

**African American Culture
and History:
The L. S. Alexander Gumby
Collection of Negroiana**

Primary Source Microfilm
an imprint of Thomson Gale

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and History:
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Collection of Negroiana**

*From the holdings of the
Rare Book and Manuscript Library of
Columbia University
in the City of New York*

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an imprint of Thomson Gale

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Alexander Gumby (1885-1961) was a book collector who ran a salon in Harlem known as the Gumby Book Studio because of the hundreds of books that lined the walls. His salon, a large, rented studio on Fifth Avenue between 131st and 132nd Streets, attracted many theatrical and artistic luminaries.

Gumby started his scrapbook collection in 1901 at the age of sixteen. After moving to New York, he began to collect with greater seriousness the materials that comprise his collection. In 1910 he started the process of gathering the material that he had assembled into scrapbooks. Forty years later, in 1950, he presented this acclaimed collection to the Columbia University Libraries. The materials consist of newspaper clippings, periodical extracts, photos, pamphlets, playbills, letters, manuscripts, and materials Gumby gathered personally from people of note such as Josephine Baker, Joe Louis, Paul Robeson, and many other political, cultural, and sports figures. Each scrapbook is devoted to one subject, either a person, an organization, or a topic.

A strength of the collection is the individual scrapbooks on noted people such as W.E.B. DuBois, Langston Hughes, Ralph Bunche, Frederick Douglass, Marcus Garvey, Jackie Robinson, Booker T. Washington, and many other prominent African Americans from all walks of life. Organizations covered within the scrapbook include the NAACP and the Urban League. Gumby also broke out such topics as “Lynchings and Race Riots,” “Social Equality,” “The Negro as a Soldier,” “Harlem,” “The Negro and Communism,” “Breaking the Bonds of Slavery,” “the Negro in Politics,” “Negro Columnists,” “Jazz,” “Music,” “Art,” and more.

INTRODUCTION TO THE COLLECTION

Black History Remains Alive in Alexander Gumby's Popular Scrapbooks

By Jo Kadlecek

This article appeared in the February 18, 2002 issue of the Columbia News and is reprinted with permission of the Columbia University Office of Public Affairs.

On December 8, 1934, the New York *Amsterdam News* reported that Colonel Hubert Julian had a “narrow escape from death” when the engines of his Moth plane stalled during a fierce storm above the English Channel. Julian, known as Harlem’s “Black Eagle” for his aviation savvy and charismatic personality, managed to fly the battered plane through giant hailstones to safety.

The Colonel was on a return trip across the Channel, which he had flown earlier to claim the honor of “being the first Negro aviator to land a plane at Le Bourget Field.” When he arrived back in Harlem with a suitcase full of clippings from the foreign press to prove his near death experience, it was the first time the Black Eagle had no immediate plans for another “long distance hop.”

The Colonel’s story is just one of hundreds carefully clipped and pasted in oversized scrapbooks by self-appointed culture-keeper and Harlem resident, L.S. Alexander Gumby. His scrapbooks contain everything from newspaper stories and magazine articles to autographs, letters, photos, playbills, and slave documents, all of which record primarily the “History of the Negro from 1850 to 1960.” And as a result of his careful attention to chronicling the subjects of interest to him, the Gumby file, given to the Rare Book and Manuscript Library in Butler Library in 1950, has become what Columbia librarians call one of the most popular files in the archives.

For the past 50 years, the Gumby File has been used “all the time” by scholars, biographers, historians, and documentarians researching some specific aspect of African American heritage, according to file curator Bernard Crystal. Anyone can request access to the file, he said, as long as they prove “scholarly intent.” Most research for magazine or newspaper articles, or biographers can trace the history and images of individuals, Crystal said. For instance, one writer was particularly interested in the boxer Joe Louis and spent weeks scouring over the eight volumes Gumby devoted to the fighter. Others have found original autographed photos, stories and letters from artists like Paul Robeson, Josephine Baker, Langston Hughes, Cab Calloway, Louis Armstrong, Count Basie, and even a 1936 playbill from the Shubert Theatre for a production of “At Home Abroad” that reads, “To Mr. Scrapbook, all the best, Ethel Waters.”

The file also contains 18 slave documents, as well as letters and autographs of noted figures such as Frederick Douglass, William Lloyd Garrison, Booker T. Washington, George Washington Carver, Father Divine, W.E.B. DuBois, and Marcus Garvey. Because the scrapbooks have now been converted to microfilm, articles, artwork, even envelopes addressed to Gumby, can be photocopied.

In addition to profiling “Prominent Negroes,” Gumby organized his scrapbooks into particular themes such as Ethiopia, football, intermarriage of Negroes and whites, lynchings and race riots, Negro business, labor and newspapers, Protestantism, and radio and television. Gumby even included specific announcements relevant to Columbia, like the Feb. 25, 1938 review of pianist/composer Luke Theodore Upshure’s concert on campus.

What makes the collection unique from others on black history is that “Gumby clipped things that weren’t necessarily from the mainstream but were unique to the black community,” Crystal said, who remembers meeting Gumby in 1961, only months before his death, when he came to the library to drop off more clippings.

