

The House Archives Built

by **DOROTHY BERRY**

Abstract

The current trending focus on liberating the concept of archives from physical institutions has served to mentally leave behind Black collections held in predominantly White institutions. Dorothy Berry reflects on the conflict of archives versus the archives, and how the fundamental structures of archives can disserve Black archival subjects by foregrounding ownership, collecting, and homogeneity.

Keywords: *archives, standards, Black History, memory*

SUGGESTED CITATION:

Berry, Dorothy. "The House Archives Built." up//root. June 22, 2021. <https://www.uproot.space/features/the-house-archives-built>. Copyright for articles published by up//root is retained by the author(s). This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.



[image one with caption: "William Berry, circa 1880, on the porch of the house he built in 1873"]

Introduction

I begrudgingly spent a good deal of time in a storefront museum in Ash Grove, Missouri, the Ozarks Afro-American Heritage Museum. In the classic tradition of African American community archives, this one was curated by a charismatic, self-educated man, dedicated to the memory of Black people in a region that would prefer to forget them. I rolled my eyes at historical anecdotes I thought were corny or in need of references. I sighed when he began his rehearsed introduction: *I grew up in the house my great-great-grandparents built in 1873*. I knew I wanted to study history in a *real* way, at a university with credentialed professors and rich with historical documentation.

Decades later, while participating in a virtual symposium from my apartment in Cambridge, Massachusetts, I found myself representing archivists in a group of credentialed professors participating in a discussion on *the archives*. "The neighborhood is an archive, the woman was an archive, this land is an archive." There was a general excitement around imagining objects, people,

and places as archives without any clear definitions. In a fit of pique I finally asked, “If everything is an archive, what meaning does the word have? What is so great about being an archive? Why have we given the word such power?” What I felt, at least subconsciously, was annoyingly provoked, reflecting on the decades of labor my mentors, colleagues, and I have worked trying to unlock ignored Black history from institutional strongholds through whatever means institutional boundaries *allow*. I realized I resent the joy and expansiveness of the professorially vague *the archives* because they flit over the struggles for respect and visibility that punctuate my career. I see *the archives* dancing atop the waves while the burdens of archives pull me farther and farther down.

Academics continuously loosen the concept of *the archives* in vigorous debate and flowery speech, while hundreds of linear feet of Black history are stacked in secure shelving, unbeknownst and inaccessible to implicated communities. “Why do we even have this?” is a recurring question whispered across institutions as complex histories of provenance and acquisitions lead to single box collections with titles like “Miscellaneous Slavery Documents,” a collection of Freedman’s Bureau papers and Bills of Sale I recently encountered. In the face of this guilt-inducing backlog, special collections have turned towards digitization as a solution, prioritizing getting images of Black people online and hoping that will be enough. I’ve commiserated with colleagues about demands to streamline digitization with the feeling that getting things online will increase access—even without full description or detailed metadata, the things that guide digital discovery. Digital collection development has been presented as a liberatory access provider, with the idea that reparative access is primarily a workflow adjustment.

There is an idea born equally from the enormous backlogs of patron requests and from idealism. If everything is digitized, regardless of metadata or image quality, the resulting hoard would solve a host of issues. Researcher discomfort in dealing with racially insensitive reading room staff? Solved. Physical awareness of marginalized status being the only Black person in the building? Solved. Criticisms that existing digital collections are too White? Immediately solved, with references. No longer would there need to be as heavy a focus on the White-supremacy inflected structures of archival repositories—those issues can be fixed in their own time, and researchers can safely access content at home. I want to explore this imaginative avoidance, how institutional possessors of primarily Black collections obfuscate access through rules and roadblocks of their own design.

Archives and The Archives

The conceptual model of *the archives*, broadly anything that collects/holds references to the past, has become commonplace in humanistic and artistic discussions of memory and history. This model has been used to refer to concepts ranging from the collective memories of a culture to discrete physical objects and their historical contexts. A photo-album becomes *an archive*, a neighborhood becomes *an archive*, the stains on a blouse—anything that can hold and spark memory. This has no doubt been to the chagrin of professional archivists with inferiority complexes, underappreciated and undersupported by the faculty who now clutch *the archives* close. At the same time, it has liberated those outside of the profession to redefine who and what holds historical value. It has also led to a harmful eliding of both the labor of archivists to preserve material history, and the vast wealth of Black history living within unsuspecting institutions. *The archives* is capricious and expansive, existing outside institutional repositories and representing marginalized peoples. Archives, on the other hand, accept their woeful, hegemonic conception of their holdings. I pull on my professional experience, and the definitions provided by the archival field itself, to trouble this newly accepted view and to explore how foundational concepts in special collections can serve as core elements in the continued ignorance and avoidance of Black history in our midst.

