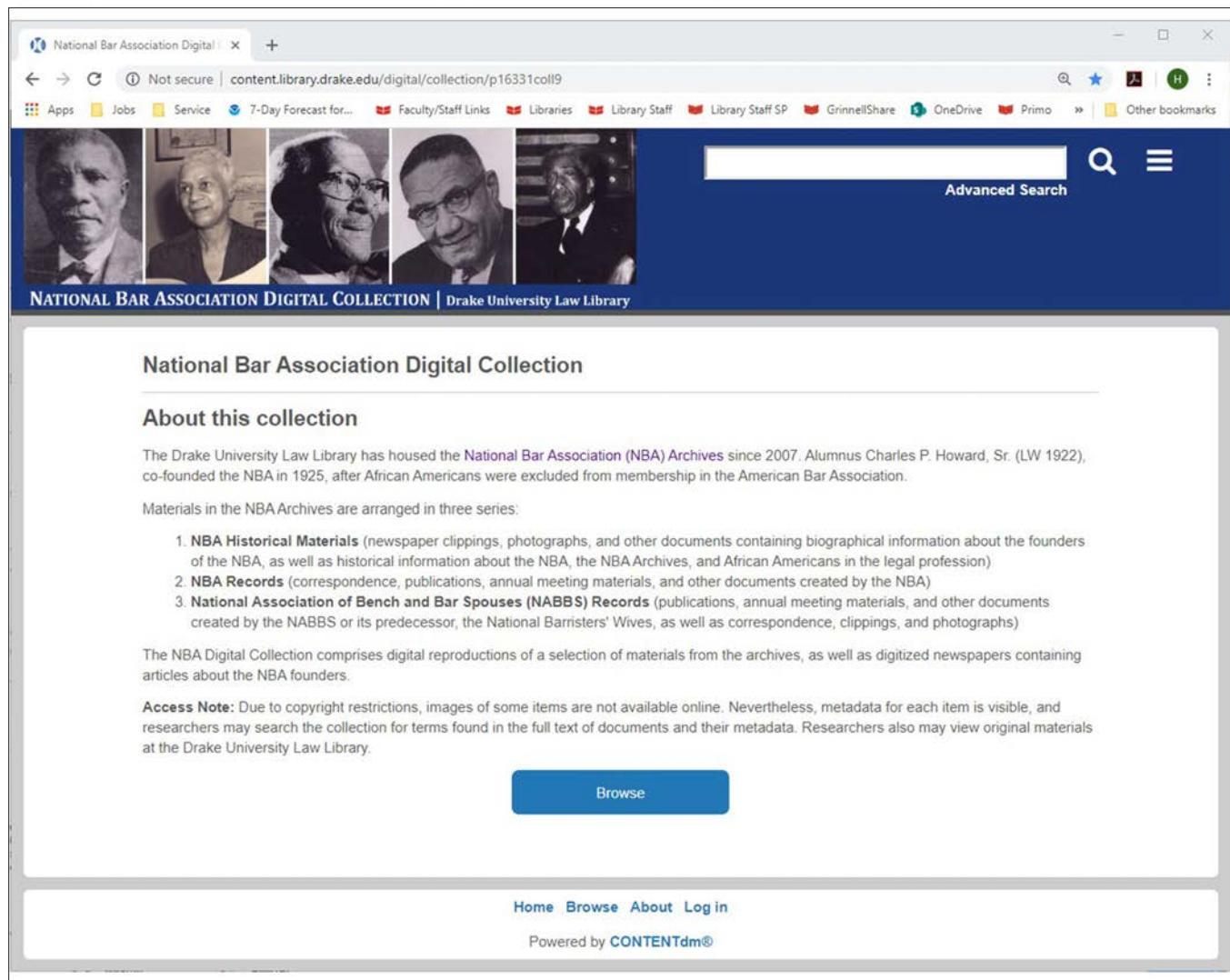
Founded in Des Moines in 1925, the NBA is an organization of African American attorneys and judges. In 1951, a group of women married to NBA members

founded the NABBS, originally known as the National Barristers' Wives. An attorney and alumna of Drake, Dr. Cleota Proctor Wilbekin (1930–2017) collected the bulk of the materials during the 1980s and 1990s, while serving as NABBS president and on the NBA's History of the Black Lawyer Committee. The Des Moines Public Library housed the collection until 2007 when it moved to the Drake University Law Library.

