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## The Rediscovery of the Sierra Leone Collection

*By Valerie Harris, University of Illinois at Chicago*

To borrow from Shiyali Ramamrita Ranganathan's third law: every archival collection has its researcher. Of course, archivists and special collections librarians have an important and active role in uniting collections and users. Such was the case with the Sierra Leone collection at the University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC) Library. Purchased by the library in 1969, it garnered immediate interest from scholars, but thereafter the collection languished relatively unknown for years, until recently rediscovered by Richard Simpson, a professor of political science at UIC and a former Chicago alderman. His early research, including his doctoral dissertation, was about the political landscape of West Africa and Sierra Leone in particular. With Professor Simpson's involvement, knowledge of the Sierra Leone collection reached a tipping point.

What united Simpson with the Sierra Leone collection? In this case, the answer is Nancy Cirillo, Professor Emerita of English at UIC and a specialist in postcolonial literature. Nearly six years ago, the then-director of Special Collections at UIC Library introduced Cirillo, who collaborated with the library to curate the H. D. Carberry Collection of Caribbean Studies, to the Sierra Leone collection. It was, as she describes it, "exciting news for a Caribbean scholar." Her persistence in bringing her students to the materials in class sessions, arranging viewings of the collection for new faculty in African American studies, and alerting Simpson to its existence led to a series of initiatives and events that really got the word out to key scholars.

The UIC Library's Special Collections and University Archives Department is well used, with staff conducting more than 3,500 reference transactions about rare books, personal papers and organizational records, photographs, and university archives during the past year. The Jane Addams Hull-House records and neighborhood papers and photographs comprised the core of the library's special collections when it opened in the late 1960s, and our collecting strengths are in late-nineteenth- and twentieth-century Chicago history, social services, politics, and culture. This local focus of UIC special collections underscores the surprise and wonder UIC students and faculty studying the transatlantic slave trade and African colonization felt when they found the profoundly rich Sierra Leone collection so close to home.

The content and context of the collection definitely are cause for excitement. Sierra Leone was not only a major port of the British slave trade—one reason the founding of the colony was officially supported—it was also directly linked to the Caribbean in that leg of the Middle Passage. The Sierra Leone collection has thus opened a new Atlantic perspective on the work being done with Caribbean studies and has offered insight into the intense international rivalries fueled by the immense wealth generated by the slave trade. The seven-linear-foot collection documents the abolition of the British slave trade and the earliest recorded attempt to resettle freed slaves on the west coast of Africa. The 60-year span (1780–1840) of materials covers a period that includes the 1793 Anti-Slavery Act in British North America (Canada), the abolition of the transatlantic slave trade, and the eventual abolition of slavery by the British Parliament. The diverse nature of materials—slave ship drawings and other graphical representations of slavery, antislavery broadsides, abolitionist correspondence (including letters by William Wilberforce and Olaudah Equiano), architectural plans for Freetown drawn by Granville Sharp, diaries and journals of voyages and of daily life, colonial legal documents, land grant deeds, petitions, ship charters, and royal warrants and treaties against the slave trade—yields a rare insight into the complex nature of the founding of the colony as both an idealistic gesture to create a community for English freed blacks and a colonial presence for a government that would become deeply invested in spreading its power. These documents are central to the history of Sierra Leone as a free nation.

In November 2008, Professor Simpson arranged a visit from Sierra Leonean scholars attending the African Studies Association conference in Chicago to view the collection. Their excitement upon seeing these previously unknown documents generated new ideas for making the material more widely accessible. Since then a comprehensive digitization project has been undertaken, with approximately 30 pages and accompanying transcriptions available on the CARLI Digital Collections Web site, <http://www.uic.edu/depts/lib/sleo/>. Selections are also available on Flickr, <http://www.flickr.com/photos/uicdigital/>. Cirillo has played a leading role in the recruitment of undergraduates and graduate students to transcribe the letters and diaries, many of which are difficult to read either because of fading

ink, archaic eighteenth- and nineteenth-century handwriting, or a combination of the two. These students have become deeply invested in bringing these documents to a wider audience, and the library continues to seek funding for providing internships and technical support to complete the transcription and digitization of the collection. When completed, the library will provide full digital access to the collection to the library at the University of Sierra Leone in Freetown.

As Alice Schreyer of the University of Chicago Library pointed out in the article “The Lost *Chicagoan*: Found

in the Library,” which appeared in the April 2009 issue of the *ILA Reporter*, the serendipitous discovery of books and documents while browsing the stacks isn’t possible in the context of special collections, where the collections remain behind locked doors. Special collections librarians and archivists face a particular challenge connecting their collections with readers, but with perseverance, creative thinking, and collaboration with colleagues outside the library, we can find satisfaction and success when a new researcher discovers what’s been there all along.

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## Between-Meeting Council Actions

Council approved the following motion via E-mail on January 26:

Approve the full minutes of the October 22, 2009, Council meeting.

President Tanya Zanish-Belcher, with the assent of Council, created two working groups on January 29. The Development/Investment Working Group is charged with examining MAC’s development and investment efforts and making recommendations for the future to Council. The group will look at the financial needs for scholarships and educational programming, and make suggestions for long-, medium-, and short-term investments based on that review. The group is to submit an initial report to Council at its October 2010 meeting with a final report to Council due at the 2011 annual meeting. Members of the group will include Matt Blessing (chair), Craig Wright (through spring 2010), Brenda Burk (through spring 2010), Dennis Meissner, Bruce Bruemmer, and the incoming MAC treasurer and development officer.

The Marketing Tools Working Group was formed to assess, review, and develop potential marketing tools for MAC for the next two to four years. The group is to provide its report to Council by the fall of 2010. The group will be cochaired by Kathy Koch and Joshua Ranger, and members include Erik Moore, Anke Voss, Shari Christy, and a to-be-announced Membership Committee representative.

## Cultural Crossroads

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workshops on oral history projects and the assessment of audiovisual materials—continue the tradition of high-quality teaching at a rock-bottom price. Workshops fill up fast, but if you are suffering from nonparticipant’s remorse, ask if there’s a waiting list and get on it.

## Tour Notes

If you’ve signed up for one of the morning tours on Thursday or the noon mini-tours on Friday, here are a couple of reminders. There’s a map of the tour sites in the January 8 blog post, <http://macchicago2010.wordpress.com/2010/01/08/mac-2010-tours/>. The full tour descriptions (with travel directions) are in the MAC program. Thursday’s tours take place between nine and noon—check the individual tour for exact times. Remember that the time reflects the actual start/finish time of the tour, not including travel time. Tour attendees are responsible for getting to and from the tour site. Friday’s mini-tours, to a potpourri of sites within close walking distance of the hotel, all run from 12:15 to 1:15 P.M.—again, times do not include travel.

## A Final Word

During the breaks between sessions, as you drink that revivifying beverage and take another cookie, remember to thank our sponsors—the vendors, friends, institutions, and archival organizations throughout the MAC region who provided monetary assistance with the conference costs. As we all know, these events are expensive. MAC’s goal is to keep registration costs low while offering a high-quality educational and social experience. It’s not easy to do, but between the hard work of the Program and Local Arrangements committees and the generosity of our supporters and members, we’ve done it again.