An archive (notice the shift in article), is defined as the materials/permanent records created or collected by an individual or organization because of the “enduring value contained in the information they contain,” especially if those materials were kept according to *provenance, original order, collective control*.² Yet, *archive* as a term has become completely untethered from the tangible. While definitions have become more slippery as the archival field intersects with other disciplines studying *the archive*, it’s important to remember that institutional archives still hold most of the power.

Thousands of students are going into debt each year to receive a degree from an ALA accredited institution in order to qualify for employment at formal institutions, often a required qualification for even entry level jobs. Those jobs are pulling their definitions from traditional professional organizations, like the Society of American Archivists, not from more expansive theoretical conceptualizers.

The definitions I provide have been troubled by others before, but are still conceived as the fundamentals of the professionalized archival field. The primary definition of *archive* centers three

principles and one standard that are key to understanding archives and are prime for reimagining: provenance, original order, collective control/description, and permanence.

Provenance

*n. (provenancial, adj.) ~ 1. The origin or source of something. - 2. Information regarding the origins, custody, and ownership of an item or collection.*³

I grew up in the house my great-grandparents built in 1873. I can hear the cadence of my father's voice reciting this line in the museum to crowds of curious locals, and can see my mother affectionately mouthing the words as he says them again and again. I am a Black, mixed race woman from a working-class background in the curious position of having followed, completely unexpectedly, in my father's footsteps.

I am from the Missouri Ozarks, a region historically known as White Man's Heaven. This is an area where contemporary understandings of the region place all African Americans as interlopers—newcomers to a traditionally White, hardscrabble country home. It is estimated that in the early 20th century, up to 40,000 African Americans left the Ozarks in response to a series of lynchings in Springfield, Joplin, and Pierce City. A Missouri State University professor became interested in the hidden and erased histories of African American settlements in the region and began her research—going out in the community and collecting, or extracting depending on the individual perspective, people's stories, photos, memories. As is common in academic archives, what was originally a faculty person's individual research eventually became a large, institutional collection. That professor made some promises she was unable to keep, and unfortunately passed away suddenly, leaving behind a mass of generally inscrutable notes. The staff archivists have done as good a job as possible to make these materials available and to describe them to the best of their abilities, but are underresourced and somewhat disconnected from local Black communities.

Almost all the Black families in the region offered up their materials to the altar of higher learning, which are all minimally processed, sitting on shelves. Donating family papers to an institutional archive is an act of trust, in the best of possible worlds, and one of generosity. Giving important community records away to preserve for future scholarship is a gift. Provenance looks at material custody, marking the "origin or source of something" in the purest of bureaucratic senses. Here is a

photo of a baptism, in a river a few minutes walk from my family homestead, cataloged: date, unknown; individuals, unknown; creator, unknown.



[image two with caption “Imagine all your family’s photos living under the heading “Katharine G. Lederer Ozarks African American History Collection” with no mention your family as contributors”]’

Almost everything remains unknown except for the professor who made collecting these materials their career’s work. The story becomes one of her research journey, and not one of the families and communities represented therein. This is not a rare or unique example. It is a fairly standard story of how materials end up as the property of colleges and universities.

I grew up in the house my great-grandparents built. This photo was taken just a few years before their son got the Spanish flu. These papers are from their wedding. This quilt was made by your great-great grandmother. My father strove to represent Black history in our region from a perspective of the community. While many families donated their materials to the university, mine did not, and when we inherited that house from my uncle Lawrence, my father set about opening a storefront museum filled with photos and artefacts from our family and family’s friends, dating back to the 1850s at least. As is

so often the case, the provenance for these materials is not about acquisition and purchase records, but is an oral history of the family and region.