With its history of promoting equality and justice, Drake University Law School is a fitting home for the archives. One of the school's founders was Iowa Supreme Court justice Chester C. Cole, who wrote the opinion in an early civil rights case, *Clark v. Board of Directors of the Muscatine Schools* (1868). In that landmark case, 86 years before *Brown v. Board of Education*, Iowa's high court held that racial segregation



National Bar Association leaders cut the ribbon on the new NBA Archives Room in the Drake University Law Library in 2007. Credit: Drake University Law Library.



in the state's public schools was unconstitutional. In 1925, Charles P. Howard, an African American graduate of the law school, cofounded the NBA after predominantly white bar associations had denied membership to attorneys of color. Another NBA founder, attorney Gertrude Rush, had become the first black woman to practice law west of Mississippi in 1918. Howard, Rush, and three other NBA founders—S. Joe Brown, J. B. Morris, and George H. Woodson—feature prominently in the archives.

Initial Stages

Two student workers and a law library associate carried out the early stages of the digitization project. The student workers used a contactless scanner to digitize photographs, clippings, correspondence, and other materials in the NBA Archives. As they scanned, the students used a

spreadsheet to record metadata for each item, including file name, extent, title, description, subjects, and keywords. Meanwhile, the university's digital projects librarian created a new digital collection for NBA materials, hosted on the same server as Drake's other CONTENTdm collections.² Library staff then used CONTENTdm's web-based administrative interface to upload the scanned files and manually enter their associated metadata.

Library staff used this process to add more than 50 items to the digital collection, but several concerns soon arose. Metadata was not always complete or consistent: students had recorded names and keywords differently; some fields contained redundant data; and arrangement information was missing, partly because a comprehensive finding aid did not exist. Moreover, it was difficult to estimate how

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much of the archives remained to be digitized, as some physical materials were unprocessed. Finally, it was time consuming to use CONTENTdm's online interface to add items individually.

Process Improvements

Specialized Staff

Staff changes in the fall of 2018 offered opportunities for improvement. The new archives associate, a graduate student in library and information science, brought knowledge gleaned from courses in archival administration and digital libraries. The law library also broadened its student job posting and hired a business major with data processing experience. All student workers participated in digitization efforts, but they also had specialized responsibilities. A law/politics/society major worked on processing physical materials and describing them for the finding aid, while the business major cleaned metadata spreadsheets.

Expanded Documentation

To guide the newly hired students, we expanded our instructional materials. Digitization procedures gained a section on updating the scanner settings to meet federal guidelines for digitizing cultural heritage materials, as well as to perform optical character recognition (OCR) to enable full-text searching of PDFs.³ We also wrote instructions for metadata creation and added brief guidelines to each column heading in our metadata spreadsheet template. In addition, we created controlled vocabulary lists for certain metadata elements, including creator and subject, compiled mainly from the Library of Congress Name Authority File. We stored our vocabularies in CONTENTdm but also included them as drop-down lists in the metadata template. For the student tasked with making notes for the finding aid, we provided access to *Describing Archives: A Content Standard* (DACS) and emphasized the importance of the scope and content element in particular. As we implemented these procedures, we consulted frequently with student workers to ensure that instructions were understandable and that tasks and timelines were reasonable.

