

## The National Archives for Black Women's History

The mission of the National Archives for Black Women's History (NABWH) is to identify, collect, and preserve the individual and collective history of African-American women with specific emphases on Mary McLeod Bethune, the National Council of Negro Women, and African-American women's organizations. In accordance with its mission, the NABWH assists researchers in locating materials in the archives and refers them to other appropriate repositories. Although access to the archives is by appointment only, simple reference questions are answered in writing and over the phone.

The collections housed in the archives cover a wide range of issues including civil rights, consumer issues, education, employment, health, housing, international issues, religion, and women's issues. The collection consists of more than 600 linear feet of manuscripts, a small library and vertical file on African-American women's history, and over 4,000 photographs and other audio-visual materials.

An abbreviated list of the holdings of the NABWH might include the following: the records of the National Council of Negro Women which examines many issues of interest to African Americans; the National Council on Household Employment which deals with domestic workers, once the largest component of African-American women workers; the records of the National Alliance of Black Feminists, which discusses the African-American reaction to the National Organization of Women and the Equal Rights Amendment; several collections relating to African-American women in the woman's auxiliary army corps; and materials from the affiliates of the NCNW, including several professional sororities.

The largest collection in the archives, the records of the National Council of Negro Women, consists of audio tapes, correspondence, memoranda, photographs, publications, and reports. This collection shows the wide influence that Mrs. Bethune had in both the African-American com-

munity and in the administration of Franklin Delano Roosevelt. Other topics with significant coverage are the NCNW's role in the Civil Rights movement and its use of Great Society programs to foster self-help initiatives in the rural south. The correspondence offers evidence of the regular interaction between the four presidents of the NCNW and the White House and the leaders of other African-American and women's organizations. Among the audio tapes, there are radio programs featuring interviews of Mrs. Bethune, including one by Eleanor Roosevelt.

The idea for an archives dedicated to the study of African-American women's history dates back to the 1940s when historian Mary Beard founded the World Center for Women's Archives. She asked Mrs. Bethune to serve as one of two African-American sponsors of the World Center. Mrs. Bethune then appointed Dorothy Porter of the Moorland Foundation at Howard University as the National Council of Negro Women's representative on the World Center's Negro Women's Committee on Archives. When the World Center disbanded in 1940, the NCNW took up the initiative and set up its own archives committee with Dorothy Porter as National Chairman. At this time, the NCNW also began promoting the study of African-American history through exhibits at its national headquarters, history kits, and radio programs.

The archives committee continued to function for over 30 years before the NCNW realized its dream of establishing a national archives. The NCNW inaugurated the Bethune Collection on Black Women's Organizations in 1976. The NCNW achieved its goal of establishing a national archives on November 11, 1979, with the dedication of the Mary McLeod Bethune Memorial Museum and the National Archives for Black Women's History.

—Susan McElrath  
Archivist

Mary McLeod Bethune Council House

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