

Records Relating to African Americans

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INTRODUCTION

From the first Dutch settlement of New Netherland to the most recent session of the State Legislature, the history of New York State is documented in the records preserved in the New York State Archives. While it is often difficult to access records on individuals and groups by race or ethnic group, there are several dozen record series in the Archives that provide retrievable information on African-American residents of New York during the past 350 years. These record series pertain to several broad subject areas: slavery and emancipation; military service; confinement in State institutions, performing arts, political radicalism, human rights, and education. Following are examples of the most significant of these records. The Archives record series numbers are given in square brackets []; requests for access to records should specify that number.

SLAVERY

"That every child born of a slave within this State after the fourth of July next, shall be deemed and adjudged to be born free . . ." From the Laws of 1799, Chapter 62 [13036]

Early Dutch settlers brought slaves from Angola and Brazil to work their new farms in the Hudson Valley. Slavery continued in New Netherland and in the succeeding British colony and State of New York over the next two centuries. At the end of the eighteenth century, New York had the largest number of slaves of any northern state. The institution of slavery is documented in the Dutch and British colonial Council minutes and papers, which document official government actions pertaining to slavery [A1809, A1894, A1895]. Ship manifest records document the importation of slaves during the mid-eighteenth century [A3196]. Extensive records of colonial probate courts, particularly wills and estate inventories, document slave ownership [J0038, J0043, J0301]. In 1785 New York State began the gradual process of eliminating slavery by prohibiting the importation of slaves for sale. In 1799 the State ensured the eventual freedom of children born to slaves, and by 1827 all slaves owned by New York residents were freed. Unique documentation of slave owners and children of slaves is contained in records of the State Treasurer and State Comptroller for the period 1797-1820 [A0827, A3211].

MILITARY SERVICE

"Richard Elsy. Born, Madison County. Age 20. Occupation, Farmer. 31st Regiment, U.S. Colored Troops. Killed in Action, July 30, 1864, Petersburg, Va." From Civil War Muster Roll Abstracts, 1861-1865 [13775]

The State Archives holds records documenting wartime military service of black New Yorkers from the Revolutionary War through World War I. Particularly significant are records that provide information on men serving in three regiments of black soldiers raised in the State during the Civil War. Abstracts of original muster rolls from these regiments contain data on the residence, age, occupation, enlistment, and military service of these individuals [13775, B0807]. Civil War registers prepared by New York's town clerks provide supplementary information on individual black soldier's lives and military service [13774]. The Archives also holds records for nearly one million New Yorkers serving in the First World War, including thousands of African-Americans. These summary records provide name of soldier, service number, dates of service, designation as "white" or "colored," residence, military unit, and any wounds or injuries sustained [B0808]. The Archives also holds complementary information and photographic images for a much smaller number of First World War soldiers, contained in records furnished by municipal historians to the State Historian [A0412].

STATE INSTITUTIONS

"Name: Joseph Thomas. Place of Nativity: Barbadoes. Age: 29. Occupation: Seaman. Usual Place of Abode: New York. Crime: Grand Larceny. Sentence: 3 years." From State Prison of the City of New York (Newgate) Register of Prisoners Received, 1797-1810 [A0775]

The Archives has acquired records, dating from the late eighteenth century to the 1980s, on hundreds of thousands of individuals confined in prisons, reformatories, mental facilities, special schools, and other institutions operated by the State. These records are among the most extensive institutional archives in the nation, providing extensive documentation on state-operated corrections, mental health, education, and social welfare programs. They comprise the largest body of records in the Archives that indicate the race or ethnic group of individuals, making them especially valuable for locating information on African-Americans. Of special importance are the approximately 150,000 case files from these institutions, which contain detailed information about individuals, including personal and family history, health, education, and occupational data. Records are available from prisons such as Sing Sing [B0143] and Auburn [14610-88D], reformatories such as the New York House of Refuge [A2064] and the Western House of Refuge for Women [14610-78], and mental health facilities including the Buffalo, Utica, and Willard State Hospitals [14231]. Summary information on individuals in correctional facilities is available without restriction; personal and medical data is legally restricted. All data in mental health case files is restricted.

PERFORMING ARTS

"Film: Harlem After Midnight. Date: 1934. Director: Oscar Micheaux. Producer: Micheaux Picture Corporation." From Motion Picture License Application Case Files, 1921-1965 [A1418]

Two groups of records in the State Archives provide documentation for researchers studying African-American contributions in the area of performing arts. Most significant are 73,000 files collected by a State censorship board that had responsibility for reviewing every film shown commercially in New York between 1921 and 1965. The files include filmscripts, correspondence, and other records pertaining to films that were produced or directed by African-Americans or that included black actors [A1418]. SARA also holds financial and program information on hundreds of cultural programs active in New York during the 1970s and 1980s. This information, contained in grant applications to the State Council on Arts, includes documentation on the large number of black theater, music, and dance organizations in New York City and throughout the State. Some information in the files is restricted [14064].