Gumby’s own story is almost as interesting as the pieces he collected. Born Feb. 1, 1885, in Maryland, Gumby was the son of Evangelist Levi Thomas and Louisa Morris Gumby. In 1901, he and his sister were sent to live with their grandparents and there the young man who loved reading made his first scrapbook at the age of 16 with some old wallpaper and a paste of flour and water. Gumby’s first clippings were of President McKinley’s assassination in Sept. 1901.

He spent the next year at Dover State College in Delaware studying law to fulfill his grandmother’s dream for him. But he became impatient and felt his skills were inadequate. He packed his scrapbooks and eventually headed to New York City, where he immediately fell in love with the place that would be his home until his death almost 60 years later.

“At once I became a New Yorker in spirit and principle for I found here more freedom of action than I had ever known before,” Gumby wrote in his 1951 essay, “The Adventures of My Scrapbook,” for the Columbia Library World. Gumby

became an enthusiastic fan of theatre and art and “formed the habit” of collecting all the playbills, pictures, and clippings he could find of his favorites.

During those early years in New York, Gumby wrote that it seemed “a willingness to change jobs was a mark of a youth’s ambition.” A friend told him of a job as a waiter at Columbia and there he began his relationships with a number of professors and students. He also clipped “everything I could find” about popular professors and President Nicholas Murry Butler.

By 1910, he organized his clippings and began to take his role more seriously. Gumby studied other collections in libraries across the U.S. and Canada, and also began collecting rare book editions and manuscripts with the help of his wealthy friend who was a partner in a Wall Street firm. And he met with other collectors like Arturo Schomburg.

At the same time, Gumby took a variety of other jobs to help sustain his passion. He became, for instance, the personal butler of a wealthy banker in the same area now known as Riverdale’s Wave Hill. Gumby also was a founding member of the Southern Utopia Fraternity, a group organized for “young men from the South who came to New York seeking a larger experience.”

Soon he became better known more for his collection of rare editions than for his scrapbooks and he opened the Gumby Book Studio at 2144 Fifth Avenue between 131st and 132nd Streets in Harlem. The historian lined his studio with books and continued clipping and pasting historic documents in his scrapbooks. Gumby’s studio grew so popular that it became a gathering place for many artists, actors, musicians, intellectuals, gays and lesbians of the Harlem Renaissance. Gumby called it the first “unpremeditated interracial movement in Harlem.”

Meanwhile, Gumby’s reputation as “The Count” and “Mr. Scrapbook” also continued to grow and he was asked to exhibit his collections in cities along the East Coast, earning him a listing in the 1922 edition of the Private Book Collectors’ Who’s Who. But by the Crash of 1929, Gumby’s wealthy friend lost millions and the Studio lost support of its regulars. The collapse took such a toll on Gumby that he was forced to give up the Studio, sell many of his editions, and store his scrapbooks in the cellar of an acquaintance’s house.

“The loss of my studio and fatigue from overwork,” he wrote, sent Gumby first to Riverside Hospital in the Bronx and then to Randall’s Island Hospital where he spent the next four years. In both hospitals, though, he continued collecting newspaper articles (some about his own hospitalization), photographs of visiting friends, and get well cards, all of which are included in his six autobiographical scrapbooks. [Editor’s note: the autobiographical scrapbooks are not included in this microfilm edition but can be viewed on microfilm at Columbia’s Rare Book and Manuscript Library.]

When he was released in 1934, Gumby set about retrieving his collections and restoring their condition, all the time adding more and more clippings, autographs and other documents. By 1950 he gave his collection to Columbia and in 1951, the University hired him for eight months to organize the materials.

Alexander Gumby considered his “History of the Negro in Scrapbook” more than a hobby. He wrote that “The collection could well be called ‘The Unwritten History.’” Gumby concentrated on African American history primarily because “There are so many surprising and startling historical events pertaining to, or relating to the American Negro that are not recorded in the Standard Histories, dictionaries and school text-books, or if so, they are shaded so that they sound like a Ripley’s ‘Believe It or Not.’”

Certainly, Gumby’s life-long commitment to recording the history of African Americans continues to provide invaluable research today.

EDITORIAL NOTE

The L. S. Alexander Gumby Collection of Negroiana is housed in the Rare Book and Manuscript Library of Columbia University in the City of New York. The Primary Source Microfilm edition, developed from a microfilm edition of the *Collection* that is also housed at the Rare Book and Manuscript Library of Columbia, features a contents list for each reel at the beginning of the reel, as well as an improved collection guide that includes a full introduction to the *Collection*.

This guide lists scrapbook volumes in the order in which they appear on the reels. The volumes were organized on the reels by Columbia University following an alphabetical arrangement of the volume's topics. In the course of the original filming, pages for volumes one and seven were filmed in reverse order, therefore requiring that the user unwind the reel from right to left (i.e., mount the reel on the right-hand reel holder, with the take-up reel on the left-hand holder) instead of the standard left to right.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The project would not have been possible without assistance from many individuals. Primary Source Microfilm wishes to thank Jean Ashton, Director, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University, for her commitment to making this collection widely available; Bernard Crystal, Curator of Manuscripts at Columbia University's Rare Book and Manuscript Library; Barbara Rader, who first recognized the value of this collection and served as Primary Source Microfilm's editorial manager of the project; Kimberly White, who captured the reel data and entered it on the collection guide; and the PSM manufacturing staff, including JoAnn Lebel and Barbara Phoenix.