As a younger person, I did not appreciate the methodology keeping this knowledge trusted and within the community. I wanted more citations and reference points. My father was not able to finish high school. I made it all the way to two master's degrees, only to realize those citations and reference points have multiple values, the strongest of which is often the ability to prove what you know to be true to those who cannot trust your word. *The archive* is nebulous, but archives are institutions defining documentary history: the things within the archive are the facts and the things without are suspect. The word holds such power because without archives we have memory, and to value memory as fact requires a transformative mindset that institutions seem to feel they cannot survive.

Original Order

*The physical and intellectual collection order established by the creator.*⁵

Who is the creator of the records and what is the institutional goal in maintenance? In archives, building from imperialist collecting ideologies, the creator is the collector, sometimes in a logical sense: my personal journals become the Dorothy Berry Collection, sometimes in a sense that leans into erasure—"The Dorothy Berry Collection of Someone Else's Personal Photos." The importance is shifted from the generative to the acquisitive—the creator is not the one who made the memories, but the one who commodifies the memories into a collection. Your memories are ephemeral, you do not own them even though you experienced them. The archival collection is *permanent*, it was created outside of personal experience.



[image 3 with caption “How do we locate Black joy searching ‘Photographs. Snack Bar, undated. (Box 149-AV, Folder 4)’ for a single digital picture in a complex object with over one hundred images?”]⁶

This photo is only one of about seventy, digitized into a complex object containing 141 image files as part of a project I managed at the University of Minnesota. The order is maintained from the original donation, and the title comes straight from the folder: “Photographs. Snack Bar, Undated.” These photos, from a series of United Service Organization (USO) photos donated by the Young Men’s Christian Association (YMCA) are part of a larger collection, which includes thousands of candid photos ranging from World War II through the Vietnam War. The primacy of original order means that for a community member or scholar to find the four photos of African Americans amongst the seventy, you need to scroll through each one; and to find photos of African Americans that weren’t already identified in the description, you need to scroll through each photograph and mark the location yourself.

Valuing the collection organizer over the collection’s human subjects makes sense in many contexts, but as powerful institutions desire more and more to collect material histories beyond the ruling class,

we begin recreating systems of bodily ownership that have now been translated into memory. Who owns the order of Black memory? The person who brought it to the White institution.

Collective Description

*Describing a collection as a group, only describing the most important items individually.*⁷

The grouping for those YMCA USO photos is “Photograph, Snack Bar.” If an archivist wanted to call attention to the cracks of Black joy breaking through the overwhelmingly White assemblage, there is no accepted methodology, unless the repository was already committed to forefronting marginalized histories in a way that subverts a commitment to standards and practices. The ‘most important items’ is a slippery delineator, a caveat based on a need to balance goals and realities. I have given numerous workshops on describing marginalized peoples’ materials in archival collections over the past year. Time and time again, I heard the same concern: People who want to do what they know is right—changing terminology, excluding patently offensive subject headings, modifying priorities—saying that they can’t because of systems and standards, as though we did not build those standards ourselves! The mechanisms of objectivity and uniformity seem to have entrapped their own designers. Given the size of many archival collections, only the most important materials can be described at item-level, but importance is gauged by the same standards that tell us it is more important to be in agreement across systems, using terms we know to be wrong, than to locally assert what is right even if it won’t sync in an aggregated context.

Even attempts at collectively describing specifically Black collections are stymied by the organizational structures and rules that define archival and manuscript description. With little time, funding, and support, collections are often described from the top down in as generalized language as possible, but subject headings standing in as road signs for all the missing detail. Consider two Library of Congress Subject Headings (LCSH) that clarify the bureaucratic nonsense of using the widely accepted descriptors: “African Americans - Music,” and “African Americans - Songs and Music.”^{8,9} I picked these two headings in deference to the fact that many problematized LCSHs are more baldly offensive, but the patent absurdity here illuminates the larger issue of commitment to structure over purpose. “African Americans - Music” is the heading for music *by* African Americans; “African Americans - Songs and Music” is the heading for music *about* African Americans. As with

provenance and original order, this type of collective description raises the question: *Who is this for?*, And yet, the answer is already a given: the language serves the systems, not the subjects.

