

# A GUIDE TO AFRICANIST RESEARCH IN THE ARCHIVE OF THE AMERICAN BAPTIST HISTORICAL SOCIETY

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## Introduction

Africanist scholars seeking archives on Africa and Africans often travel back to the continent to conduct research, or more commonly, to the various repositories of former colonial powers in Western Europe to find their information. However, there are some archives located in the United States that, although they are not dedicated exclusively to Africanist materials, contain an array of resources relevant to Africanist research. One such archive is that of the American Baptist Historical Society (ABHS).

The American Baptist Historical Society was founded in 1853, and, according to a conversation with Communications and Reading Specialist Betsy Dunbar, contains many records "by, about, for, and against Baptists."<sup>1</sup> While not adhering to any one particular brand of Baptist, the society accepts and archives the records and documents of various Baptist denominations from all over the country and some international denominations, from Anabaptists, to Free Will Baptists, to some Southern Baptist congregations and most of the Northern Baptists in the United States of America.

The ABHS archive is located in suite 150 on the first floor of the Administration and Conference Center at Mercer University's Cecil B. Day Campus in Atlanta, GA, USA.<sup>2</sup> A branch campus mainly for the graduate schools of the university whose students commute in, it is a sprawling, wooded campus that provides a tranquil and pleasant setting for relaxing after hours of archival research. The Administration and Conference Center is a tall, five-story white building nestled on five wooded acres, located at 2930 Flowers Road South and purchased in 2003 from the Georgia Baptist Convention.<sup>3</sup> It is now used to house administrative offices, numerous conferences and meetings, and lastly, the American Baptist Historical Society.

## Collections and Finding Guides

According to a news release, the collection of the ABHS is now the "largest collection of Baptist pieces in the world."<sup>4</sup> These records, estimated to be 25,000 linear feet (or five miles of shelving), include manuscript collections of various Baptist pastors and theologians, original church records of numerous

varieties of Baptists, books, pamphlets, photos, and an assortment of artefacts that are primarily from the private collections of retired or deceased missionaries. The American Baptist Historical Society also acts as the official repository of the following organisations: American Baptist Churches USA (formerly the Northern Baptist Convention), which includes the American Baptist Foreign Missionary Society/Board of International Ministries, Women's American Baptist Foreign Missionary Society, American Baptist Home Mission Society, Women's Baptist Home Mission Society, Ministers and Missionaries Benefit Board, and the Publication Society of the American Baptists, among others. The archive also holds various state and association minutes for both Northern and Southern Baptists, and records for the Baptist World Alliance (BWA), an umbrella organization organized in 1905 for Baptists around the world, including numerous African Baptist groups. The archive is funded by the American Baptist Churches, USA, the Board of International Ministries, the Board of National Ministries, the Missionaries Benefit Board, and the donations of benefactors.

The American Baptist Historical Society has only recently consolidated all of its collections in one location. Previously, the American Baptist Samuel Colgate Library in Rochester, NY, USA housed the manuscript collections, church records, minutes, periodicals, and books, while the Archives Center at Valley Forge, PA, USA contained the archival materials and administrative offices of the society. The Valley Forge material was moved to Atlanta in the spring of 2008, while the Rochester material was relocated in September of the same year. The grand opening of the new, consolidated archive bringing together both collections was held at Mercer University on September 27, 2009.

The records encompass several centuries of material. The oldest item in the collection dates to the mid sixteenth century, and the largest manuscript collection in the repository is that of Walter Rauschenbusch, a Baptist minister and important figure in the Social Gospel Movement of the early twentieth century. There are several finding guides that are available for the different parts of the collection, but as the materials are still being reclassified and catalogued, there is not yet a single system for searching the entire collection. There is an online finding guide for certain manuscript collections deposited there up until the nineties, a catalogue of African American Baptist Annual Reports, and a Baptist bibliography compiled by Edward C. Starr (which is of somewhat limited use). Moreover, there is a basic computerised database created in Microsoft Access that allows researchers to search for materials formerly held at the Valley Forge Archives Center. Some of the available searchable categories on the database include missionary correspondence, Pre-World War II, and Post-World War II subject files. Unfortunately, few of the records from Rochester are included on this computerised database. Lastly, there are eight card catalogues that can also be perused for information about the location of many materials, although these too are not all inclusive.

The reading room is air conditioned, with several small wooden closets for storing bags and coats to your right as you enter the doors. There are three wide, wooden readings desks, and two older microfilm machines towards the back left hand corner of the room. If either of the machines is malfunctioning, the staff members are very accommodating and will try and address the problem, and if that doesn't work, they can retrieve the original files for you to use. There are no cameras or scanners allowed. Researchers may bring laptops to take notes, and all note taking by hand can only be done with pencil to protect the materials.

