

New collection broadens KSU's African-American archive holdings

by Sabbaye McGriff

More than 200 years of Georgia's African-American history, found in cemeteries, oral church histories and plantation remnants, has been added to the growing archive collections at Kennesaw State University's Sturgis Library.

The collection, titled "Oh Freedom: An Epic Journey through Georgia," is the first installment of a proposed five-year project to document historic African-American cemeteries, churches and plantations in Georgia from the 1600s-1890s.

Lawrence E. Walker, a television and film producer who specializes in historical documentaries, created the collection of more than 900 photos and 15 videotaped interviews with church historians and scholars, including several from KSU.

Working as a senior fellow with KSU's Center for African and African Diaspora Studies (CAADS), Walker presented highlights of the collection June 25 to about 50 archaeologists, preservationists and historians, civil rights activists and KSU faculty and students.



Television and film producer Lawrence Walker presents highlights of his collection of 900 photographs and 15 taped interviews documenting historical cemeteries, churches and plantations in Georgia

"This is a very significant collection for the KSU archives because it complements and adds another layer of context to related holdings in the KSU archives documenting different aspects of the African-American experience in Georgia," said Tamara Livingston, director of archives and records management at KSU.

The KSU archives includes among its unique local, state and African-American historical holdings the Cobb County NAACP Collection; the Gordon, Kruse, Wentzel Collection on workplace integration at Lockheed; the Bell Bomber Collection; the Georgia National Conference on Blacks in Higher Education Collection; and KSU professor Tom Scott's extensive oral history series on the history of northwest Georgia.

Livingstone noted that the new collection also is important because it is the first "digitally born" collection in the KSU archive. Once the work of cataloguing, authenticating and copyrighting the material is completed, it will be readily accessible to researchers via the Web.

Walker, who has produced similar documented histories of African-American graves, cemeteries and landmarks in the Northeast, said he got involved in the Georgia project because no such collective record existed in the state. "It's important to increase awareness about the role of blacks in the state," he said.

The timely transfer of Walker's digitized materials coincides with two recently publicized cases in Clayton County, Ga., and Atlanta's Buckhead community in which developers have initiated actions to raze or relocate historic African-American graves.

Rosa Bobia, KSU professor and CAADS director, said Walker's documentary work is particularly important in light of recent threats to these historical sites.

"The hope is to create a repository of this valuable research to make it available to researchers, scholars and students for years to come, and to do it while we still can," Bobia said.

Scholars and activists attending Walker's presentation said they looked forward to the additional historical resource the completed collection would provide.

In her work as the African-American program coordinator for the Historic Preservation Division of Georgia's Department of Natural Resources, Jeanne Cyriaque said she was encouraged by Walker's emphasis on oral and photographic church history in the collection.

"We've found that churches are the best sources throughout the state to find out more about its historic cemeteries and plantations," Cyriaque said. "The more we document this history, the more we can uncover about the state's history."

Suzanne Sammons, an archaeologist with the Douglas County Cemetery Preservation Commission, said the work on cemeteries in that county demonstrates the important history contained in cemeteries. For example, the Basket Creek Cemetery in Powder Springs — recently added to the National Registry of Historic Places and included in the KSU archives — dates back to 1886 and reveals traditions and burial customs slaves brought from the Caribbean and West Africa.

Likewise, Hugh Matternes, an archaeologist with New South Associates, a cultural resources consulting firm, said his company is working to trace links in pre- and post-emancipation mortuary elements, such as the use of broken pottery, silver objects and stones. "These connections are very important historically."

KSU senior Charlette Corey, an African and African Diaspora Studies major, said Walker's research was of particular interest to her because of her ongoing research into the little-known phenomena of plantation ownership among African Americans, especially women. "It's very exciting that I might find out more about black plantations," she said. "I've found that this was prevalent in many southern states, including in my own family here in Georgia."

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