

A Collections Assessment Regarding Black History
in the Michigan Historical Collections,
Bentley Historical Library

by

Michelle L. McClellan

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Thesis Committee:

Professor Elizabeth Yakel, Chair
Associate Professor Ricardo Punzalan

Abstract

While “assessment” has received renewed attention in the Library and Information Science (LIS) field over the last decade, there is a lack of standardized procedures for how to conduct a collections assessment in an archival setting, particularly when the goal is to understand collection content or “aboutness.” The emergence of the Black Lives Matter movement and the COVID-19 pandemic have brought new urgency to archival collecting goals and methods. The purpose of the present study is to take stock as systematically as possible of existing holdings related to Black history in the Michigan Historical Collections (MHC) at the Bentley Historical Library. It is a pilot study intended to test a collections assessment method and to assess coverage in order to inform future fieldwork. My basic questions were: how much material related to Black history is in the MHC, and what is that material about? What time periods and what places does it cover? Since it would be impossible to examine the thousands of collections in the MHC directly to answer these questions, I used archival surrogates. A MARC record export was produced using the subject heading “African Americans—Michigan” as a filter. I analyzed that export in conjunction with other access tools created by Bentley archivists (an unpublished guide to African-American resources and a selective sample of finding aids). I was able to identify meaningful patterns in the subject sample, especially regarding the chronological and geographical distribution of collections. Evaluating size was more difficult because of disparate units of measure, but an overall trend was clear. Determining subject areas was even more challenging, in part because of variations in the amount and type of description across collections. These findings suggest that the current attention to reparative description in archives also provides an opportunity to think about how metadata can shape future collections assessments.

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Introduction

The purpose of the present study is to gain a better understanding of existing holdings related to Black history in the Michigan Historical Collections (MHC), Bentley Historical Library, in order to inform future collecting priorities and strategies. It is a pilot study, intended to focus on one topical area to assess coverage and to test a method that can eventually be used to assess the holdings of the Michigan Historical Collections writ large (either using a phased approach by topic or conducted holistically).

The choice of topic (Black History) was very much shaped by the historical moment, particularly the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement. The emergence of BLM and the COVID-19 pandemic have prompted archivists to consider new ways to collect current events as they unfold, prompting renewed debates about archivists as activists. In order to develop collecting priorities and strategies for archival fieldwork in the MHC on the critically important topic of Black history in this dynamic environment, a first step was to take stock of current holdings as systematically as possible.

While “assessment” has received renewed attention in the Library and Information Science (LIS) field over the last decade, there is a lack of standardized procedures for how to conduct a collections assessment, particularly when the goal is to understand the “aboutness” of a collection. “Aboutness” is an archival concept relating to the content or subject area of a resource. Categorizing resources according to “aboutness” is at the heart of information science yet “aboutness” is surprisingly difficult to define, even though it might seem self-evident (Bruza, Song, and Wong, 2000; Hjørland, 2001). An additional lens to bring to bear on “aboutness” is “by” versus “about.” Have the materials in question been created *by* African Americans regarding their own experiences, or were they generated by others *about* them? Both types of materials can provide insight, but understanding the distinction—and the power relations inherent in it—is important.

Part of the purpose of this study, then, is to develop and test a method that can be used to further analyze the MHC and contribute to collections assessment practice more generally.

I articulated the following research questions:

RQ1: How many collections related to Black history in Michigan are in the holdings of the Michigan Historical Collections?

RQ2: What is the size range of collections? In addition to the number of collections, how big or small are they?

RQ3: What is the chronological coverage of these collections? How well represented are different historical periods?

RQ4: The MHC has a statewide collecting mission. What is the geographical coverage? How well represented are different regions in Michigan?

RQ5: What other subject areas intersect? What aspects of Black history are covered in these collections? Are there topics that are particularly well represented? How do the topical foci of these collections intersect with and contribute to other aspects of Michigan history?

To create the dataset, a MARC record export was produced using the Subject Heading “African Americans—Michigan.” That export was then analyzed to answer the research questions, and further analysis evaluated the dataset in conjunction with other access tools created by Bentley archivists.

Literature Review

Collections Development and Diversifying the Archival Record

The tumultuous events of the last several years (including a worldwide pandemic, political violence in the United States, and the intensification of movements for social justice) have brought renewed attention to the concept of historical memory and whose stories get preserved. This is not the first time that turmoil in the present prompted a call for more inclusive archives. In 1970, radical historian Howard Zinn challenged the attendees at the Society of American Archivists annual meeting to abandon their professed neutrality and seek out records from individuals and groups too often marginalized. Historians and archivists during the 1970s and 1980s focused on “history from the bottom up,” identified and collected previously ignored resources, and produced paradigm-altering reference tools, such as *Women’s History Sources: A*

Guide to Archives and Manuscript Collections in the United States, edited by Andrea Hinding, et al., and published in 1978.

In the case of African American history, it is fair to say that what we might call a community archival ethos was there all along, whether recognized by “mainstream” or predominantly white institutions or not. During the era of segregation, white collecting institutions generally ignored African American history and excluded Black scholars outright, and only a few formal collections devoted to Black history were established anywhere in the U.S. But among African American communities, schools, pageants, community celebrations, and oral traditions served as keepers of historical memory (Brundage, 2005). Gibbs argues that archivists today need to understand this history. Too often, she warns, archivists “characterize and assess minority collections based on our profession’s narrow perspective of diversity objectives, not on the documentation priorities of the originating community that usually have designated social and political purposes” (Gibbs, 2012, p. 196). For her part, Hughes-Watkins calls for a “reparative archive,” using as an example a Kent State University initiative to collect on Black student activism in order to overcome a racialized memorialization wherein the story of white students effectively erases all others (Hughes-Watkins, 2018). Hughes-Watkins and others caution that predominantly white institutions that seek to collect Black history (or that of any other under-represented group) must be willing to interrogate their own racial history as part of the process (Bowers, Crow, and Keeran, 2017).

In her 1998 study of the motivation of Black donors of archival material in North Carolina, Church interviewed Black donors, non-donors, and archivists who had successfully built collections in African American history. She found little research on donor motivation, and archivists—even those who had built collections—acknowledged that they did not have a systematic understanding of why donors gave materials. Existing collections focused on African American history that Church identified were generally small, and they often focused on widely recognized issues in African American history such as slavery, Reconstruction, and the Civil Rights movement. They tended toward “notables,” individuals who had been prominent in their communities, at both the national and local scale. Geographic proximity, some kind of personal connection to the repository, and simply being asked to donate all played a role in donors’ motivation. The main reason that people did not donate was that no one had ever asked them to do so. A subset who had been asked declined because of their “self-assessment,” believing they

or their experiences were not important enough to merit inclusion. In deciding where to donate, the individuals in Church's study articulated a dilemma: "Those who donated their papers to traditionally White institutions indicated that they would have donated them to historically Black institutions without hesitation had they felt confident that such facilities were in a position to maintain the materials and provide scholars access to them" (Church, 1998, p. 29). The quandary faced by these donors is a direct result of the segregated memory infrastructure and its unequal allocation of resources in the U.S. It is a good reminder that assessment strategies within and across institutions must take this history and its ongoing legacy into account.

Evolution of Collections Assessment as an Approach

During the last third of the twentieth century, manuscript repositories were inspired by current events, new scholarly perspectives, and technological changes to take a fresh look at collecting strategies. With organizations and institutions generating increasing amounts of records, facilitated by new and easier duplication technologies, must everything be kept? While this phenomenon was especially evident in records management programs, it also affected manuscript repositories which faced slightly different but not unrelated challenges. For them, the question might be phrased as, out of all the records that could be collected, how should a repository choose? According to Phillips in her 1984 study of collections policies, "Sporadic, unplanned, competitive, and overlapping manuscript collecting has led to the growth of poor collections of marginal value" (p. 31).

These concerns led to efforts to standardize collections policies and practices. While the American Library Association put forth guidelines for collection development, these were not directly applicable to manuscript repositories, for whom the possibilities seemed almost too open-ended (Abraham 1991; Phillips 1984, see especially 37-38; see also Marshall 2002 on collections policies for college and university archives; Crosetto, Kinner, Duhan, 2008 for collections assessment in a library). In an effort to create rigorous, systematic collection development practices and to show that repositories were more than antiquarian hobbies of the elite, archivists developed a variety of appraisal strategies in the 1980s and 1990s. The range of approaches and their rationales goes beyond this brief review, but I note a few examples here to contextualize this study.

One of the most creative and ambitious of these approaches was documentation strategy (Samuels, 1986; Hackman and Warnow-Blewett, 1987; Marshall 1998; Abraham 1991). In this model, archivists identify a topic or event, enumerate records that would illuminate it, and pursue those records systematically (and often collaboratively with records creators and with other repositories). One project to collect records related to American physics enjoyed some success, but most archivists concluded that the method was overly ambitious and therefore unworkable (Abraham 1991). While the chance to think through a topic in advance, including consultation with records creators and subject matter experts, could seem ideally suited to manuscript repositories, archivists in that setting found it difficult to establish clear parameters of what might be available to collect. Since the possible “universe of records” associated with a particular topic or event was inherently unknowable, Anderson concluded that archivists in manuscript repositories “typically live in a relative instead of a Newtonian world” (Anderson, 1985, p. 297). Some aspects of documentation strategy have been incorporated into other approaches (named or not), but not without critique; Mark Greene, for one, noted difficulties in defining priorities and determining what would be “adequate” documentation of a given topic and maintained that use deserved more attention as a factor in appraisal (Greene, 1998).

Phillips (1984) argued that collections assessment should be part of the process of developing a collections policy: evaluating the strengths and weaknesses of the current collection was an important step in identifying priorities. Greene and colleagues emphasized that part of the process in the Minnesota Method of appraisal (Greene and Daniels-Howell, 1997), yet many writers seemed to skip over that step or at least give it short shrift, perhaps eager to move on to what seems the more exciting task of determining what to collect next. One major exception to this tendency was an initiative at three major repositories in the Midwest: the Bentley Historical Library (BHL) at the University of Michigan, Minnesota Historical Society (MHS) and the State Historical Society of Wisconsin (SHSW). In addition to the challenge of “haphazard” collection in the midst of abundance already discussed, archivists at these institutions were inspired by the rise of the “new social history” to broaden their collecting mandates to include more materials from everyday people and social movements. Yet this kind of collecting was generally more disparate and diffuse than a focus on elite individuals and institutions, making it all the more important to develop a coherent strategy. As one fundamental step in building that strategy, these organizations analyzed their current holdings (Endelman, 1987; Thompson, 1988; no publication

resulted from the SHSW but Endelman described it in her article). Since the BHL is the subject of the present study, I will discuss this prior assessment initiative in some detail (Endelman, 1987, provides a thorough overview).

The three repositories used similar but not identical approaches, and each had slightly different resources to bring to bear on their respective assessments. Archivists at each institution determined what they wanted to know about their holdings in order to sort and count. The overall approach included a quantitative assessment in which “specific characteristics of a repository’s holdings are enumerated” and a qualitative evaluation which contextualized those findings (Endelman, pp. 341-42). The BHL focused on material from the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, since one main goal of the assessment was to inform future collecting. Data was gathered on 1106 collections, representing one third of all collections with post-1870 material. Staff members then assigned up to five subject areas and five geographic locations¹ to each collection and also noted each collection’s size and chronological coverage (Endelman, p. 343). Both the BHL and the SHSW had outside funding to support the project and used sampling and computer analysis. In contrast, at the MHS existing staff members assessed the collection by hand.

For all three projects, understanding the subject matter or “aboutness” represented in their collections was a central goal, but defining and determining subject areas proved complex. As Endelman explained, “The creation or selection of a list of subject categories to provide the intellectual framework for a collection analysis is perhaps the most critical element in the project design” (p. 343). The challenge was to be sufficiently thorough without becoming cumbersome and overwhelming, or in Endelman’s words: “The ideal list would be detailed enough to include the universe of human activity and, by extension, the range of subjects to be documented in a given repository. Yet it should be simple enough to apply without a great deal of difficulty” (p. 343). The list should be granular enough to capture nuance but not so idiosyncratic that it was inconsistently used or lost the capacity for comparison. The MHS used a rubric that had previously been developed by the Midwest Archives Guide Project, while the SHSW created its own list of subject categories by adapting the work of anthropologist George P. Murdock whose *Outline of Cultural Materials* categorized human activity for cross-cultural comparisons. The

¹ The MHS and SHSW assessments covered a network of repositories across their states, while the BHL is a single institution with a statewide collecting mandate.

staff at the BHL considered a number of models before deciding to use (with some modifications) the list developed by the SHSW, in part because doing so promised to allow comparison between the findings at SHSW and BHL and coordinate collecting in the future.