Conclusion

I am certainly not a disciplinary founder, but I am someone who has been working and writing on reparative description for years. I have gotten to a comfortable place saying “We don’t have to type that into the finding aid,” or “Let’s look up the actual name for this person/place/thing,” utilizing agency as someone who values my own expertise and who feels responsible for work that I put out into the work. I’ve freed myself to move past archival stasis by being willing to speak up, realizing that for me, the anxiety around blunt speech is less harmful than the guilt of keeping quiet. Growing up in a small town, I was often furious about the racism around me—it took me years to move beyond that pure rage. I have experienced that anger bubbling below the surface in professional settings where neutrality and passivity are accepted as being equal to the hard work of self-improvement. For the sake of my own calm and well-being I have reflected, and now understand that I am most angered when I don’t speak up—when I have the debates with myself inside my head, instead of out loud with my colleagues. This emboldened agency is often perceived, I’m told, as self-confidence but I experience it more as a survival technique.

Since the summer of 2020 and the murder of George Floyd by Derek Chauvin, archives and special collections across the country have been galvanized to forefront Black collections that they had previously ignored and to work towards less offensive description for these materials, in manners ranging from patently-guilt ridden to the thoughtfully executed. The archival field itself is predominately White, leading to top down change and initiatives led by anyone but Black people. Buildings designed to mimic colonial mansions, with grand plantation columns, have held these materials for decades. The sudden national awareness of clear and present racism has led to a demand for working groups and committees—often led by professionals who have deprioritized this language work for years, and have now been told by administrators that this is an area in which they need to be leaders.

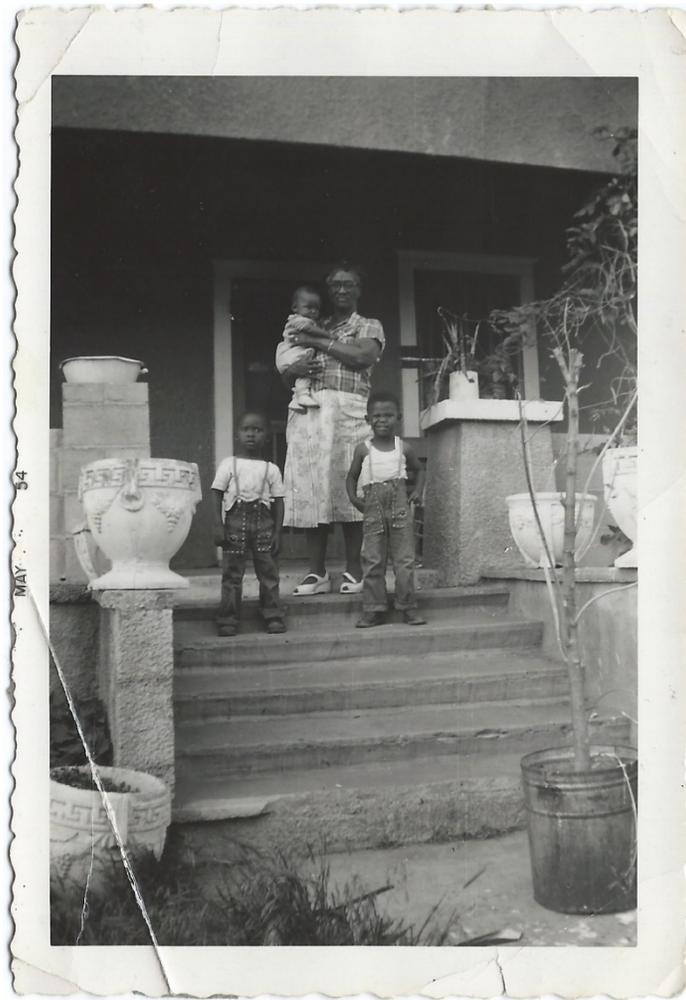
This reflection may sound more troublesome than solution oriented, but that is part of my goal. The fast transition from reparative description as a sort of backburner special interest for archivists of color to administratively driven fast-tracking in order to make public announcements about search-and-

replace corrections for “out-dated” language. There is little space for actually acknowledging and understanding the personal harm and alienation our professional standards have inflicted on both patrons and staff. This is not the first or last time I will say it, but problems that took years to build are not often dismantled in an hour. There are beams of harm stretching out across the order of these collections, their provenance, and their description. It is hard to know which part of the shaky foundation will unsteady a patron and push them out, but it’s even harder when we want to jump over the harm and move straight to solutions. I don’t want to provide suggestions that get translated as directives, I want to trouble the waters and see what comes up.