POLITICAL RADICALISM

"RED HOT MASS MEETING. 10,000 Harlem Citizens will protest against unjust interference with Negro Publications in Mails . . . COME and HEAR why the NEGRO PROBLEM is growing more acute every minute . . . Palace Casino, 135th and Madison Avenue, July 13th, 1919. " Broadside from Mass Meetings Investigation Files, 1918-1920 [L0038]

A special legislative committee, established during the "Red Scare" period following the First World War and chaired by Senator Clayton R. Lusk, investigated a large number of individuals and organizations suspected of promoting political radicalism throughout New York. The records of this committee include unique documentation on activities of African-American politicians, labor and community leaders, organizations, and others who participated in marches, protest meetings, educational programs, and other "seditious" activities during the period [L0026-L0041]. The Archives also holds documentation of more recent investigations of suspected radicals, including blacks. These records are part of the New York State Police non-criminal investigation files from the 1940s to the 1960s, which document investigations of individuals and groups suspected of involvement with the Communist Party, the Nation of Islam, anti-war protests, the civil rights movement, etc. Access to these recent investigation files may be restricted to protect personal privacy of individuals named in the files [A0795].

HUMAN RIGHTS

"Recently, there have been many public utterances to the effect that this discrimination must be eradicated. I would go beyond that and say that the elimination of such employment practices is just as essential to the survival of democracy as is the overthrow of the totalitarian powers, and, as it is nearer home than those powers, it must be done away with first." Comments by New York City Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia, 1941, from records of the New York State War Council's Committee on Discrimination in Employment [A4278]

Since the 1930s a number of State agencies and temporary commissions have examined crucial problems affecting broad segments of New York's black population. Many of these efforts are documented in State Archives records. During Governor Lehman's administration from 1933 to 1942, for example, there were a number of investigations into racial discrimination and its impact on housing and employment conditions [13682-53]. During the war years, the New York State War Council produced minutes and investigation files documenting attempts to identify and eliminate discriminatory labor practices [A4278]. Recent files from the Attorney General's office contain extensive documentation on hundreds of discrimination cases [18571]. Of particular significance are the records of Attorney General Louis Lefkowitz, who was instrumental in developing civil rights legislation during the 1970s [18574]. The Archives also holds selected Division of Human Rights Discrimination case files from the 1950s through the 1970s [10409] and Human Rights Appeal Board case files from the 1960s to the 1980s [15002]. In addition, the Archives maintains Division of Human Rights Investigation Files records pertaining to the work of a 1960's Governor's committee to review New York State laws and procedures in the area of human rights [10994]. In the 1970s and 1980s, affirmative action efforts increased substantially, resulting in new legislative and executive agency programs. Among records documenting this activity include those from the Assembly's Sub-Committee on Affirmative Action [L0103], the Division of Affirmative Career Programs [B0545], and the Merit System Affirmative Action Office [B0546].

EDUCATION

"The problem of admission to college from our high school on account of minority group membership is at times serious . . . The problem of the Negro is only occasional because few of them in our village have the ambition or intelligence to go beyond the secondary schools."

Comments from a high school principal in 1947 from Statewide Higher Education Study Files, 1946-1948 [A0614]

Societal changes occurring during and immediately after the Second World War spurred anti-discrimination legislation and programs in higher and secondary education. Examination of college admission policies in New York State revealed widespread discrimination against minority groups, including blacks. Records of the Temporary State Commission on the Need for a State University document evidence of the barriers preventing minorities from participating fully in higher education before 1948 and document programs begun to eliminate these barriers [A0614, A3036]. The State Archives also maintains more recent records from the Bureau of Higher Education Opportunity Programs for the period 1964-1990 which provide data on scholarship programs that assisted educationally and economically disadvantaged students [13223]. Records are also available from the State Education Department Bureau of School District Organization from the 1950s and 1960s documenting racial imbalances in elementary and secondary schools [B0477]. Files of the Commissioner of Education [15080] and a special division of urban education (1968-73) [14188] document the intense controversy over school desegregation and integration in New York City during the late 1960s. Additional files show how demonstration school districts were established in New York City in an attempt to remedy inequalities due to existing racial imbalance [B0471].

THE NEW YORK STATE ARCHIVES

Archives holdings are searchable through Excelsior, the online catalog of the New York State Archives.

Records in the State Archives may be used at the Archives' research room. Certain record series have been microfilmed by the State Archives, and the film may be borrowed on inter-library loan or