The findings, according to Endelman, “produced a few surprises, dispelled some myths, and confirmed a number of assumptions concerning collection strengths and weaknesses” (p. 344). Endelman emphasized that “collection assessment is descriptive, not prescriptive” (p. 347) and converting such findings into a collecting strategy is “not simple” (p. 347). She also noted that strengths and weaknesses are always comparative, not absolute. At the BHL, the results were used to articulate clearer criteria for field work by identifying collecting priorities, making acquisition more strategic rather than reactive, and even creating a new committee to be involved in appraisal (Endelman, 1987; Weideman, 1991). Endelman concluded by emphasizing the importance of standardizing collections assessment methodologies (including subject headings) to facilitate cooperative collecting strategies across institutions.

The collections assessments discussed so far were conducted, for the most part, in the context of collection development and appraisal. By the early twenty-first century, the LIS field as a whole moved toward a heightened “culture of assessment” (Carter 2012). This focus had a variety of causes: sometimes it was to satisfy funders or to demonstrate value to a parent institution or other stakeholders. For archives and special collections, there was also an increasing imperative to address a backlog of materials. Against this backdrop, the OCLC (Online Computer Library Center) published a report on archival collections assessment (Conway & Proffitt, 2011). In 2019, a joint task force of the SAA and the ACRL/RBMS (the Rare Books and Manuscripts Section of the Association of College and Research Libraries released [“Guidelines for Standardized Holdings Counts and Measures for Archival Repositories and Special Collections Libraries.”](#) Both documents illuminated key issues and challenges in collections assessment today: both identified a lack of standard processes and sought to promote best practices, yet both stopped short of recommending specific procedures, instead deferring to local needs.

The OCLC report defined archival collections assessment as “the systematic, purposeful gathering of information about archival collections” (p. 7). Such assessments had not been “a regular part of collections management practice,” according to Conway and Proffitt, at least in part because most archives lack the capacity to do them without additional resources—as

the BHL and the SHSW enjoyed for their projects in the 1980s, for example. Just as the archivists at the BHL chose an approach that could facilitate comparison and cooperation, Conway and Proffitt urged twenty-first-century archivists to develop a collections assessment “community of practice” to create models and share insights. At the time of this report, there was no standard procedure or method for conducting an archival collections assessment. Nor should there be, according to the authors, since the process should be shaped by the intended purpose, and that will vary.

The OCLC report laid out common reasons to conduct a collections assessment, including to: uncover so-called “hidden collections,” determine processing priorities, evaluate the condition of materials, and manage collections. Archivists must determine the scope of the project, decide upon or create a methodology and allocate resources, and document the process (p. 16). Consistent with the Midwestern projects from the 1980s, the OCLC report called for the collection of quantitative and qualitative data (that which requires a higher degree of evaluative rating by the assessor) (p. 18). Despite advances in electronic databases and digital tools by the early twenty-first century, the process remained highly dependent on human effort and judgement and very labor intensive. Regardless of the motivation for conducting an assessment or the specific collections to be analyzed, the OCLC report explained, “the basic approach is the same: open the boxes and look at the stuff” (p. 17).

The OCLC report came out of a particular moment in archival theory and practice, one characterized by concern about managing the backlog, efforts to identify so-called “hidden collections,” and debates about MPLP (More Product, Less Process) a practice to maximize the number of collections described at a minimum level in public databases and minimize detailed and labor-intensive collection processing of a few collections. Reflecting this context, the mindset and methods of the OCLC report were especially focused on collection management without, as the authors themselves point out, sufficient attention to other issues of increasing importance such as digitization readiness, user needs (especially when the LIS field was moving more toward centering users as a priority), and collecting policies. As the authors acknowledged, assessing “research value” is much more difficult than determining whether archival containers are adequate. And there are sound reasons for focusing on practical matters of stewardship and accessibility of an archive’s existing holdings. But ideally, collections assessment will feed into collecting strategies. The OCLC authors point out that “a collections assessment can range from

a one-time-only inventory of some or all holdings to a comprehensive, ongoing, data-gathering activity” (p. 13). Following from this, accessioning, stewardship and use, and de-accessioning could all be thought of as a sequence of activities, with collections assessment informing each stage and ensuring that archives are dynamic rather than static entities (Gerenscer 2015; Anderson 1985).

The 2019 Guidelines focused even more on quantitative assessment yet did not spell out detailed procedures. This guide enumerated what should be counted: intellectual units held, physical units held, physical space occupied, and digital space occupied, with “recommended” and “optional” levels of data gathering and computation for each. But no survey instrument was provided, because that will vary by the needs of the repository: “The guidelines do not suggest or recommend any particular methods or even best practices regarding the ‘hows’ of counting or measuring” (p. 3). The guide noted that most repositories will have to use separate processes and data sources to count the designated units and spaces, and that each may be done independently. The guide recommended that when counting, repositories consider whether each unit is “discoverable” in the sense of being described online, and it emphasized the importance of documenting assessment procedures. But unlike the assessments from the 1980s, this framework did not address “aboutness.”

Collection Assessment for Reparative Purposes

This final section of the literature review considers recent initiatives that seek to identify diverse holdings in archival collections and libraries. In some cases, these projects evoke the potential for collaboration inherent in the assessments from the 1980s while using new tools. One example is the Archives Matrix Project in Arizona, which echoes the challenges Endelman identified in creating a schema to capture “aboutness” (Coyner & Pringle 2014). Intended to update a 1983 Arizona survey, this 2009 project had a multitude of goals: gain a better understanding of collections statewide, including backlog and “hidden collections;” “highlight un(der)documented communities and subjects;” and facilitate cooperation among repositories (p. 463). Archivists across the state were invited to contribute by listing and categorizing their collections directly into an Excel spreadsheet with drop-down fields. When prompted to assign subject categories, some archivists preferred not to “pigeonhole an entire collection into a single subject” and thus chose “other” (Coyner & Pringle 2014, p. 464). There was also inconsistency

in other terminology such as “accession” versus “collection” and “processed” versus “unprocessed.” The instrument was revised for a subsequent round of data collection but analyzing the subject field remained challenging because of how participants designated subject categories as “primary” or “secondary.”

While the Arizona Matrix Project instrument design did not allow sophisticated statistical analysis given the lack of consistency in how categories were assigned, it facilitated participation because it was easy to use. The project yielded knowledge about collections across the state (such as which subjects were most and least represented, and which collections were available to patrons). It also encouraged communication between repositories. By these measures, the assessment could be considered a success. On the other hand, the resistance to classifying reflected the concern that such a process “can obscure the nuances of the collections and alienate communities and subjects that do not fit neatly into prescribed categories” (Conyer & Pringle, 2014, p. 460-61). Yet avoiding classification is not the solution, since that compromises discoverability and could therefore result in further erasure and marginalization.

Other initiatives to identify more diverse collections within existing holdings have been launched around the U.S. in recent years. Although sometimes referred to as collection assessments, they are not assessments of the holdings of a particular repository in a holistic sense, as outlined in the OCLC report. Instead, they are often projects to identify collections across repositories that center on a common subject or theme, such as Black history or that of other historically marginalized groups. Examples include the [Black Metropolis Research Consortium Collections on Black Experiences](#), centering on Chicago, the [Philadelphia Area Consortium of Special Collections Libraries Hidden Collections Processing Project](#), and the [Recollection Wisconsin Gap Analysis](#). Another example centered on Latino Art Archives (Grimm and Noriega 2013). These projects often aim to raise awareness of collections, including the creation and dissemination of online finding aids, and to foster collaboration among repositories and among archivists, records creators, and users. In these ways, they can be seen as a modern-day version of documentation strategy. Collections assessment is often a part of the overall initiative (if only to count and categorize collections among existing holdings) but understanding an archive’s collection as a whole is not usually the goal.

“Diversity audits,” often focusing on books for children and young adults, represent a similar initiative in libraries (Jensen, 2018; Roos, 2020). Guidance on how to do diversity audits

and discussion of the rationale for them has appeared in publications for school librarians and in library blogs. As with collections assessment in archives, the challenge is in defining the categories to reveal “aboutness” and then assigning books to those categories. To do so, librarians use subject headings but also may evaluate characters and even the authors and illustrators against various characteristics (including race, gender, sexual orientation, neurotypicality, and even whether characters are human or animal). While diversity audits are a topic of conversation among archivists, no archival-specific practices have yet emerged, according to a 2021 meeting of the SAA’s Acquisitions and Appraisal Section (SAA A&A Third Thursday, March 18, 2021).

Returning to the Bentley Historical Library: since the extensive collections assessment of the 1980s, the types and volume of records and the methods for managing them have changed substantially. On the one hand, electronic databases and online catalog searching can make it easier to quantify and categorize an archive’s collection. The analytical capacity is or should be much greater than the days when staff manually counted entries in a physical card catalog. On the other hand, the challenges of assessing current collections echoes wider abundance-related issues in archives generally.

Beyond issues of volume, archivists today are living through a transition in collections management. It can be hard to track the evolution of an archive’s collection over time when data about the collection has been recorded in different formats, using different strategies, and assembled for different purposes. There might be a substantial amount of data about a collection but that data may not capture what would be most useful for various types of assessment in terms of today’s standards, sensibilities, and goals. For example, while the chronological coverage represented in a collection is generally recorded, the time that that collection came into the archive is often not available through the same tools, such as a MARC record. Easy access to accession dates in conjunction with “aboutness” information would allow better analysis of the development of a collection over time, including how well it conformed to collecting priorities and the relative success of outreach efforts. This is another argument for assessment to be ongoing and recursive. The more assessment is done, the more data gathering can be attuned to the particular needs and goals of the institution, just as the OCLC and SAA-RBMS reports recommend.

Methods

Goal of Study

The goal of the present study is to investigate the extent of existing holdings in the Michigan Historical Collections at the Bentley Historical Library related to Black history in order to inform future collecting priorities and strategies. My basic questions were: how much material related to Black history is in the MHC, and what is that material about? What time periods and what places does it cover? To address these areas of inquiry, I formulated the following research questions:

RQ1: How many collections related to Black history in Michigan are in the holdings of the Michigan Historical Collections?

RQ2: What is the size range of collections? In addition to the number of collections, how big or small are they?

RQ3: What is the chronological coverage of these collections? How well represented are different historical periods?

RQ4: The MHC has a statewide collecting mission. What is the geographical coverage? How well represented are different regions in Michigan?

RQ5: What other subject areas intersect? What aspects of Black history are covered in these collections? Are there topics that are particularly well represented? How do the topical foci of these collections intersect with and contribute to other aspects of Michigan history?

Since it would be impossible to examine the thousands of collections in the MHC directly to answer these questions, I used archival surrogates—in this case, existing administrative records, an unpublished guide to African-American resources, and a selective sample of finding aids. These sources of data, their advantages and disadvantages, and the ways in which I used them are explained below.

Data Source #1: MARC Records

A MARC record is a bibliographic record containing descriptive information about an item or in this case, an archival collection, that can be read by a computer. Since the primary unit of measure in archives is the collection, MARC records can be used to generate a list of collections by applying a filter. Once such a list is created, it can be further analyzed for chronological and geographical coverage, collection size, and additional subject areas.

The advantages of using MARC records for collections assessment include:

- The use of a filter that seemed a perfect match for the area under study (the subject heading “African Americans—Michigan”)
- The ability to search through the holdings of the MHC using that filter far more efficiently and systematically than can be done by hand
- The generation of a dataset that could be sorted and analyzed to address research questions concerning size of collections, location, chronological content, and other topical areas included in each collection

Disadvantages include:

- Despite the appearance of standardization in nomenclature, the resulting dataset would only be as reliable as the cataloging practices that assigned metadata to each collection.
- Cataloging practices have changed over time, as have systems for storage and retrieval of descriptive information, and the effects of any such changes on the application of the filter and the resulting dataset were impossible to determine in advance.
- MARC data does not include an accession date, with the result that this data did not illuminate collecting practices related to Black history over time.