I started by stating that this essay was based on my flawed experiences gaining credentialed library education and doing digital collections work at predominately White institutions. These are the rules and regulations of the field, and I’ve traced the roadblocks they put up around Black memory through our own standardized definitions. I have many trusted colleagues who refuse to work outside of Black collections out of solidarity and self-preservation. Sometimes I think I’ve unnecessarily made myself punishable by working in those spaces I’ve chosen, but I always think back to the stacks—the literal stacks of paper documenting Black life throughout primarily White institutions, papers that are often only explored in response to public events or to fill a Black History Month exhibit case.

When archives feel stymied by standards and best practices, digitization can feel liberatory. It feels freeing knowing that someone can look in a collection online and avoid profiling by reading room security. It feels freeing knowing that someone can search digital collections for “African Americans” and not have to request a box titled “Miscellaneous - Negroes” from an apologetic White archivist. Our descriptive systems are often the first interaction patrons have with our institutions, and when the language and systems feel alienating, patrons will take what they need and leave the rest. Archivists worry about archives in the age of digital discovery, wondering who will come to visit us if they can just get the images they want online. The question of who will come visit is rarely asked of the house we have built and whether or not our door has ever been truly open in the first place. We constructed a house from static language centered on privileged experiences, then applied some cheap siding in the form of hastily thrown-together workarounds and inclusion committees. Now we wonder why no one wants to move in and stay.

I grew up in the house my great-great grandparents built in 1873.



[image 4 with caption “Moses Berry, circa 1955, with his grandmother Mamie and brothers Gary and Charles, on the porch his great grandparents built in 1873.]¹⁰

Acknowledgements

This piece was originally presented in a highly different form at *Black Portraiture[s] V* in October, 2019. I want to first and foremost thank my parents, Magdalena and Fr. Moses Berry for cultivating my interest in history and for supporting work. I also want to thank and acknowledge all the Black archivists, curators and self-identified memory workers whose work I am building on—especially my great friend and supporter Holly Smith. Finally, I want to thank the archivists at Missouri State University who kindly let me tour their stacks and work incredibly hard as archivists in a state that chronically underfunds education and the humanities. I deeply appreciate the up//root editorial team, and my hard working reviewers, Katrina Spencer, Rachel E. Winston, and Joyce Gabiola, who helped transition this from an inchoate set of presenters notes to a fully realized essay.

End Notes

1. "Man standing on porch with chair; Photograph," Ozarks Afro-American History Museum Online, accessed June 9, 2021, <https://oaahm.omeka.net/items/show/93>.
2. "Archives." Pearce-Moses, Robert. *A Glossary of Archival and Records Terminology*. Chicago: The Society of American Archivists. 2005.
3. "Provenance." Pearce-Moses, Robert. *A Glossary of Archival and Records Terminology*. Chicago: The Society of American Archivists. 2005.
4. "Baptism in Little Sac River," Katherine G. Lederer Ozarks African American History Collection. Missouri State Digital Collections, accessed June 9, 2021, <https://digitalcollections.missouristate.edu/digital/collection/LedererExhibit/id/212/rec/1>
5. "Original Order." Pearce-Moses, Robert. *A Glossary of Archival and Records Terminology*. Chicago: The Society of American Archivists. 2005.
6. National Board of the Young Men's Christian Associations. Armed Services Dept. "Photographs. Snack Bar, undated," YMCA Armed Services Scrapbooks and Photographs (Y.USA.4-5). University of Minnesota Libraries, Kautz Family YMCA Archives, accessed June 9, 2021, <http://purl.umn.edu/265186>.
7. "Collective Description." Pearce-Moses, Robert. *A Glossary of Archival and Records Terminology*. Chicago: The Society of American Archivists. 2005.
8. "African Americans--Music" <http://id.loc.gov/authorities/subjects/sh85001968>
9. "African Americans--Songs and music" <http://id.loc.gov/authorities/subjects/sh2011002554>
10. "Elderly woman standing on porch holding infant with two boys; Photograph," Ozarks Afro-American History Museum Online, accessed June 9, 2021, <https://oaahm.omeka.net/items/show/134>.