While they are not usually open to researchers, there are three climate controlled storage rooms that house the archive and library. The largest room holds thirty moving compact shelving stacks, as well as numerous file cabinets of personnel files, field reports, death reports, audits, controversy files, executive reports, and files on overseas missionary affairs. There are also many other floor to ceiling stationary shelving units that house numerous books and publications. There are two other large rooms of files of the home and mission societies that make up the American Baptist Churches. One room is dedicated to the records of the Office of the General Secretary, with an adjoining smaller room housing many original serials and newspapers published by Baptists. The other large room, located across the hall, includes files of the Board of International Ministries, including missionary correspondence, subject and regional files, missionary publications, and other materials.

### **Africanist Research**

What records at the ABHS would be of interest to Africanists? While the majority of the collections of the American Baptist Historical Society do not deal directly with materials pertinent to Africa, there are quite a few records, documents, and artefacts that in fact do so. The materials most relevant to Africanists are largely in the records of the American Baptist Foreign Missionary Society, as previously mentioned. This mission organisation was originally founded in 1814 as the General Missionary Convention of the Baptist Denomination in the United States for Foreign Missions, more simply known as the Triennial Convention based on its meeting schedule.<sup>5</sup> After the Southern Baptists separated from the organisation in 1844/45 over the question of slavery, the Northern Baptists changed the name to the American Baptist Missionary Union. In 1910 the name was changed once again to American Baptist Foreign Missionary Society, which remains its legal name although the more commonly used name is now Board of International Ministries.<sup>6</sup> The ABFMS had a number of mission fields: Burma, Assam, China, the Philippines, India, Thailand, parts of Europe, several Native-American communities (considered in the past to be separate nations), Haiti,

Korea, and several other places in the Americas. However, the primary mission fields in the continent of Africa were first, southern Liberia during the nineteenth century, then western Congo from the late nineteenth century to the late twentieth century, and more recently, South Africa. By far, the largest collection of African materials deals with the former Belgian Congo. There, there were a number of mission stations (mostly in western Congo) including Banza Manteke (Mbanza Manteke), Sona Bata (Nsona Mbata), Lukunga, Mukimvika, Matadi, Kimpese, Palabala (Mpalabala), Tshumbiri, Leopoldville, Vanga, KiKongo, Moanza, and Ikoko-Ntondo.

One type of archival documents that would be of great interest to Africanists is missionary correspondence. The ABHS has files of letters between missionaries and the home office in the United States. This correspondence is searchable in the computerised database and is filed by a range of dates (e.g. all letters between 1922 and 1927) and alphabetically by the last name of the missionary. Most of this correspondence has been microfilmed, but the original files are also available if necessary. Included in these files are annual mission station reports that were written by that particular missionary, as well as quarterly reports, if relevant. The correspondence is revealing because not only do you get a sense of successes and failures in evangelization, but also interactions that the missionaries had with colonial administrators, other mission societies, and the indigenous population. The correspondence includes information as varied as epidemics of disease, purchases of property, and even observations of indigenous religious movements. There are also several files of correspondence dealing specifically with matters of the Kongo Evangelical Training Institute, an institution established at Kimpese and jointly funded by the ABFMS and the BMS (Baptist Missionary Society, based in England) to train teachers and evangelists. Moreover, many missionaries also wrote personal letters to the home secretary, so that researchers can also read about conflicts between missionaries in the same mission field or controversies and disagreements within the society that are less publicly known.

The ABHS also has an assortment of other records dealing with ABFMS missions in Africa. These include general and station files, documents on national leaders, conference minutes and reports, missionary manuals, and other miscellaneous material. The BIM (Board of International Missions) subject files are grouped geographically, and are also arranged chronologically, divided into Pre- and Post World War II files. Thus, a researcher searching for information on mission stations in the Western Congo would find subject files for each mission station (Sona Bata, Banza Manteke, etc). The mission conference files address meetings of the ABFMS and other larger meetings with all of the Protestant missions (e.g. Congo Protestant Council, Congo Administrative Council, etc). There are also files of news clippings, some documents on the Baptist Community of Western Zaire and

the Church of Christ in Zaire, scholarship files, ingoing and outgoing cables, research documents, and records of the Baptist World Alliance (BWA).