Generating the MARC Export

To create a dataset that would address the research questions, a MARC export was generated with the following parameters:

1. All MARC records in the Bentley that include/exclude:
 1. 650 Subject begins: African Americans -- Michigan
 2. 970 Format: Archive, Manuscript, Mixed Material
 3. NOT 110 a University of Michigan
2. Fields (with all subfields)
 - 100

- 110
- 245
- 300
- 500
- 600
- 610
- 650
- 651

The subject heading “African Americans – Michigan” aligned with both the topical area under study and the collecting mission of the Michigan Historical Collections (MHC), the statewide history of Michigan.

The format was restricted to “Archive, Manuscript, Mixed Material” because the goal here is to inform strategic planning for collections development, specifically archival fieldwork. The Bentley does contain published works but I did not include those since the process of adding published materials to the MHC is different.

Collections that were identified by 110a subject field as University of Michigan were excluded. In some ways that is an artificial distinction: the history of the university is part of state history; faculty papers and administrative records often overlap with statewide issues and content; cataloging practices at the BHL have not always rendered a hard-and-fast distinction. But practical concerns shaped the decision to limit the findings in this way. Because this collections assessment is part of strategic planning for fieldwork, and because fieldwork responsibilities at the BHL are currently divided into university history and the MHC, these parameters were intended to yield MHC results.

I included subject fields (6XX) beyond these specific parameters to provide data that could help categorize and characterize the collections with the goal of achieving a better understanding of the geographical, chronological, and topical coverage they provide. The resulting report was then analyzed according to the Research Questions below. Some analysis was done by hand, and a research assistant used Open Refine to clean the data for additional analysis.

Data Source #2: African Americans in Michigan Subject Guide [date unknown]

Bentley staff created this access tool, one of a series of Subject Guides at the Bentley focusing on various topics such as Detroit, Ann Arbor, or the Civil War. The African Americans in Michigan Subject Guide [hereafter AAM-SG] is a list of Bentley collections grouped into thematic areas

("Civil Rights Activists and Organizations," "Education," and "Slavery, Abolition, and the Civil War," for example), as well as short list of published sources also held by the Bentley. The AAM-SG includes a brief explanation of its purpose: to assist researchers "by providing a broad overview of the lives of African Americans in Michigan and the challenges they faced." It is selective, not exhaustive. It does not identify on the document who created it, when, or what method was used to compile it. This lack of descriptive data is not uncommon, but it makes it more difficult to contextualize the AAM-SG for purposes of collection assessment.

One major advantage of the AAM-SG for the present study is that it captures institutional knowledge and expertise in a way that MARC records do not.² But the lack of contextual information regarding the creation of the AAM-SG makes it difficult to evaluate the interpretive choices that informed it.

Data Source #3: Finding Aids

Archivists at the Bentley created finding aids for archive users. They generally describe the content of archival collections and provide an inventory showing how the materials are organized, thereby facilitating access. A finding aid may or may not provide contextual information on its own creation, such as who wrote it and when. The degree of detail in finding aids varies significantly, with different practices prevailing over time, by local standards, and often by the size of the collection.

An advantage of finding aids for the purposes of the present study is that they can provide more descriptive information about a collection than that provided by its MARC record or in the AAM-SG. Disadvantages include the variations in detail and context noted above, which means that finding aids could not be relied on for consistent amounts of information across collections. It is also time-consuming to refer to finding aids individually.

I consulted finding aids at several points in the present study. I used the finding aids of the largest collections in the sample (those more than 20 linear feet) for additional analysis for RQ1 and especially RQ5 (N = 7). When assigning collections from the study sample to

² In conceptualizing and planning for this study, I considered several ways to further leverage the institutional knowledge and expertise of Bentley staff: interviewing current and former staff and conducting research in the Bentley's administrative files. For reasons of scope and practicality (the Bentley was closed due to COVID-19 during much of the research phase of this study), I was not able to do so.

previously defined topical categories, I looked at finding aids when I could not assign a collection based on subject headings alone (N = approximately 15).

Operationalizing Questions for Analysis Using MARC Records, the African Americans in Michigan Subject Guide, and Selected Finding Aids

RQ1: How many collections? The first research question seemed simple or at least straightforward. How many collections does the Michigan Historical Collections hold that include “African Americans – Michigan” as a subject field? Note that for purposes of counting, the existence of the subject heading was considered sufficient. In other words, no attempt was made at this stage to evaluate the proportion of the content of a given collection that focuses on African American history or otherwise differentiate among or rank the collections. If a collection included the subject heading “African Americans – Michigan,” it was counted as having to do with African American history in Michigan.

The number of “hits” (collections that were caught by the filter and parameters) served as the preliminary result. The resulting list was consolidated so that materials that came from a single donor were considered one collection, even if the MARC report counted them separately because they were different formats.

Once the count was established, I analyzed the MARC data on each collection to characterize the sample in the aggregate. There was variation in the amount of description provided (in other words, not every collection included the same amount or type of descriptive data) which affected some findings and conclusions, as noted in more detail below.

The MARC export serves as the primary dataset or sample for this study. The AAM-SG serves as a control, since it is a previously assembled list of collections related to Black history within the MHC. I compared the number of unique collections on the MARC export with the number of unique collections on the AAM-SG. I examined the subject headings of collections on the AAM-SG that did not appear on the MARC export for clues as to why those collections had been excluded from the MARC export. I hoped that this additional analysis would provide insight into how the MARC parameters functioned in creating the sample.

RQ2: Size range of collections? The approach to this question was complicated by the fact that collections include different formats and it is challenging to compare sizes across them. As a first step, the results were filtered by “linear foot” since that is the predominant unit of measure for archival material. While some collections were described in linear feet plus additional items (an oversize folder, for example), I did not conduct a systematic examination of additional items because most seemed unlikely to change the size significantly.

RQ3: Chronological coverage? I first delineated time periods based on major events and recognized turning points in U.S. and African American history, as commonly defined in American historiography and educational resources. I then assigned collections to one or more time periods based on the dates provided in the MARC record. If a collection spilled into a time period by only 1-2 years, it was not counted in that additional time period (this was especially the case when there were “bulk dates” squarely within the adjacent period).

RQ4: Geographical coverage in the state? I extracted geographic data from the MARC export. Not every record included a location, nor was there a standardized unit of expression. Some listed a town or city, others a county, and still others a township (an important unit of government in Michigan but not used in every place in the U.S.). This process was done by hand. There were a few locations outside the state of Michigan which I excluded. To feed the data into mapping tools, I assigned each Michigan location a zip code. If the location was a township without a zip code, the nearest town was used. For a county, the zip code of the county seat was used. After experimenting with several different visualization tools, I concluded that the county-level map provided the clearest representation of the geographic distribution of the collections in the MARC sample. I then compared the distribution of collections with the population distribution in Michigan at several time points, and I conducted a selected cross-analysis by location, size, and chronology.

RQ5: Other subject areas. Here I explored the issue of “aboutness,” an archival concept relating to the content, subject, or topical focus of a resource. Once collections had been identified as having to do with Black history in Michigan, what other topical areas intersected? How else might those collections be grouped thematically?

An additional lens to bring to bear on “aboutness” is “by” versus “about.” Are these materials that have been created *by* African Americans about their own experiences, or were they generated *about* African Americans by others (who might be biased toward, indifferent to, or removed from the people and experiences the materials purportedly document)? Both types of materials can provide historical insight, but the distinction is important when assessing collections regarding under-represented voices.

To investigate “aboutness” and the corollary question of “by” versus “about,” I first worked with a research assistant to clean the data and calculate the frequency of subject headings in the MARC export. We then grouped the subject headings to illuminate thematic and topical patterns that might not be evident in the first round of quantitative analysis (for example, counting the appearance of “civil rights” whether it was modified by a geographic term or not).

I then conducted a content analysis to compare and align subject headings in the MARC sample with two sets of topical categories that had been developed previously at the Bentley (those in the AAM-SG and those used in the collections assessment that was done in the 1980s). I did this in several steps.

Aligning MARC Sample Collections with AAM-SG Categories. I compared the MARC export with the AAM-SG to see not just the number of unique collections on each, but also to identify the overlap. I reviewed the MARC collections that were not on the AAM-SG and attempted to assign them to an AAM-SG topical category using each collection’s subject headings. If I could not determine an assignment using the subject headings, I turned to the finding aid, if there was one, in the hope that additional description would help me in making that assignment. I determined that 35 of the MARC collections fell outside the scope of the AAM-SG categories.

Aligning MARC Sample Collections with “Endelman” Categories. I then sought to assign the MARC collections to the topical categories that had been used during the collections assessment that the Bentley had conducted during the 1980s (referred to here as “Endelman” categories).

At this point, for this purpose, the MARC sample collections fell into three groups:

- 1) MARC collections that were also listed on the AAM-SG and thus were already assigned to an AAM-SG category

- 2) MARC collections that were not listed on the AAM-SG but which I had assigned to an AAM-SG category using the process described above
- 3) MARC collections that were not on the AAM-SG and for which I could not determine an AAM-SG category

For MARC collections in the first two groups, I assigned each MARC collection to at least one Endelman category (and if appropriate, up to three categories) using the AAM-SG category as the basis for the Endelman assignment. If needed, I consulted the brief description of AAM-SG collections on the AAM-SG for additional information.

For the third group, MARC collections for which I could not determine an AAM-SG category, I tried to use each collection's subject headings to assign it to an Endelman category. In approximately 15 cases where that proved difficult, I consulted the MARC collection's finding aid (if there was one – some of these collections were very small and did not have a finding aid). I assigned each MARC collection in the third group to at least one Endelman category, and if appropriate, up to three.

At the end of this process, I had assigned every collection from the MARC export (that is, every collection in the study sample) to at least one Endelman category, either through the intermediate step of an AAM-SG category or directly into one (or more) Endelman category.

Comparing AAM-SG and Endelman Categories. As a final step, I then compared the categories used in the AAM-SG with the “Endelman” categories used in the collections assessment from the 1980s. This step did not involve assigning collections from this study. Rather, I simply cross-walked the categories themselves for any additional insights to be gained by stepping back from individual collections to map the categories.

Results

Overview: The results indicated that the number of collections related to Black history constitute a small portion of the Michigan Historical Collections. The majority of the collections in the sample are small (less than three linear feet) and concentrated geographically in southeast lower Michigan (Wayne and Washtenaw counties). The chronological coverage is centered in the mid-twentieth century, with something of a drop-off in the last thirty years. Further analysis revealed that the largest collections in the sample do not necessarily contain a significant amount of material on Black history, which cautions against overstating the holdings focused on Black

history from a simple count or size calculation alone. Additional investigation, including a detailed examination of subject headings and comparison and alignment of categories used in the African Americans in Michigan Subject Guide and the Endelman collections assessment done at the Bentley in the 1980s, further probed the “aboutness” of these collections and the degree of insight provided by access tools.

RQ1: How many collections?

The first research question seemed simple or at least straightforward. How many collections does the Michigan Historical Collections hold that include “African Americans – Michigan” as a subject field? Note that for purposes of counting, the existence of the subject heading was considered sufficient. In other words, no attempt was made at this stage to evaluate the proportion of the content of a given collection that focuses on African American history or otherwise differentiate among or rank the collections. If a collection included the subject heading “African Americans – Michigan,” it was counted as having to do with African American history in Michigan.

The MARC record export yielded 231 hits. These results were regrouped into 191 distinct collections since one donation (as evidenced by having the same individual or organization as the donor) might be represented by multiple MARC record entries for materials of different formats (e.g., papers and photographs). The regrouping was further justified for several reasons. Other records included mixed material from the same donor so this seemed a more consistent way to count. In fact, generating different records for different formats was only a practice at the Bentley for a certain period of time, so grouping by donor created a more consistent approach. In some cases the existence of multiple records represents a transition of record types (from paper to a webpage, for example) and is therefore an artifact of change over time in how records are generally produced by many organizations and individuals. These cases can be seen as comparable to multiple accessions from a donor to the same collection. Finally, although the lens here is for fieldwork, researchers would be likely to consult multiple types of materials from the same donor and to approach it as a coherent collection.