Batch Ingestion


To speed the addition of items to the digital collection, we investigated methods for ingesting digital objects in batches. We determined that CONTENTdm Project Client, a desktop application, was the best option; it uses tab-delimited text files to import file directories and their associated metadata. We knew it would be possible to create such files from our metadata spreadsheets, but first we needed to ensure that the metadata was normalized.

Metadata Design and Cleanup

Using CONTENTdm's administrative interface, we indicated the metadata elements that we wished to display for each item in the collection. We also configured each field's data type, visibility, searchability, and controlled vocabulary, if applicable. For reference, we found it useful to compile a metadata application profile (MAP). In our case, the MAP was a table of our selected elements, their mappings to the Dublin Core metadata schema (the typical element set for digital collections), values rules, and examples. These metadata tools helped us to keep track of which fields had controlled vocabularies, where boilerplate text should be used (such as in the rights field), how titles should be devised (following DACS rules), which capitalization and punctuation rules to follow, how dates should be formatted, and so on, to populate fields consistently.

For archives-specific metadata elements, we drew from our freshly published finding aid.⁴ We provided its URL in the source field, and we used its contents to populate the series and folder fields with details about the original material's location. Those fields will be especially helpful when retrieving items for which only metadata is displayed, for copyright or privacy reasons.

The MAP proved useful for creating guidelines for the student worker responsible for normalizing metadata spreadsheets. We also suggested Excel functions to automate date formatting, concatenating text from multiple columns, and adding prefixes to file names. With those tips and his own ideas, the student quickly cleaned dozens of spreadsheets, which we then used to generate tab-delimited text files for batch ingestion into CONTENTdm.



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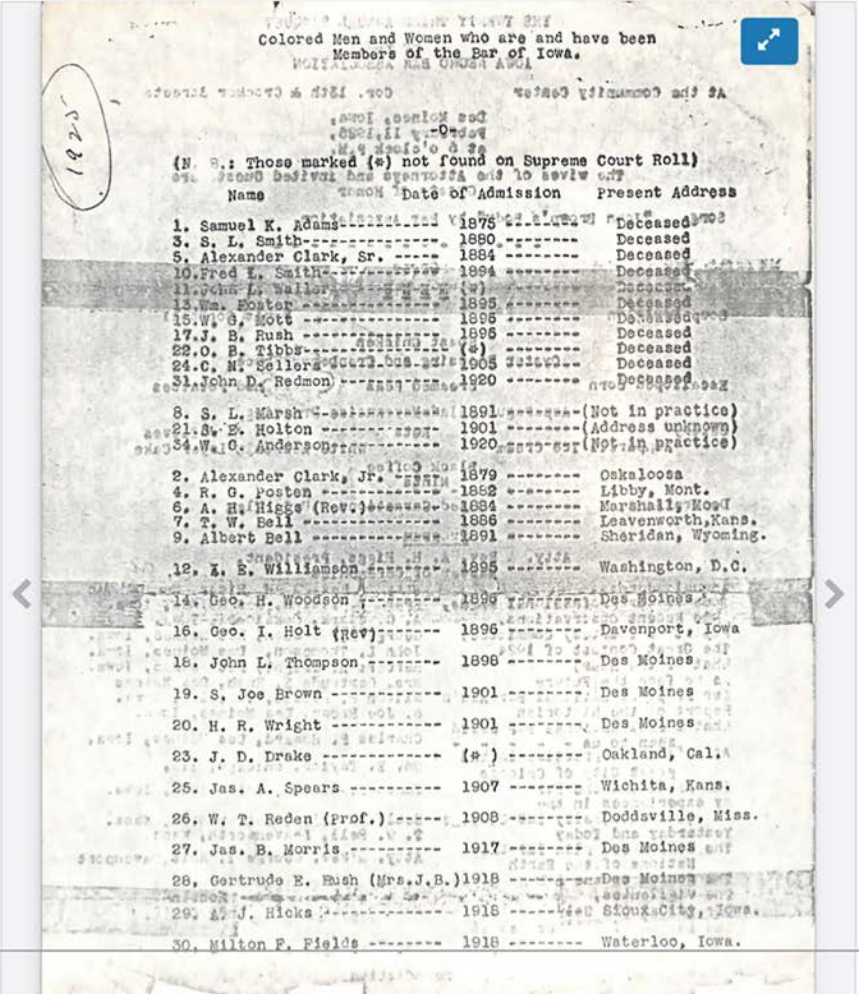
NATIONAL BAR ASSOCIATION DIGITAL COLLECTION | Drake University Law Library