Other material of interest to Africanists includes literature files and larger published texts. There are two sets of literature files. The first set is organised by year and includes all of the pamphlets and smaller publications that were published by society missionaries stationed all over the world. These include surveys of Baptist mission fields, Christian plays, narratives of converted, descriptions and reports on mission fields, and visual catalogues of countries, among other assorted materials. From my own quick (and unofficial) count, I estimate that just in the files dated between 1900 and 1930, about 12.6% (146 out of 1160 pamphlets, flyers, small magazines, etc.) of the material is about the Congo. So while researchers would need to search through the undifferentiated missionary literature, as the files are not arranged geographically, such efforts will have rewards as there is relevant material on Africa within the files. The second set of literature files are the personal publication files of specific missionaries. These are arranged by name and include many of their publications. Most of these publications were designed to be consumed by interested readers in the United States, not only to inform them about missionary work, but also to solicit donations and applications for missionary service. Another great resource in the archive is a set of larger texts, many of them published in KiKongo. These include educational materials, grammar and dictionaries, books and gospels of the bible, translations of the entire New Testament, and other documents.

The biographical files of the missionaries who served the ABFMS and WABFMS are also a valuable resource. Each file has information about the dates that each missionary was abroad and when they were on furlough, from the time they began work as a missionary to their retirement. The files also include applications for service, obituaries, newspaper clippings, some correspondence, miscellaneous publications, and even some personal photos. There is also a small collection of artefacts from missionaries from all over the world. Items from Africa are very well represented here, from baskets, raffia mats, and ivory tusks from the Congo to a large, polished wooden plaque from the Liberia Baptist Theological Seminary (dated 2001). While there is no formal display for these artefacts, the country of provenance has been noted. Many of them came from the personal collections of missionaries and are thus held in boxes with that missionary's name. There are also some collections of personal papers from a few missionaries who were stationed in Africa over long periods of time, such as Joseph Clark (over fifty years in the Congo) and C.C. Boone (over twenty five years in Congo and Liberia combined). Other records of relevance to Africanists include the books of handwritten letters sent from home offices overseas (which recorded earlier correspondence spanning most of the nineteenth century) and ethnographic and photo albums, some of which are in the personal collections of particular missionaries.

While most of the documents were written by missionaries, there are also items authored by Africans themselves in the collection. There are several narratives of converts that appear in pamphlets published by the society. The original handwritten and typed drafts of some of these narratives in Congo (by Frank Iteva, Vinda Bidalos, etc.), can be found in Joseph Clark's personal papers, for example. There are also a few documents written by Kongo teacher evangelists about their experiences trying to proselytise in villages and towns of other ethnic groups in the Congo. A more extensive search of the collection will likely reveal even more African-authored documents. Moreover, a number of the Baptist missionaries sent to Africa were African-Americans, such as the aforementioned C.C. Boone. Researchers may well benefit from examining files in the ABHS archive that document the experiences of diasporic people of African descent evangelising in Africa in both the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

The ABHS also has a very good collection of periodicals. Of relevance to Africanists would be *Missionary Review of the World*, *Missions Magazine*, *The Baptist Magazine*, the *Watchmen Examiner*, the *Missionary Herald* (of the B.M.S), and particularly *Congo Mission News* and *Congo News Letter*. The *Congo News Letter* was a periodical published quarterly by the missionaries of the ABFMS, edited and published at Mbanza Manteke. The ABHS has a compiled table of contents and index for the *Congo News Letter*, which had 231 issues containing 2,587 articles, published from 1910 – 1972. Most of these articles discussed happenings and missionary work at the various stations in the Congo, and so the journal proves to be a valuable resource. Moreover, other writings of the Congolese themselves can also be found in the periodical *Minsamu Miambote*, of which the Historical Society has several issues.

### **The Use of Missionary Sources: Benefits and Challenges**

Before starting my ethnographic research in the Democratic Republic of Congo, I did not anticipate the immense influence and role of missionaries, missionary societies, and churches in general in documenting both the history and culture of the Lower Congo region in the westernmost part of the country. The importance of churches in the Congo (especially former mission churches) in providing basic services from education to healthcare, reflect the historic role of missionaries in European colonization of Africa, the lack of emphasis on the creation of state supported infrastructure to provide such services during the colonial period, and the more recent decline and even collapse of whatever infrastructure did exist during the post-colonial period.

As an anthropologist, my method of conducting research is based not only on extended participant observation, but also interviews and the use of archival sources. One of the major challenges of using missionary sources, like any archival documents, is that the researcher must be aware of biases and the

intentions that missionaries had in documenting events. Researchers must take note of the point of view, general goals, and potential ethnocentrism that missionaries had in recording their observations of happenings in certain ways, or documenting particular types of events over others. This is especially the case with religious movements. In my own research area on the Kongo movement of *bangunza* or prophets that began in colonial Belgian Congo in 1921 with the healing miracles of the prophet Simon Kimbangu, missionaries from different denominations took particular interest in this movement because it was religious in nature. While most people of the Kongo ethnic group were supportive of the movement, many of the missionaries saw the movement as a threat to their own religious authority in the Congo. As a result, observations that the *bangunza* movement was "heathen" or "inspired by the devil" must be weighed carefully with the larger antagonisms that missionaries had towards the movement and the desire to protect their own status and power.