I then compared the number of hits in the MARC export with the number of collections listed in the African American Subject Guide (AAM-SG). The MARC export and the AAM-SG did not have identical results, although each includes a similar number of collections. The AAM-

SG lists 194 unique collections. There were 149 collections that appear on both the AAM-SG and the MARC export. A total of 42 collections on the MARC export did not appear on the AAM-SG, while 45 collections from the AAM-SG did not appear on the MARC export.

The AAM-SG was selective rather than exhaustive, so it is understandable that some of the collections in the MARC export are not in the AAM-SG. Furthermore, the date of the AAM-SG is uncertain, meaning that some of the collections yielded in the MARC export may not have been part of the Bentley's collections at the time the AAM-SG was created.

On the other hand, the 45 collections in the AAM-SG that did not appear in the MARC report raise more questions. This outcome was more concerning since the point of a MARC report was to be as thorough as possible. Further comparison and analysis revealed the following:

A total of 10 collections in the Subject Guide did not include "African American(s)" as a subject heading (although one included "Afro-Americans").

A total of 4 collections that were on the Subject Guide but not the MARC report included "African Americans–Michigan" as a subject heading but were excluded (as intended) because of they were University of Michigan institutional records (the Institute of Public Policy Studies) or may have been considered University of Michigan faculty papers (Detroit Michigan Race Riot Scrapbooks, part of the Sidney Fine Collection).

Another 15 collections in the Subject Guide but not on the MARC export included "African American(s)" or "African American _____" as a modifier of composer, actor, singer, and so forth but did not include Michigan in the subject heading. In some cases, Michigan was included but in a separate subject heading. This finding suggests that future parameters be set to catch the geographical target even if listed separately, as well as the use of African Americans as a subheading.

The most concerning lapse was the 16 collections that did have a separate subject heading including "African Americans" and "Michigan" but "African American" was modifying a noun. Examples include "African American Women–Michigan–Detroit" (Georgia M. Washington), "African American churches–Michigan–Battle Creek" (Mount Zion African Methodist Episcopal Church (Battle Creek, Mich.)), and "African American fraternal organizations–Michigan–Ann Arbor" (Omega Psi Phi Fraternity, Sigma Rho Chapter). The intent of the "African Americans–

Michigan” parameter would have been to catch collections like these. The fact that it did not suggests the need for additional parameters in future.

The 191 collections that were yielded through the MARC export constitute the sample for the present study. I chose to use the MARC results as the sample because the purpose of this study is two-fold: to identify content related to Black history and to pilot a collections assessment method. In this case, the AAM-SG served as a control against which I could evaluate the MARC results—and that comparison showed limitations of the MARC export in fully illuminating content related to Black history. But not every topical area at the Bentley has a Subject Guide, so I chose not to merge results here for subsequent analysis. That is, I did not include collections that appeared on the AAM-SG but not on the MARC export in calculating results on RQ2, RQ3, and RQ4. The findings in those RQs are based only on the 191 collections in the MARC export.

RQ2: Size range of collections?

To gain a better understanding of the collections included in the sample, I evaluated the size range. The approach was complicated by the fact that collections include different formats. As a first step, I filtered the results by “linear foot” since that is the predominant unit of measure for archival material. The filter yielded 136 collections which were measured in linear feet. That sample was then sorted by size. As shown in Table 1 and Figure 1, the size distribution ranged from less than one linear foot to 96.

Table 1: Size of Collections in Linear Feet (LF)
N = 136 collections

Size of Collection in Linear Feet	< 1 LF	1 LF	2 LF	3 LF	4-6 LF	7-9 LF	10-19 LF	20-59 LF	>60 LF
Number of Collections	50	24	20	6	15	3	11	5	2
Percentage of Total	37%	17%	15%	4.5%	11%	2%	8%	4%	1.5%

There is some degree of imprecision here, since many of the collections were described in linear feet plus additional items (an oversize folder, for example). I did not systematically examine additional items because it is difficult to compare across disparate measures and most seemed unlikely to change the size significantly.

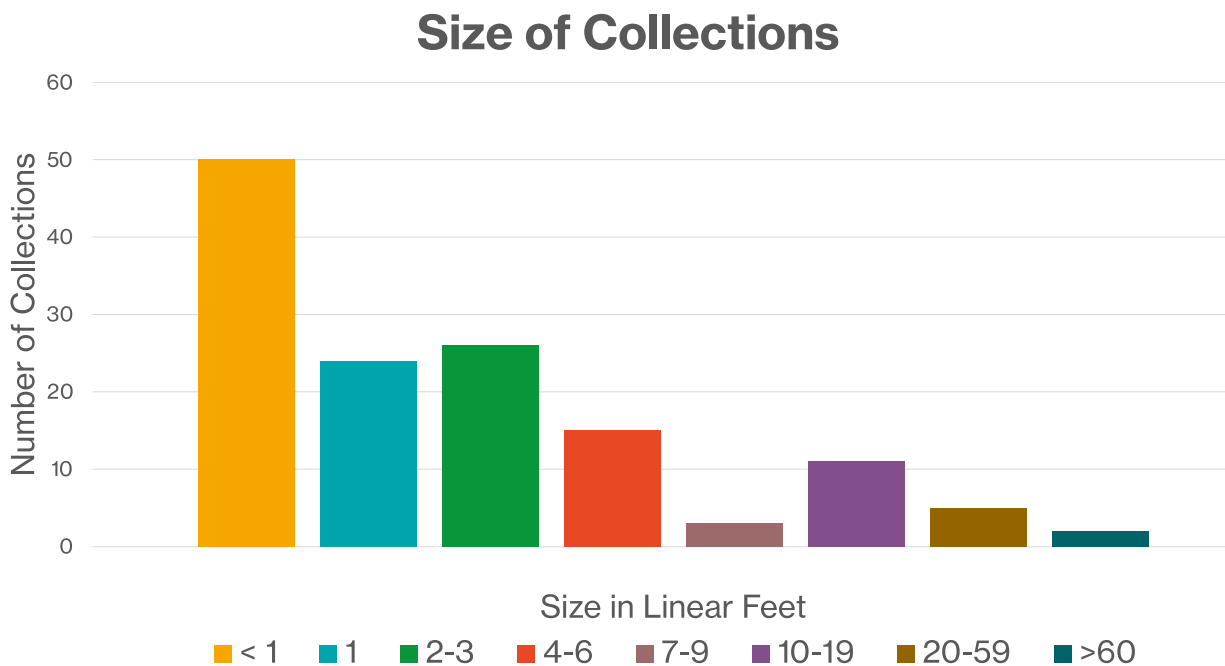
More than two-thirds of the collections (69%) are two linear feet or less. The size distribution can also be seen in the following chart which shows that the majority of collections are on the small end of the size spectrum.

At the other end of the size spectrum, three of the seven largest collections (over 20 linear feet) are associated with the University of Michigan: Alexander Grant Ruthven, Paul G. Kauper, and Harry Burns Hutchins. In fact, I would have expected that all three of these collections would have been excluded from the MARC export given the parameter to exclude university history (the 110a University of Michigan MARC field). Both Ruthven and Hutchins served as president of the University of Michigan as well as being long-time faculty members, and Kauper was a law professor.

It may be that these collections were included because the division between University history and the Michigan Historical Collections was not always rigid, and the timing of their

accessions may have been before the 110a identifier was consistently applied. Regardless of the reason, their inclusion in the sample as three of the largest collections potentially skews the results regarding size given that the intent of the MARC parameters was to exclude such University of Michigan collections.

Figure 1: Size of Collections



There are 136 collections represented in these figures. That leaves 55 collections whose volume is described in some other way. These included such descriptions as “two volumes,” “three photographs,” “one item,” “two reels microfilm,” “digitized files.” It is challenging to compare size across such disparate descriptions but the wording of those I did consider indicated that most were small so they were unlikely to change the overall size distribution of the sample.

The difficulties involved in evaluating size show that if size is to be considered an important metric in collections assessment, there is a need for standardized ways to characterize volume and, even more challenging perhaps, to talk meaningfully across formats (one photograph versus 10 web captures versus linear foot versus GB for example).

As explained in RQ1, collections were included in the MARC export if they have the subject heading “African Americans—Michigan.” This criterion does not tell us how much of

the content of any given collection actually has to do with African American history. It is worth noting that some of the collections on the higher end of the size spectrum included “African Americans–Michigan” as one of many subject headings. Although subject headings are not proportional, having a large number of subject headings in a given collection raises the possibility that the volume of content related to African American history may not correlate with the collection’s overall size. To explore this issue more thoroughly, I took a closer look at the descriptive tools for all collections over 20 linear feet (N = 7). I discuss those findings more thoroughly in RQ5. Suffice it to say here that it is important to remember that the MARC export can tell us the size of collections with the designated subject heading, but it does not tell us the amount of specific content of interest within collections.

In sum, assessing the size of collections in the sample proved difficult given the challenges of comparing across format types. Most collections in the sample are small, with more than two thirds of the sample collections that can be counted through the standard archival measure of linear feet coming in at two linear feet or less. Size is relative and “small” is not meant to be dismissive (particularly important when discussing content related to historically under-represented voices). Moreover, the size of the collection does not necessarily tell us the quantity of content of interest. These findings underscore the point that assessing quantity requires a series of metrics. The number of collections, and even the aggregate number of linear feet, is only part of the story when the goal is also to identify specific types of content.

RQ3: Chronological Coverage?

To further understand the collections and to inform strategic planning for future fieldwork, I assessed the chronological coverage represented by the collections. I created time periods based on major events in African American history and U.S. history; they follow breakdowns commonly used in historiography and instruction of American history. (For examples and explanation of the periodization process, see Library of Congress <https://www.loc.gov/classroom-materials/united-states-history-primary-source-timeline/> and the Public History Initiative at UCLA <https://phi.history.ucla.edu/nchs/preface/developing-standards/>)

Once I established time periods, I assigned the collections to one or more categories. The total in the table adds up to more than 191 because many collections included material from more than one time period. If however a collection spilled into a time period by only 1-2 years, it was not counted in that additional time period (this was especially the case when there were “bulk dates” squarely within the adjacent period).

Definition of and Rationale for Time Periods

- *Antebellum and earlier (prior to 1861)*. The overall significance of the start of the U.S. Civil War is well recognized, and thus 1861 is a logical turning point here. If it turned out there were more collections in this relatively long timespan (“prior to 1861”), it could have been broken down further.
- *Civil War and Reconstruction*. A commonly used era in historical scholarship and teaching, and of tremendous importance in the historical experience of and historiographical attention to African Americans.
- *1877-1914*. The end of formal Reconstruction through the Progressive Era to the beginning of World War I in Europe. These beginning and ending dates are considered important turning points in American history. This era is also recognized as the rise of the “Jim Crow” system and new forms of institutionalized racism in the U.S.
- The twentieth century could have been divided in several different ways. The time periods chosen here were intended to recognize important events in U.S. and African-American history and allow a meaningful consideration of the distribution of collections.
- *1915-1940*. Includes World War I, the Great Migration (the movement of tens of thousands of Black Americans from rural areas in the south to urban, industrial centers in the north), and the Great Depression.
- *1941-1954*. From the beginning of U.S. involvement in World War II to the U.S. Supreme Court decision of *Brown v. the Board of Education of Topeka*, which declared school segregation unconstitutional.
- *1955-1970*. From the Brown decision through major accomplishments of the Civil Rights movement, urban rebellions of the 1960s, and the rise of Black Power.

- *1971-1992.* The 1970s and 1980s include the end of the war in Vietnam and the Reagan-Bush era with controversies over affirmative action and school desegregation, among other civil rights issues.
- *1993-present.* The 1992 election of Bill Clinton has been understood as a political and generational turning point. Rapid changes in informational and communications technology characterize the last few decades with important implications for records creation. I also chose this division to illuminate how many collections could be considered “recent” history, documenting the last thirty years.