Home > National Bar Association > Colored Men and Women Who Are and Have Been Members of the Bar of ...

Result 12 of 43
← Back to results

Colored Men and Women Who Are and Have Been Members of the Bar of Iowa

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Search this record

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Object Description

Title Colored Men and Women Who Are and Have Been Members of the Bar of Iowa

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Results

Thanks to these process improvements, our small staff added nearly 600 items to the NBA Digital Collection within one semester. We were pleased to receive feedback from the vice president of NABBS, who was thrilled to see the materials online. Creating the digital collection also raised the visibility of the NBA Archives in Google search results: we soon received multiple reproduction requests.

Another positive result of the project was the empowerment of student workers. Granting students responsibility for meaningful tasks, as well as opportunities for collaboration, resulted in improved procedures, efficient workflows, and an upbeat environment. Moreover, the students gained resume-worthy experience. To recognize their contributions, we held an appreciation lunch and gave the student processor a credit on the finding aid.

The screenshot displays the National Bar Association Digital Collection search interface. At the top, there are five portrait photos of African American women. Below them is the site title 'NATIONAL BAR ASSOCIATION DIGITAL COLLECTION | Drake University Law Library'. The search bar contains 'Rush, Gertrude' and 'clipping phot...'. The results are sorted by 'Original Date Ascending' and show 10 results per page. The first result is 'Only Colored Woman Now Member State Bar' from 1918. The second is a newspaper clipping from 1947. The third is a photograph of Gertrude E. Rush from 1950. The fourth is 'Mrs. Rush Dies Here' from 1962. The left sidebar shows filters for Subject, Original Form, Creator, and Series.

Looking Ahead

Although we achieved our project goal, we already can envision future improvements. Ensuring that the collection appears in the collaborative discovery systems WorldCat, ArchiveGrid, and SNAC would increase discoverability.⁵ Rescanning some materials would improve the overall quality of the collection, as a number of images were scanned before we acquired a sheet of antiglare plexiglass to place over shiny or curled materials. Human-generated transcriptions would improve usability, particularly for items with handwriting or illegible areas. Design changes beyond our customized

header could differentiate the collection further. Finally, it would be ideal to undertake digital preservation activities to safeguard the accessibility and integrity of the digital objects. Of course, these initiatives would require time and resources. For now, we are gratified that the NBA Digital Collection expands access to the history of African American leaders in the legal profession, particularly in the Midwest.

Notes

1. National Bar Association Digital Collection, Drake University Law Library, <http://content.library.drake.edu/digital/collection/p16331coll9>.
2. Drake University Digital Collections, <http://content.library.drake.edu>.
3. Still Image Working Group, “Guidelines: Technical Guidelines for Digitizing Cultural Heritage Materials,” Federal Agencies Digital Guidelines Initiative, September 2016, <http://www.digitizationguidelines.gov/guidelines/digitize-technical.html>.
4. Heather Campbell and Elyse Dye, National Bar Association Archives Finding Aid, Drake University and Law School Archives, <https://cowles-archon.drake.edu/index.php?p=collections/findingaid&id=493&q=>.
5. ArchiveGrid, OCLC, <https://researchworks.oclc.org/archivegrid>; Social Networks and Archival Context, <https://snaccooperative.org>; WorldCat, OCLC, <https://www.worldcat.org>.

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