Creating the National Bar Association Digital Collection

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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...
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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. 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...
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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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.

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. 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

Guidelines for Digitizing Cultural Heritage Materials,”
Federal Agencies Digital Guidelines Initiative, Sep-

guidelines/digitize-technical.html.

4. Heather Campbell and Elyse Dye, National Bar Associ-
ation Archives Finding Aid, Drake University and Law
School Archives, https://cowles-archon.drake.edu/

5. ArchiveGrid, OCLC, https://researchworks.oclc.org/
archivegrid; Social Networks and Archival Context,
https://snaccooperative.org; WorldCat, OCLC,