Table 2: Chronological Coverage

Time Period	Prior to 1861	1861-1876	1877-1914	1915-1940	1941-1954	1955-1970	1971-1992	1993-present
Number of Collections	6	10	28	62	71	94	81	42

Figure 2: Chronological Coverage

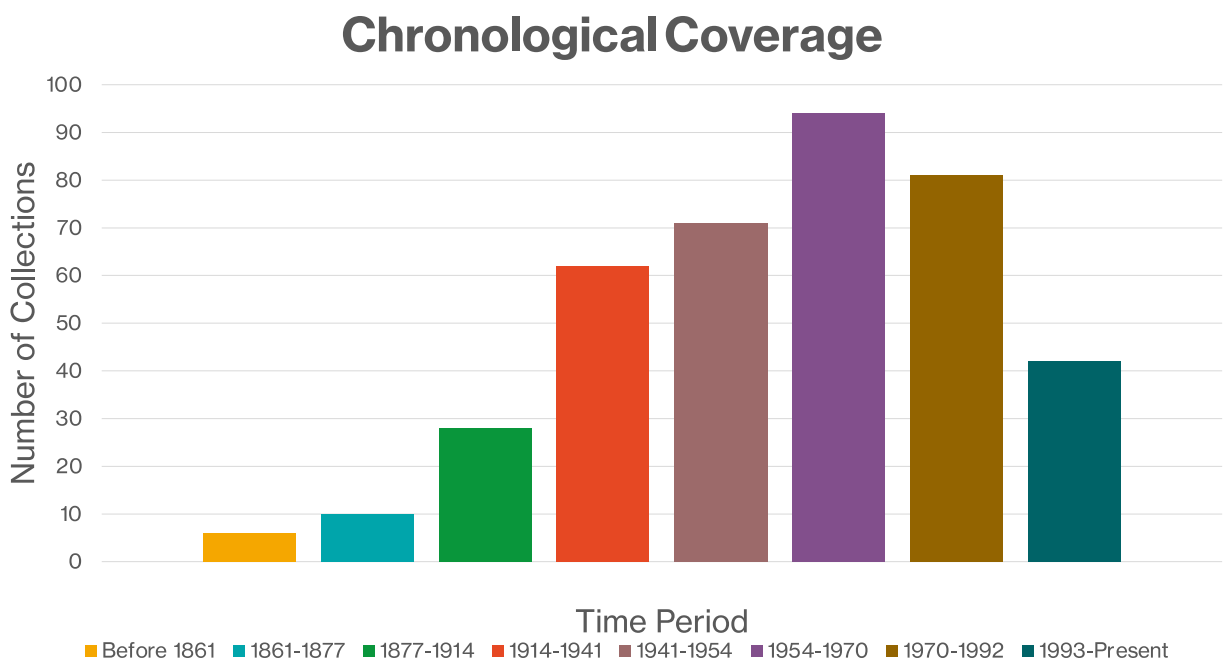


Table 2 and Figure 2 demonstrate that chronological coverage of these collections is centered squarely in the mid-twentieth century. This distribution is consistent with the general “problem of abundance” in the post-World War II era when individuals and organizations generated more paper files than previously. It also reflects a general interest in the most well-known aspects of the modern Civil Rights movement, a focus that is also demonstrated in the Subject Guide.

The apparent significance of the larger collections can be amplified when looking at chronological coverage. For example, consider again the Alexander Grant Ruthven collection. The Ruthven collection is large (the second largest in the sample) and of long duration, spanning several of the twentieth-century time periods (collection dates are 1901-1961, with bulk dates 1906-1951). These metrics make the Ruthven collection loom large in the sample, and yet as explained below in RQ5, its content relevant to “African Americans – Michigan” is difficult to identify and likely very small.

RQ4: Geographical coverage in the state?

Because the Bentley has a statewide collecting mission, it is important to understand the geographic distribution of current holdings related to Black history to plan future fieldwork.

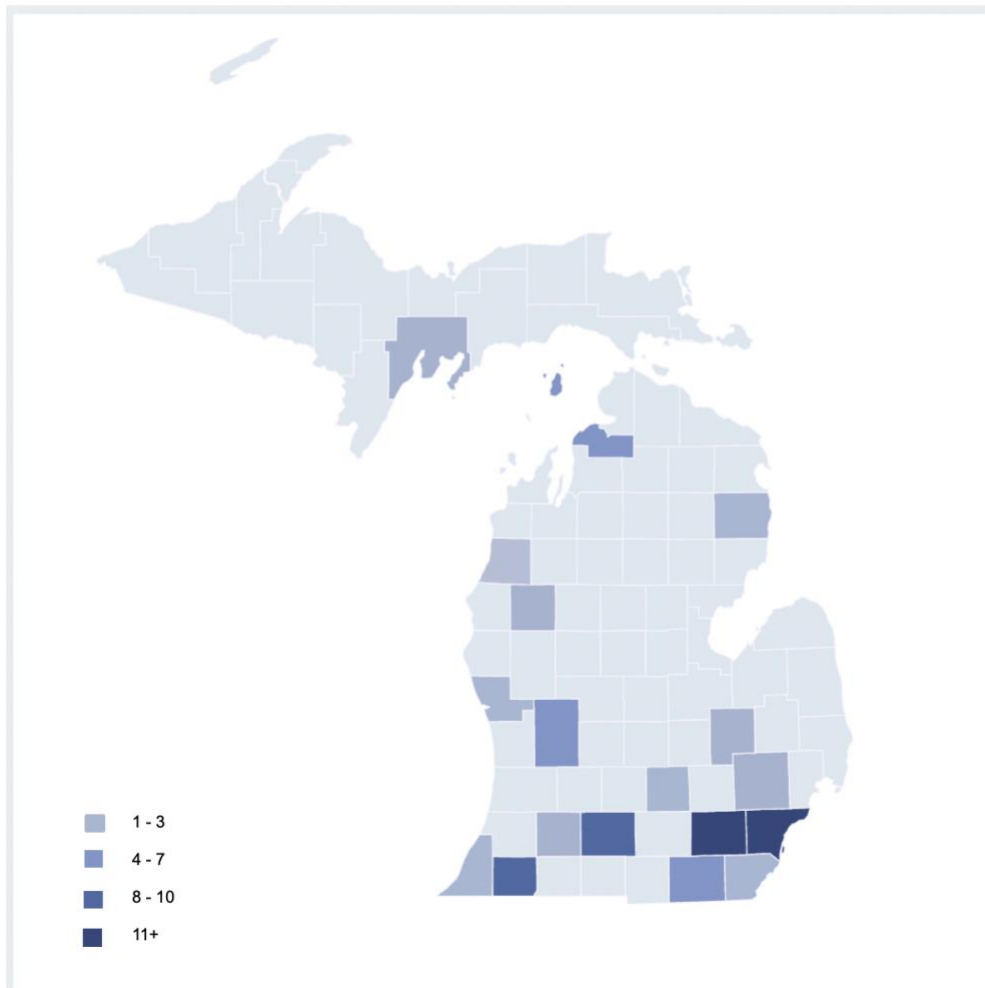
Initially I approached the geographic distribution like the chronological coverage, establishing regional categories based on our existing knowledge of demographics and historical events and then fitting the collections into those categories. However, it became clear that it would be difficult to delineate regions in the abstract, especially in southeastern lower Michigan. As a result, I extracted geographic data from the collections and then used several different visualization tools to understand the geographic distribution.

As a first step, I went through each MARC record for location information. Not every record included a location. For those that did, there was no standardized place in the MARC record for location information, nor was there a standardized unit or expression. Some listed a town or city, others a county, and still others a township (an important unit of government in Michigan but not used in every place in the U.S.). This process was done by hand. There were a few locations outside the state of Michigan and those were excluded.

To feed the data into mapping tools, I assigned each Michigan location a zip code. If the location was a township without a zip code, the nearest town was used. For a county, the zip code of the county seat was used. After experimenting with several different mapping tools, the county-level analysis represented the geographic distribution most clearly and yielded additional insights. One of the most important was that the majority of collections come from only two counties: Wayne (where the City of Detroit is located) and Washtenaw (where the University of Michigan is located).

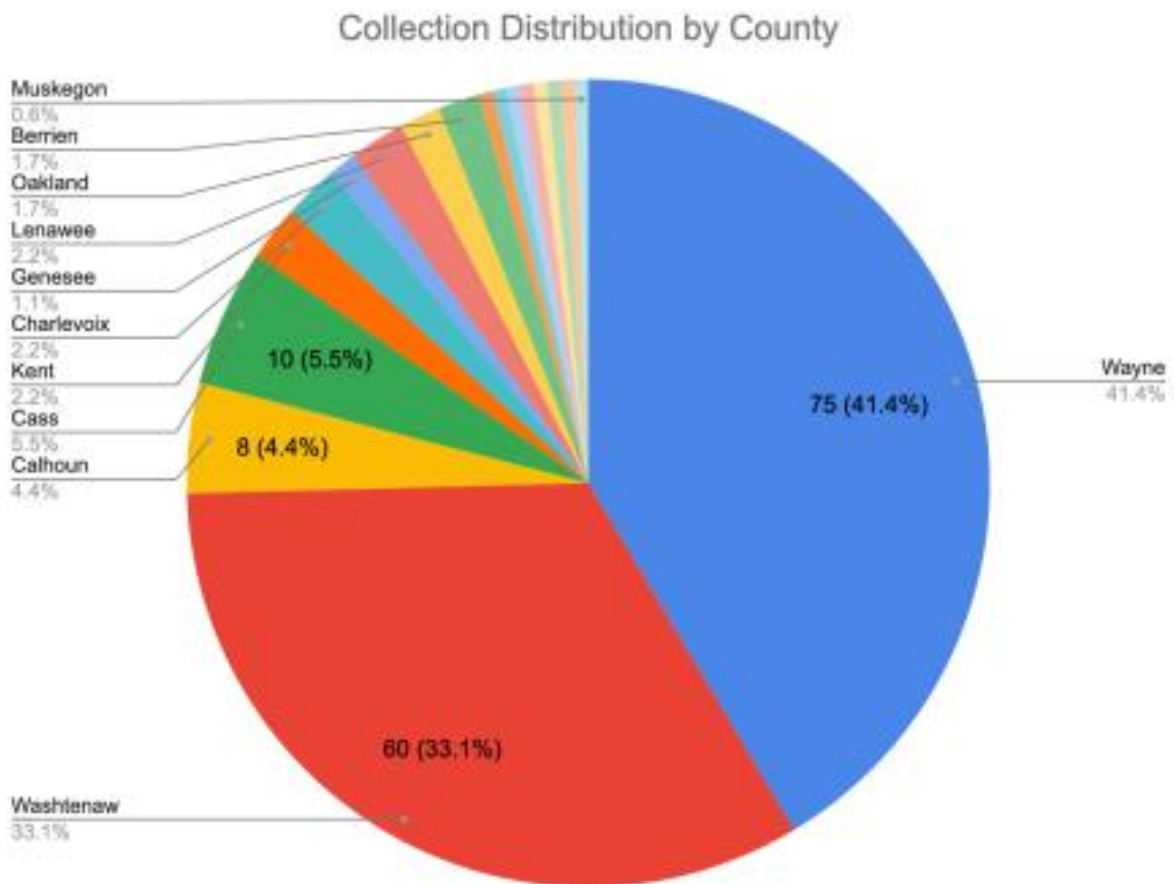
Figure 3: Geographic Distribution of Collections, By County

Collection Distribution in Michigan, 2022
Number of Collections per County



The degree of geographic concentration can also be visualized in the following pie chart (Figure 7), which shows that almost three-quarters of the collections in the sample (74.5%) come from Wayne and Washtenaw counties.

Figure 4: Collection Distribution by County



Of the 7 collections that are more than 20 linear feet in Table 1 above, explained in RQ2, 5 are centered in Wayne or Washtenaw counties (Ruthven, Detroit Urban League, Kauper, Michigan *Citizen*, and Hutchins). Although the Michigan *Citizen* was distributed in Benton Harbor in southwestern Michigan, its other distribution areas were Detroit and Highland Park, both in Wayne County. The Michigan Historical Records Survey has statewide content, but the African American material is concentrated in the “Detroit metropolitan area.” Only the

Southwestern Michigan Urban League, of these largest 7, is located outside Wayne or Washtenaw County.