While researchers must use missionary sources with a careful eye and consideration of the context and intention, there are also many benefits in the use of missionary archives. One of the major benefits is that, in the Congo, religious archives often have a larger number of documents and materials which are better preserved than sources in the state supported archives. Civil War and recurring violence, economic crisis, and the decline of state services have left archives (the National Archive in Kinshasa, for example) in ruins and disrepair. While I did find some documents in the National Archive, much of my document related research in the Congo was done in the library of CEPAS (Centre d'Études pour l'Action Sociale or the Center for the Study of Social Action), the Mayidi Grand Seminary in Inkisi, and the library of Father François Bontinck at Scholasticat Père Nkongolo. These are all part of Roman Catholic institutions founded by missionaries (Jesuit and Scheut Fathers to be specific).

Missionary archives are also useful because missionaries, who lived in closer proximity to and usually with indigenous populations, often documented events and cultural traditions to which colonial governments did not necessarily pay attention. Moreover, the use of missionary documents allows researchers to get the varied perspectives of missionaries from different societies at particular points in time. Although European and American missionaries in Africa all shared the goal of Christian evangelised, they did not always share the same methods or even perspectives on the same events. For example, the *bangunza* movement was summarily criticised by most Belgian Catholic missionaries in the Lower Congo, and British missionaries of the Baptist Missionary Society (BMS) generally frowned upon it as well, since the prophet Simon Kimbangu had been a member of one of their mission churches. However, research in the archive of the ABHS has in fact revealed that ABFMS (American Baptists Foreign Missionary Society) missionaries had

more varied reactions to the movement. In fact, many of them saw the *bangunza* movement as a positive Christian revival that actually increased the numbers of people seeking to become members at their churches. Such documents at the ABHS archive that help to complicate our understandings of reactions to and observations of the *bangunza* movement in the Lower Congo, prove the usefulness of missionary sources for achieving a richer and fuller historical account and analysis.

### Conducting Research at the ABHS Archive

The best advice for researchers seeking to consult the archive is to contact the staff members well in advance. In this way, they can identify relevant materials ahead of time so that your research visit is efficient and productive. The reading room for the archive is open to the public from 1:00 to 4:00 pm, but as long as you have a research appointment, it is open to researchers from 10:00 am to 5:00 pm. Research consultation forms can be downloaded from the website, completed, and sent back to the society either by mail, e-mail, or fax. In addition, researchers should be well aware of the research fees and associated expenses to be incurred. Access to the archive for the week costs \$45, and photocopying is \$.50 per page. The society has a full list of fees for services on its website, [www.abhsarchives.org](http://www.abhsarchives.org).

The society also has a very small staff. For this reason, researchers should plan appropriately to allow time for their requests to be met. This also applies while already on site at the archive because usually there are not more than two staff members available at one time, and quite frequently, there is only one staff member. However, the staff goes above and beyond to help with research requests. There are three full-time staff members (one based in Valley Forge) and two part-time assistants. The general e-mail address listed below goes to all of the staff members. While I was there, they were exceptionally courteous and helpful, suggesting numerous records to consult and sharing conversation over lunch. In all, the "Baptist Hospitality" that I received, as well as the surprising wealth of resources available at the archive of the American Baptist Historical Society, will ensure that I not only make a return visit, but also spread the word to other Africanists about the opportunities waiting to be explored there.

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## Notes

- 1 I would like to thank Betsy Dunbar and Betty Layton for the extended conversations that they had with me about the archive. I would especially like to thank Deborah Van Broekhoven for not only her conversation, but also the extensive comments that she provided on earlier drafts of this paper.
- 2 The main campus of Mercer University is located in Macon, GA, USA.
- 3 "Mercer Purchases Baptist Center from GBC," News Release, August 25, 2003: <http://www2.mercer.edu/News/Articles/2003/030825gbc.htm> (accessed August 13, 2009).
- 4 "American Baptist Historical Society to hold 'Grand-Reopening' Sept. 27," News Release, September 2008: <http://www2.mercer.edu/NewsAtMercerAE/September2008/08Society.htm> (accessed August 13, 2009).
- 5 Personal correspondence, Deborah Van Broekhoven, Executive Director, American Baptist Historical Society, August 24, 2009.
- 6 Ibid.

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