Volume No.	Title	Reel No.
1	Adventures	1
2	Amalgamation of Races	1
3	Amalgamation of Races	1
4	Art	1
5	Art	1
6	Modern Art	1
7	Negro Art	2
8	Josephine Baker	2
9	Book Reviews	2
10	Basketball	2
11	Book Reviews	2
12	Breaking the Bonds of Slavery	3
13	Breaking the Bonds of Slavery	3
14	Ralph Bunche	3
15	George Washington Carver	3
16	Catholics	3
17	Classic Art	3
18	Ezzard Charles; Jersey Joe Wolcott	4
19	Cole and Johnson; Will Marion Cook	4
20	Columbia University	4
21	Countee Cullen	4
22	Dancers	5
23	Dancers	5
24	Frederick Douglass	5
25	W.E.B. DuBois	5
26	Paul Laurence Dunbar	6
27	Education: North and South	6

Volume No.	Title	Reel No.
28	Ethiopia	6
29	Ethiopia	7
30	Father Divine	7
31	Football	8
32	Marcus Garvey	8
33	"The Green Pastures"	8
34	Greenwich Village	8
35	Gumby Book Studio	9
36	Gumby Book Studio	9
37	Gumby Book Studio: Gumby's Quarterly	9
38	Gumby Book Studio: Guest Book	9
39	Haiti	9
40	Harlem	10
41	Harlem	10
42	Roland Hayes; Marian Anderson	11
43	Langston Hughes	11
44	Maurice Hunter	11
45	Intermarriage of Negroes and Whites	11
46	Intermarriage of Negroes and Whites	11
47	Jazz	11
48	Jazz	11
49	Jewish Black Sects; Prophets	12
50	Jack Johnson	12
51	Lafayette Theatre	12
52	Libraries	12
53	Little Theatres	12
54	Little Theatres	12

Volume No.	Title	Reel No.
55	Joe Louis	12
56	Joe Louis	12
57	Joe Louis	12
58	Joe Louis	12
59	Joe Louis	12
60	Joe Louis	12
61	Joe Louis	12
62	Joe Louis	12
63	Joe Louis	13
64	Lynchings; Race Riots	13
65	Lynchings; Race Riots	13
66	Florence Mills	13
67	Motion Pictures	13
68	Motion Pictures	13
69	Music	13
70	Music	13
70a	Music	14
71	National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP)	14
72	National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP)	14
73	The Negro and Communism	14
74	The Negro as a Soldier	14
75	The Negro as a Soldier	14
76	Negro as a Soldier	14
77	The Negro as a Soldier	15
78	Negro Business, Labor, and Newspapers	15
79	Negro Columnists	15

Volume No.	Title	Reel No.
80	Negro Columnists	15
81	Negro Entertainers	15
82	Negro Prize Fighters	15
83	Negro Prize Fighters	15
84	Negro Prize Fighters	15
85	Negro Prize Fighters	15
86	The Negro in Africa	16
87	The Negro in Africa	16
88	The Negro in Baseball	16
89	The Negro in Bondage	16
90	The Negro in Congress	16
91	The Negro in Drama	16
92	The Negro in Drama	16
93	The Negro in Drama	17
94	The Negro in Drama	17
95	The Negro in Politics	17
96	The Negro in Politics	17
97	The Negro in Stamps	17
98	Negro Musicals on Broadway	17
99	Negro Musicals on Broadway	17
100	Negro Poets	17
101	Negro Poets	17
102	Negro Religions	18
103	Negro Schools	18
104	Negro Schools	18
105	Negro Sports	18
106	Olympic Sports	18

Volume No.	Title	Reel No.
107	Opera	18
108	William Pickens	18
109	"Porgy"	18
110	Protestantism	19
111	Radio and Television	19
112	Paul Robeson	19
113	Jackie Robinson	19
114	Jackie Robinson	19
115	Sugar Ray Robinson	19
116	J.A. Rogers	19
117	William Shakespeare	19
118	Social Equality	19
119	Social Equality	19
120	Social Equality	20
121	Social Equality	20
122	The South	20
123	The South	20
124	The South	20
125	The South	20
126	The Supreme Court and the Negro	20
127	They Broke Through Discrimination	20
128	Charles W. Chesnutt; Wallace Thurman; Jean Toomer; Claude McKay	20
129	Urban League	20
130	Booker T. Washington	21
131	Booker T. Washington	21
132	Booker T. Washington	21

Volume No.	Title	Reel No.
133	Ethel Waters	21
134	Leigh Whipper	21
135	White Prize Fighters	21
136	Williams and Walker	21
137	James Weldon Johnson	22
138	H. L. Mencken	22
139	Miscellaneous	22