I compared this distribution of collections to the racial distribution by county in Michigan as reported in the U.S. Census at three different time points (1920, 1950, 1980, census.gov). That census data showed that approximately three quarters of African Americans in Michigan lived in Wayne or Washtenaw counties, which tracks with the geographic distribution of collections in the sample. However, the population breakdown between Wayne and Washtenaw did not conform to the geographic distribution of collections but instead was much more concentrated in Wayne County. Of all African Americans who lived in Michigan in 1920, 73% lived in Wayne County and 2.3% in Washtenaw County. In 1950, the figures remained similar: 76% in Wayne County and 2.1% in Washtenaw County. By 1980, the proportion in Wayne County had dipped a bit to 69%, while Washtenaw County was 2.4%. If anything, then, Wayne County is underrepresented and Washtenaw County overrepresented in this sample. Some of this overrepresentation comes from the unexpected presence of University of Michigan collections in the sample, but there may be other factors as well. More analysis would be needed of the MHC as a whole to determine whether this concentration of collections from Washtenaw County is unique to Black history. It may be that the MHC's holdings skew toward local history across other topical areas.

It is not a given that the geographic distribution of collections should be pegged directly to the distribution of population, especially when that changes over time. But more detailed analysis of these factors, especially in combination, would yield important insights into Black history in Michigan. For example, a selected cross-analysis of location by size and chronology shows that some of the collections that came from more isolated geographic locations (in the sense of fewer collections coming from there) are on the small end of the size spectrum and come from earlier time periods. Those such as Cassopolis and Calvin Township (Cass County in southwestern Michigan) or Adrian (Lenawee County in southeastern Michigan) reflect early settlement of African Americans in those regions, anti-slavery activism, or both. These kinds of analyses can help inform strategic planning for future fieldwork.

RQ5: What other subject areas intersect?

In addition to size, chronology, and geography, a goal of this study was to gain an understanding of what other topics or themes were represented in the collections that were identified as having to do with Black history in Michigan (again with the goal of strategic planning for future fieldwork). This question incorporates the archival concept of “aboutness” (the content, subject, or topical focus of a resource) as well as the concept of “by” versus “about” (were the materials created by historical actors about their own experiences, or were the materials generated about them by others?).

This research question raised some of the same dilemmas that challenged other collections assessments as reported in the literature: how to analyze elements of description (particularly subject headings) in a way that was general enough to see patterns but granular enough to account for nuance. A further challenge was the wide variation in the number of subject headings assigned to a given collection, ranging from two or three to more than one hundred.

I used a quantitative approach that borrowed from other collections assessments as a first step in surveying subject headings in the MARC export. I then conducted a content analysis to compare and align subject headings in the MARC sample with two sets of topical categories that had been developed previously at the Bentley (one set from the African Americans in Michigan Subject Guide and the other from a collections assessment that was done in the 1980s, referred to as the “Endelman categories” in the present study).

Frequency of Subject Headings

Recall that the MARC export was created using the parameter of “African Americans–Michigan” as a subject heading, so that was by definition a common subject heading. Beyond that, quantitative analysis yielded the following list in Table 3:

Table 3: Most Used Subject Headings in MARC Export

Heading	Frequency
African Americans – Michigan – Detroit	46
Detroit (Mich.)	23
African Americans – Michigan – Ann Arbor	21
Ann Arbor (Mich.)	14
African American Churches – Michigan – Detroit	13
Detroit (Mich.) – Church History	12
Detroit (Mich.) – Race Relations	8
Civil Rights – Michigan	8
Baptists, Black – Michigan – Detroit	8
Cass County (Mich.)	7
Riots – Michigan – Detroit – History – 20 th Century	7

As this list of subject headings reveals, simply counting the subject headings does not provide much additional insight into the content of the sample as a whole. But upon further analysis, the headings can be grouped into three broad categories: location (geography), religion, and civil rights. Both religion and civil rights are key themes in African American history and in the Bentley’s collections. Since one function of subject headings is to locate collections in space, the frequency of geographic terms is not surprising. The list reflects the same patterns that emerged in RQ4, with Detroit (Wayne County) at the top of the “most” list, Ann Arbor (Washtenaw County) not far behind, and other areas in Michigan appearing less frequently (and still others not at all).

Rather than counting discrete subject headings only, it is possible to “cluster” subject headings so that thematic commonalities are more evident (in this sense, the rendering of the MARC export can make it harder to see the hierarchical nature of subject headings and to obscure, for instance, topical similarities across different geographic areas). For example, “civil rights” as a subject heading was associated with specific locations to such an extent that its thematic importance might not be immediately clear, especially when combined with the fact that it often appeared in other variations such as “African American Civil Rights Workers,” “Civil Rights Workers,” and “Women Civil Rights Workers.” Overall, “civil rights” in any form

appeared 45 times, making it the second most common subject heading behind only “African Americans – Michigan – Detroit.”

Similarly, in the area of religion, grouping the names of specific denominations (Baptist and Episcopal in this sample) with “church history” as a subject term gives a more accurate picture of the prevalence of religion as a topical focus in the sample:

- Baptist = 41
- Baptists = 12
- Episcopal = 35
- Church history = 20

The total of these terms is 108, showing that it is indeed a very common theme in the sample.

Counting subject headings and especially clustering them thus illuminates some patterns in terms of the frequency of subject headings in the sample. I then used additional steps to evaluate subject headings in conjunction with other descriptive tools, explained in the next section.

“Aboutness,” Collection Size, and Archival Description

The number of subject headings assigned to the collections in the MARC sample varied widely. While subject headings are not proportional (having 10 subject headings does not mean that 10% of the collection centers on each of those subjects), the degree of variation itself is notable and encourages caution in what conclusions regarding “aboutness” can be drawn from subject headings alone. Furthermore, subject headings may not indicate “by” versus “about.”

To get at these issues more thoroughly, I turned to other sources of archival description. I examined the MARC records, catalog records, and finding aids of the collections over 20 linear feet (N = 7), as shown in Table 4. Collections are listed in descending order by size, with the third column listing the number of subject headings assigned to each collection.

Table 4: Collection Size (Large Collections) and Subject Headings

Name of Collection	Size	Number of Subject Headings
Detroit Urban League	96 linear feet and one oversize folder (Visual materials series has one additional linear foot and one oversize folder)	31
Alexander Grant Ruthven	65.4 linear feet and one oversize folder	63
Michigan Historical Records Survey	47 linear feet and 68 microfilm reels	125
Paul G. Kauper	42 linear feet	17
Michigan <i>Citizen</i> Records	30 linear feet including oversize (in 57 boxes), 5 microfilms, and 189.2 MB (online)	17
Southwestern Michigan Urban League	23 linear feet (Photograph series has 0.25 linear feet)	10
Harry Burns Hutchins	22 linear feet	46

After consulting the finding aids to learn more about each collection, I grouped them into three categories: University of Michigan (Ruthven, Kauper, Hutchins); Urban League (Detroit Urban League and Southwestern Michigan Urban League); and Other (Michigan Historical Records Survey and Michigan *Citizen* Records). I then conducted keyword searches in the finding aids to identify content related to Black history.

Group 1: University of Michigan (Ruthven, Kauper, Hutchins).

A keyword search in the finding aid for “African American” of each of these three collections returned zero results beyond the subject heading itself (which is Afro American in the

case of Hutchins). Searching the keywords “Afro [American],” “Black,” and “Negro” returned zero results for Ruthven and Kauper. For Hutchins, “Blacks” yielded one hit (“Blacks in Michigan” in the “Selective Subject Card Catalog to the Harry Burns Hutchins Papers”) and “Negro” yielded one hit in the Partial List of Correspondents (the “National Urban League for Social Service among Negroes”). As a result, it is impossible to determine with precision how much of these collections has to do with African American history, or even in some cases what the African American-related content is.

Group 2: Urban League (Detroit Urban League and Southwestern Michigan Urban League).

The single largest collection in the sample is the Detroit Urban League at 96 linear feet, while the Southwestern Michigan Urban League is also larger than 20 feet (and several other Michigan chapters are more than 10 feet). The National Urban League began in the early twentieth century in New York City to provide services and support to African American residents, many of whom were newly arrived from the American south as part of the Great Migration. The Detroit chapter was founded in 1916 and other Michigan chapters later. Unlike the Ruthven, Kauper, and Hutchins finding aids, the finding aids for the Detroit and Southwestern Michigan Urban Leagues contain the term “African American” beyond the list of the subject headings themselves, more often in series descriptions and the History / Biography section than in folder titles. The Urban League collections present almost the opposite challenge in using subject headings to assess the proportion having to do with Black history in that the entire collection centers on the experience of African Americans.

However, it might still be difficult to parse the Urban League collections in terms of “by” versus “about” based on description. Many social service agencies founded in the early twentieth century in American cities featured white directors and social workers attempting to act upon (and producing records about) a clientele that was made up of Black and immigrant residents. The finding aid notes that the Detroit Urban League was founded “to meet the most pressing educational, employment, health, and social needs of the Detroit African American community.” But the finding aid does not identify the leaders of the Detroit Urban League as Black in its short “History” section (and they were). I am not arguing that it should – only that it is difficult to assess “by” versus “about” without that information. In contrast, the Biography/History section of the Southwestern Michigan Urban League Records finding aid explicitly refers to the entity as

an “interracial, non-profit, non-partisan community service organization.” Both finding aids include attribution (a practice which was not always standardized at the Bentley) but only one (Southwestern Michigan Urban League) includes dates. Based on the dates of the Detroit Urban League accessions, that finding aid was likely completely earlier and reflects standard practice at the time it was created.

Group 3: Michigan Historical Records Survey and Michigan Citizen.

The remaining large collections from Figure 2 are the Michigan Historical Records Survey (with 125 subject headings) and the *Michigan Citizen* (with 17). The Michigan Historical Records Survey was the state version of a federal New Deal program, the “largest survey of public records ever conducted in the United States,” according to the detailed finding aid (created in the late 1980s with attribution). The long list of subject headings reflects the statewide coverage of the initiative: a majority of the headings identify locations in Michigan. The “History” and the series descriptions in the finding aid provide context for different parts of the initiative. The term “African American” appears only three times in the finding aid, including the subject headings themselves. Following the terminology in the materials, the term “Negro” appears 15 times. The term “Black” appears 7 times. It is also worth noting that the two-line summary includes the phrase “also material relating to the history of Blacks in Michigan” although the material is a small proportion of the total (the “Inventory of Negro Manuscripts” is less than one linear foot out of 47, although there is some additional material on Blacks in Michigan in the county series). The finding aid provides useful context for understanding how the inventory was created, worth quoting as a window into “by” versus “about”: “The field workers (all Black) surveyed the Black community in the Detroit metropolitan area and the collections of the Burton Historical Collection at the Detroit Public Library. They searched for original records and papers, both of organizations and of individuals, which would shed light on the social and political history of Blacks in America.” This finding aid reflects the challenges inherent in evolving terminology and legacy description, and the ongoing value of detailed context in archival description.

The final collection larger than 20 linear feet is the *Michigan Citizen* collection, with 17 subject headings. The *Michigan Citizen* was a “weekly African American newspaper published from 1978 to 2014, and distributed in Benton Harbor, the City of Highland Park, and the City of

Detroit, Michigan” according to the finding aid. The records “consist of the weekly issues of the newspaper, the subject files used by the newspaper staff, reporters’ notes, correspondence written to the editor of the Michigan *Citizen*, and hundreds of photographs.” In the finding aid, the term “African American” appears 23 times, “Black” appears 41 times, and “Negro” appears 4 times. Many of these hits are the folder titles of subject files that the newspaper staff used. It would be reasonable to conclude from the description in the finding aid and the number of hits that these records have a considerable degree of “aboutness” in terms of Black history in Michigan. Determining “by” versus “about” is more challenging since the description does not address that question directly.

In sum, examining the largest collections in the sample show the challenges of identifying African American-related content from the MARC export alone. The largest collections may not – and in this case, do not – include the largest amounts of relevant material. In some collections, identifying the relevant material was impossible from descriptive tools (including the finding aids), with implications for understanding the “aboutness” of individual collections or the MARC sample in the aggregate. The catalog records and the finding aids also show the difficulties posed by legacy description and the advantages of detailed description [which exist in tension with MPLP (More Product, Less Process) and the desire to make material available to users, including source communities, as efficiently as possible].

Topical Groupings and “Aboutness”

To further investigate “aboutness” and the corollary question of “by” versus “about,” I conducted a content analysis to compare and align collections in the MARC sample and their subject headings with two sets of topical categories that had been developed previously at the Bentley (those in the AAM-SG and those used in the collections assessment that was done in the 1980s). The goals here were to gain additional insights into the “aboutness” of the MHC holdings related to Black history, to better understand differences between the MARC export results and the AAM-SG, and to consider how a topically focused collection assessment like the present study might be aligned with repository-wide assessments done in the 1980s. I did this in several steps.

Aligning MARC Sample Collections with AAM-SG Categories

My first step was to compare the MARC sample collections with the topical categories on the AAM-SG. It is not known exactly how the categories were created for the AAM-SG, but they reflect major historical and historiographical topics and themes in African American history, especially as conceptualized in the late twentieth century. Any MARC collection that was also included on the AAM-SG (N = 149) was, by definition, already assigned to an AAM-SG category. I then attempted to assign the MARC collections not included in the AAM-SG (N = 42) to an AAM-SG category, using each MARC collection's subject headings. If I could not determine an assignment using subject headings, I turned to the finding aid, if there was one, in the hope that additional description would help me make the assignment.

The results are shown in Table 5. Neither column adds up to the exact number of unique collections in that group, because each collection could be assigned to more than one topical area (up to 3) and 35 collections from the MARC sample did not fit into any topical category from the AAM-SG.

Table 5: Comparing AAM-SG headings with MARC export

Subject Guide Headings	Number of collections: Subject Guide	Number of Collections: MARC Export
Community Leaders and Organizations	54	52
Civil Rights Activists and Organizations	34	27
Education	24	23
Fine Arts	5	5
Military Service	10	6
Religious Leaders and Organizations	39	36
Slavery, Abolition and the Civil War	35	6
Women Leaders and Organizations	21	18

The broad contours are similar, which makes sense since there is a substantial overlap between the MARC export collections and the AAM-SG collections. For each set of collections, “Community Leaders & Organizations” is the largest category, followed by “Religious Leaders & Organizations” and “Civil Rights Activists & Organizations,” with some collections being listed in more than one of these categories. Similarly, there is substantial similarity between “Women Leaders & Organizations” and the other “Leaders” and “Activist” categories. One notable exception is the “Slavery, Abolition, and the Civil War” category which included 35 collections in the AAM-SG and only 6 in the MARC sample.

While there are parallels in how the collections line up topically in the two samples, I found that a sizeable number of the MARC collections (35) did not fit into a category on the AAM-SG. MARC collections related to science and medicine, natural resources, agriculture, or family and community (in a general sense) had no obvious home in the AAM-SG. Some prominent business people were community leaders or civil rights activists and could fit in those

categories, but not all were. Not all politicians were civil rights activists, and not all women were “leaders.” As noted previously, the AAM-SG topical areas are considered central to Black history and historiography, but this attempt to assign MARC collections to AAM-SG categories shows that the AAM-SG categories exclude collections that also have to do with Black history. The AAM-SG does not purport to be exhaustive, so it would not be fair to criticize it for that reason. Nevertheless, this comparison helped illuminate other dimensions of MHC holdings related to Black history beyond the AAM-SG.

Matching MARC Sample Collections with Endelman Categories

While the AAM-SG categories were tailored to a subset of collections focusing on African American history, the large-scale collection assessment conducted at the Bentley in the 1980s used a model that was meant to be universal. This schema, referred to here as the “Endelman categories” or “Endelman schema,” borrowed from the system used by the State Historical Society of Wisconsin, which itself was adapted from the work of anthropologist George P. Murdock whose *Outline of Cultural Materials* offered a way to categorize human activity for cross-cultural comparisons.

As a further step in my topical analysis, I matched the MARC collections with the Endelman categories to see if the process would add analytical value and a clearer picture of the “aboutness” of the MARC collections.

At this point, for this purpose, the MARC sample collections fell into three groups:

- 1) MARC collections that were listed on the AAM-SG and thus already assigned to an AAM-SG category
- 2) MARC collections that were not listed on the AAM-SG but to which I had assigned an AAM-SG category using the process described above
- 3) MARC collections that were not on the AAM-SG and for which I could not determine an AAM-SG category

For the first two groups, I assigned each MARC collection to at least one Endelman category (and if appropriate, up to three categories) using the AAM-SG category as the basis for the Endelman assignment. If needed, I consulted the brief description of AAM-SG collections on the AAM-SG for additional information.

For the third group, MARC collections for which I could not determine an AAM-SG category, I tried to use each collection’s subject headings to assign it to an Endelman category. If that proved difficult, I then consulted the MARC collection’s finding aid (if there was one – some of these collections were very small and did not have a finding aid). I assigned each MARC collection to at least one Endelman category, and if appropriate, up to three.

At the end of this process, I had assigned every collection from the MARC export to at least one Endelman category (up to three), either through the intermediate step of an AAM-SG category or directly into the Endelman schema. The results are in Table 6.

Table 6: MARC Collections and Endelman Categories (Total = 262)

Endelman Categories	Number of collections: MARC export
AA Arts	10
AG Agriculture	2
CO Communication	8
ED Education	33
IN Industry, Manufacturing, Business	11
LA Labor	0
ML Military	5
NR Natural Resources	2
PO Politics and Government	45
PR Professional	2
PS Populations	14
RE Religion	42
RL Recreation / Leisure	11
SC Science and Technology	7
SE Settlement	5
SO Social Organizations and Activity	65
TR Transportation	0
XX Miscellaneous	Not used

The largest categories are “Social Organizations and Activity” (65), followed by “Politics and Government” (45) and “Religion” (42). Next is “Education” (33). This pattern tracks in some ways with the AAM-SG, which highlights leadership, activism, and religion. Compared with the AAM-SG, the Endelman schema accommodates other domains more easily, including agriculture, industry, and recreation / leisure, just to name a few (and indeed, the act of applying the Endelman categories helped illuminate alternative possibilities for collections that did not fit squarely into the AAM-SG topical areas). In the Endelman schema, all the collections in the MARC sample could be considered “Populations” (a category that included “Ethnic/Racial Groups,” “Population Groups,” and “Immigration/Migration/Emigration”). But because assigning it to every collection rendered it effectively meaningless, it was reserved for those collections with a subject heading or other description that indicated that “settlement” or “pioneering” was a theme in the collection.

Cross-walking AAM-SG Categories with Endelman Categories

Stepping back from counting individual collections to cross-walk the categories themselves, I could see more clearly that while the Endelman categories include more facets of human experience and history than the AAM-SG, they have limitations too. Some of them need to be updated. The military category, for example, only goes up to the Vietnam War. Others could be clarified. For instance, should medicine be grouped with Science and Technology? The Endelman schema also erases some of the nuances in the AAM-SG for purposes of this sample. The “Politics and Government” and “Social Organizations and Activity” categories from the Endelman schema do not map directly onto “Community Leaders & Organizations” and “Civil Rights Activists & Organizations” categories of the AAM-SG, obscuring a detailed understanding of Black history and activism that the AAM-SG categories convey.

Especially jarring to the present-day reader is the absence from the Endelman schema of top-level categories related to women, gender, or sexuality. The “Social Organization and Activity” category bundles “Family/Domestic Life,” “Genealogy,” “Organizations,” and “Social Action” into one grouping. This category may well reflect the anthropological approach that shaped this schema. But there were alternatives even at that time that recognized women’s experiences more distinctly. For example, the “Basic Hierarchy / Main Entries” topical categories used by the Midwest Archives Guide Project included a category called “Women’s

Organizations” (Thompson, 1983). To return to the present study, it is no coincidence that the “Social Organizations and Activity” category includes the highest number of MARC collections, combining as it does many elements that today would be considered separate topical areas.

This categorization and cross-walking exercise illuminate the breadth of the MARC sample beyond the AAM-SG and its categories. It also shows conceptual challenges in cross-walking categories that were created at different times, for different reasons, and that operate at different scales. Finally, comparing these topical groupings reflects an intellectual history of how categories change over time.

Discussion

Depth and Coverage of Collections and Implications for Fieldwork

This study was intended to identify collections within the Michigan Historical Collections (MHC) that have to do with African American history. The MARC export yielded 231 individual results that I regrouped into 191 collections. While it is impossible to determine exactly what proportion of the MHC this represents, since the MHC cannot be separated with precision from collections that have to do with university history, the Bentley has been collecting since 1935 and reports 11,000 collections overall.

The findings show that most of the MHC collections related to African American history are small in size, they cluster geographically in southeast lower Michigan (especially in Wayne and Washtenaw counties), and they are centered chronologically on the mid twentieth century. Most are conventional formats (paper and visual materials), with some digital material and a few web-only collections.

The assessment thus illuminated gaps that could be addressed in future field work. As Endelman (1987) pointed out, however, the path from assessment to collecting strategy is “not simple” (p. 347). Consider geography, for example. Should the Bentley build on the collection’s strengths in southeast lower Michigan, or seek out collections from the areas in Michigan that are not currently represented in the sample? The question of filling gaps versus augmenting strengths was also debated in other assessments and appraisal models reported in the archival literature. While it does not have to be an either-or scenario, of course, in a world of limited resources it makes sense to identify priorities (and that was part of the motivation for the present study). The data from an assessment can suggest future paths for fieldwork, but determining

what to actually do next is a question for any given archive to consider in its own context. Furthermore, the importance of collaboration, emphasized in the collections assessments and appraisal strategies from the 1980s, is worth underscoring here. Although it has a statewide collecting mission, the Bentley is far from the only repository in the state. Comparing notes with other archives and developing coordinated collecting strategies would benefit all, and address some of the concerns first articulated decades ago about “competitive” and “haphazard” collecting practices in manuscript repositories. (I will say more about collaborating with records creators below.)

The chronological coverage illuminated in this study shows that the recent past (from 1992 to the present) has fewer collections than the middle of the twentieth century. This was a surprising finding in some ways. It would be valuable to be able to compare the date of accession of collections to contextualize this drop off in chronological coverage. Was there a decline in collecting activity in Black history? Or does the drop off reflect a built-in delay inherent to archival practice (given that archives generally collect inactive records, will the chronological coverage in the content always lag behind the date of accession)? Since the accession date is not part of the MARC records that constituted the dataset for the present study, that question could not be answered here in an overall sense. It is likely that the Bentley’s administrative records and the institutional knowledge of long-time staff would illuminate this question further—but such research was not possible due to COVID-19 closures and the need to retain a manageable scope. Future studies, however, could utilize a more robust mixed-methods approach to analyze the relationship between accession date and “aboutness” more thoroughly. Knowledge gained through this approach, in turn, would facilitate better understanding of the evolution of a collection over time, including how well it met collecting goals and the outcomes of outreach efforts. As this example shows, although assessment is often thought of as a separate step, it can and should be embedded into the core functions of archival practice. Doing so means that assessment can be more attuned to the particular needs and goals of the institution, just as the OCLC and SAA-RBMS guidelines recommend.

Even without a convenient way to see accession dates overall, assessing the chronological coverage indirectly revealed “fallow” donors—individuals and organizations from whom no accessions had been received for a number of years but who are likely to still be

generating records. This is one small example of how a collections assessment can illuminate next steps in fieldwork.

Assessing the chronological coverage also has implications for thinking about format types. Future studies could look more closely at size and format types, following the 2019 SAA-RBMS guidelines. The analyses done so far on this MARC dataset suggest that such an examination would be unlikely to change the general conclusions and implications for fieldwork emerging from the present study. But the question of format deserves attention and could suggest new strategies for the future. In the wake of COVID-19 and the Black Lives Matters movement, many archivists and repositories have turned new attention to “rapid response collecting,” using strategies such as crowd-sourcing to collect material related to current events as they are unfolding. Web archives and oral histories could also be used to collect the recent past and continue to broaden the variety of formats related to Black history. The particular history of African American memory keeping, where community pageants, school curricula, and oral traditions are especially important (Brundage, 2005), also argues for maximum openness to various format types.

Beyond these debates about collection strengths, weakness, and concrete next steps are ethical questions about collecting material related to Black history. Such questions are especially resonant in light of the Black Lives Matter movement and the history of African American collecting practices, exclusion, and segregation. Recall the Church (1998) study of donor motivation, where donors would have preferred to give their materials to Black archives if those repositories had sufficient resources to preserve them and make them accessible. The full dimensions of this situation go beyond what can adequately be addressed here. But it is critical to keep in mind that just because “mainstream” or predominantly white archives now see the value in collecting Black history, it does not automatically follow that they are the best place for such materials. Collections assessments within and across institutions—such as those in Chicago, Philadelphia, and Wisconsin—can help, by identifying where resources are as a first step. Collaborations like these should include not just formal repositories, but also source communities and records creators—whose ideas about what materials are worth preserving and how may challenge conventional archival practice (Punzalan and Caswell, 2016).

Methodological Issues in Assessing Collections for Reparative Purposes

This study was intended in part to pilot a collections assessment method for the MHC to guide strategic planning for future fieldwork. I found that even the first step, counting, was not as straightforward as I expected. The OCLC report says that for collections assessment, the basic process is to “open the boxes and look at the stuff” (p. 17). While looking at archival materials themselves has utility for collections assessment that is especially focused on collections management and the condition of materials, it is not an approach that can be easily applied at scale or used to understand the content of the collection as a whole. For that, I relied on archival description—MARC records, catalog records, selected finding aids, and the African Americans in Michigan Subject Guide (AAM-SG). These are all forms of what Yakel (2003) calls “archival representations,” tools that archivists have created as part of their stewardship of the materials that allow us to know what we have.

To identify collections related to African Americans in Michigan, I used as a filter a subject heading that seemed the perfect match: “African Americans—Michigan.” This subject heading, along with other parameters to separate out published material and to differentiate the Michigan Historical Collections from university history, created the dataset that was the basis of this study. Given the relatively small sample, most of the calculations were able to be done easily. Future phases of collections assessment that are of a similar scale could be done in the same manner. But any topical focus that generates a larger sample, or if the MHC as a whole is to be analyzed simultaneously, then a research approach that includes more automation should be considered.

The filter produced a result, yielding a list of collections. But, as I explained in the RQ1 Results section above, comparison with the AAM-SG revealed that the MARC export missed 42 collections that I would have expected to be included. Those collections that were missing from the MARC report were only discovered because of the AAM-SG. In other words, it is only because Bentley archivists had previously created the AAM-SG that we know the MARC export missed some collections. It is possible that there are additional collections related to African American history that were on neither the MARC export nor the AAM-SG. The AAM-SG is not exhaustive, but the intent of the MARC export was to catch all collections with content related to African American history. This finding (and the patterns I identified among those that were missed) suggests that additional subject headings be used in future studies, even if they seem

redundant. For example, parameters should be set to make sure to catch the geographical marker of “Michigan” even if it was included in a separate subject heading, and to catch “African American” when it was a modifier or a subheading as well as a noun. This failure of the MARC export to include relevant collections raises the question of whether there is a better way to categorize collections for a query like this. Could there be some kind of omnibus heading or tag that indicated content related to DEI (diversity, equity, and inclusion) goals, for example? I’ll return to this issue below.

Once the list and count had been established (the baseline quantitative finding), I used the subject headings and other access tools to learn more about the collections in the sample according to RQ2 (size), RQ3 (chronology) and RQ4 (geography). I found this analysis to be relatively straightforward since the majority of collections included relevant data for me to characterize the sample in terms of size and chronological and geographical distribution.

I found it much more challenging to investigate “aboutness” using descriptive tools. One issue was the significant variability in the number of subject headings assigned across collections, an artifact of changing cataloging practices over time as well as individual preference by the cataloguer. This variability made it difficult to tell from subject headings alone the extent of material in a given collection that centered on African American history or how that content might relate to the rest of the collection. Even finding aids did not always identify the African American content in a collection, as I discovered in my examination of finding aids from the largest collections. There are several implications here. One is that the rationale for assigning the relevant subject headings to those collections cannot be known with certainty, making it that much more difficult to trace the descriptive practices that produced the MARC sample. A second implication is that the largest collections in absolute size were not necessarily the largest in terms of African American-related content. This is not necessarily a surprising finding, but it does show that the first phase of analysis—identifying the collections through the MARC export and ranking them by size—results in incomplete and potentially even misleading conclusions about the amount of material related to African American history in a given collection and thus in the overall MHC.

In addition to subject headings and finding aids attached to individual collections, I analyzed other access tools and organizing schemas that were meant to capture topicality across groups of collections, the AAM-SG and the Endelman categories. The AAM-SG shows the

power of archival representation to shape knowledge about collections. The AAM-SG can serve as a boon to researchers and was critical in the present study in revealing collections that did not appear on the MARC export. But grouping collections topically reinforces the power of that organizing schema; it reinforces the importance of the enumerated themes and risks overlooking other aspects of African American history if researchers assume it is the whole story. While the document explains that it is not meant to be exhaustive, its structure, name (“Guide”), and even the lack of attribution give it an authority that may override, or at least exist in tension with, that disclaimer. This dynamic echoes what Yaker (2003) identifies regarding archival representation, that access tools can obscure as much as they reveal and take on a kind of cumulative power over time.

As discussed particularly in Endelman (1987) and the Arizona Matrix Study (Conyer and Pringle, 2014), creating subject categories and assigning collections to them to codify “aboutness” is difficult. While the goals of discoverability and interoperability in the LIS field make standardization a key value, the cataloging process is not an exact science. This is why the OCLC and SAA-RBMS guidelines emphasize the importance of documenting one’s own practices and decisions, and why the lack of contextual or identifying information on some descriptive information and access tools such as the AAM-SG is limiting.

Furthermore, the exercise of cross-walking the AAM-SG and Endelman categories shed light on the extent to which archival representation changes over time, as well as the challenges for collections assessment in aligning description that was created at different times for different purposes. The AAM-SG categories centered on topics and historical developments that are generally considered fundamental to African American history (civil rights, religion, and slavery, for example). In contrast, the Endelman categories were intended to capture the breadth of human experience cross-culturally. Both sets of categories can be considered dated now, with important implications not just for description (reparative or otherwise) but for how we conceptualize collections and identify collecting priorities.

The juxtaposition of these categories, combined with the insight that the largest collections in the MARC export did not necessarily have the most material related to African American history, brings us back to issues of representation. Here I do not mean Yaker’s concept of archival representation as such, but rather what archives are trying to achieve by collecting materials related to African American history (or that of any group that has been traditionally

excluded from or marginalized in the archival and historical record). In thinking about representation in this sense, it can be helpful to deploy the archival concept of “by” versus “about.” Were records created *by* the community whose stories we seek to preserve, or were they created by others (often those with much more institutional or social power) *about* them? And do the various forms of archival representation allow us to tell the difference? In the sample generated for the present study, the answer to the latter question seems to be, sometimes. Recall the examples of the Detroit Urban League (with a concise historical / biographical section in the finding aid that did not identify the leadership of the organization as Black) compared with the Urban League of Southwest Michigan, where the finding aid explicitly refers to the organization as inter-racial.

Today, diversity audits in libraries and movements toward “reparative description” in archives have brought renewed attention to metadata, particular what is sometimes referred to as “metadata for diversity” (Clarke and Shoonmaker, 2019). In archives, much of the current discussion focuses on the harm caused to users and records creators when they encounter pejorative text or images in archival collections or description and how archivists can remedy or ameliorate such harm. Since metadata is the tool we use to know what we have, the current intensive focus on descriptive language and practice could be an opportunity to lay the groundwork for better assessment. One idea is an omnibus DEI heading mentioned previously. But this could be challenging, not to mention controversial. Revisiting the categories from the 1980s assessments reminds us that standards and values change over time in how we conceptualize and label concepts, topics, and especially people. The reparative description movement similarly underscores the fact that naming has power. This issue also complicates the “by versus about” question. Should the identity of the records creator be considered to constitute diverse representation regardless of the content of the materials under consideration? Most recently, intriguingly, there has been a movement against recording gender in name authority records (<https://www.loc.gov/aba/pcc/documents/gender-in-NARs-revised-report.pdf>) while debates about including racial identifiers seem to be more mixed.

These are complex questions without easy answers, especially given our current political climate. The standardization inherent in information science is both a strength and a weakness—intended to provide access, it can sometimes seem like a blunt instrument that obscures nuance and even causes harm through erasure or misperception. Archives perhaps have an advantage

over libraries in that rather than relying only on cataloging, archivists produce a broader array of access tools such as finding aids whose format allow for greater detail and subtlety in describing materials. But the time, energy, and judgment required are substantial.

Conclusion

In this study I sought to assess the extent of current holdings related to Black history in the Michigan Historical Collections, Bentley Historical Library, to inform future collecting priorities. I also tried to pilot a method for conducting this type of assessment. In terms of findings, even the most basic quantitative measure (how many collections are there related to Black history?) was not as simple as I expected. Nevertheless, I was able to identify useful patterns in the geographical and chronological distribution of the collections in the sample. Evaluating size was more complicated because of disparate units of measure, but an overall trend was clear. It is important to remember that the largest collections in absolute terms may not have the largest amount of relevant content and that size, in any case, is not a value judgment.

I found determining “aboutness” to be much more challenging. The method relied on archival representations—primarily MARC records but also a selected sample of finding aids and an undated guide to holdings created by Bentley archivists. As a result, this study’s findings depended on past practices, often invisible, that had shaped the available data. The variation in amount of description, whether the number of subject headings or the degree of detail in finding aids, sometimes made it hard to assess with confidence the relevant material within collections and across the sample.

While some of these challenges are unavoidable (it would be unrealistic to do a collections assessment without relying on archival surrogates), others could be ameliorated. The current attention to reparative description provides an opportunity to think ahead regarding assessment. If the archival community would like to be better able to identify material related to under-represented groups and to more precisely parse collections as to “by” versus “about,” then metadata and cataloging practices should be developed to make such content easier to highlight. Archivists who develop such practices should document their rationale and procedures, not just to ensure consistency over time but also to provide important context for future assessments that rely on this data.

With the caveats noted above, this study's findings conveyed a reasonably clear and thorough snapshot of collections related to Black history in the MHC. For purposes of collection development, however, I would like to be able to trace the evolution of the MHC over time and understand its use. For example, have particular models of outreach proven especially fruitful in connecting with prospective donors and yielding collections? On the use side, what collections have been especially popular among researchers, instructors, and students? The challenge in addressing these questions is that the data to at least start to answer them exists but it was not part of the MARC dataset. The accession date was sometimes included in the finding aid but I only consulted a selected sample of finding aids. At the Bentley, as in many archives, different staff members compile various forms of information for their own needs. This mode of operation may be efficient and support the core work of the archive, but it makes it more complicated to design assessments that require data from different departments, functions, and data management systems. In the present study, this data divergence, if it may be called that, was most evident in trying to align accession dates with other descriptive elements drawn from the MARC export. An ideal approach emerging from this study would be the capacity to easily assess volume, "aboutness," and accession dates simultaneously, or at least in a more integrated way.

This study, along with the review of other assessment projects and guidelines, illuminates a perpetual tension in the LIS field between standardization and local needs. Guidelines from professional bodies seem remarkably hesitant to prescribe assessment procedures—perhaps for good reason. But this reticence means that each assessment project has to "reinvent the wheel" to some degree, making it less likely to produce a method or results that can be integrated into larger or later analysis. Adding to the challenge is the reality that assessment often seems to be outside the daily functions of an archive, a luxury or "extra" beyond the regular scope of work. Assessment is labor intensive; it is no coincidence that many of the projects reviewed here were conducted when outside resources were available and required a team approach. And the reality is that collaborative assessment, whether with other repositories or records creators, or both, requires even more foresight, planning, and commitment.

As I hope this study has shown, however, collections assessment is a worthwhile and necessary endeavor. It would be difficult, if not impossible, to implement collections development strategies without starting with assessment. The concerns that animated earlier rounds of collection assessment have not gone away; if anything, they have intensified. The

proliferation of records (electronic as well as analogue), a desire for collaborative rather than competitive collecting between repositories, and a growing commitment on the part of many archives toward better preservation of underrepresented voices all argue for the importance of collection assessment as a fundamental step in collection development.

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