



Alabama DEPARTMENT OF
ARCHIVES & HISTORY



Alabama Heritage

Statement on the Risk to Research Collections at the Birmingham Public Library

August 24, 2020

The archival, historical, and genealogical communities of Alabama issue this joint statement of opposition to threats posed to the **Department of Archives and Manuscripts (DAM)** and the **Department of Southern History (DSH)** at the Birmingham Public Library (BPL) by impending furloughs and the FY 2021 Proposed Operating Budget of the City of Birmingham. We call on the City and the Library Board to take all measures necessary to achieve the following.

- **Throughout the immediate budget crisis, maintain a presence of experienced staff at the DAM and SHD to provide for the safety of the collections and to make possible the resumption of services in the future.** Professionals with appropriate skills and institutional knowledge should be present in the departments during any reduction in operating hours and staffing. The interruption of active management of collections increases the likelihood of damage from humidity, leaking pipes, and other routine risks. Staff disruptions also undermine the institutional knowledge needed to resume ongoing work such as acquisitions, cataloging, and reference. The continuity of institutional knowledge is especially important for responsible stewardship of unique collections such as those held by DAM and SHD.
- **When the budget crisis abates, address any deferred maintenance on the historic structure of the Research Library and prioritize the rebuilding of staff capacity at the DAM and SHD.** Deferred maintenance to roofs and environmental systems will create problems much more costly to address over time and could result in damage to irreplaceable collections. If a permanent separation of employees occurs during the

current crisis, invest in rebuilding the staff with qualified archivists and librarians. A disruption involving the loss of personnel for even a year can take many years to overcome until the departments are able to provide services with the same expertise and efficiency built over prior decades.

Birmingham's cultural resources deserve broad support, but the collections and operations of the DAM and SHD merit special attention for several reasons.

- **They include many unique, irreplaceable materials essential for understanding the experiences of Alabamians and the special story of the Birmingham region.** The histories of southern industrialization, immigration, the Civil Rights Movement, labor unions, health care, LGBTQ communities, and daily life in the households of African American and white families could not be written without the records held by the DAM. Scholars and students from around the globe visit Birmingham to make use of these resources. In turn, Birmingham's importance to American and world history appears in scholarly works, textbooks, and documentaries. These works are essential to our nation's present reckoning with its history of racial injustice.
- **Thousands of visitors come to the BPL annually to find information on the history of their families.** Birmingham is home to one of the most important centers of genealogical research in the South because of the information and services available at the DSH. The DAM contains hundreds of thousands of photographs, diaries, and maps that provide connections to previous generations.
- **The collections represent a commitment made by the BPL and the City to exercise proper stewardship on behalf of the public.** They were donated over many decades by private citizens, businesses, and organizations on the assurance that they would be professionally managed and accessible to the public. The Cartography Collection of the DSH, to take one example, is one of the finest map collections in the U.S. and is especially significant for its documentation of southeastern history from the colonial era, through the early national period, and during Alabama's development as a leading agricultural and industrial state. It began through Rucker Agee's donation of his personal collection and has grown through the generosity of other families since.
- **As the official repository of Birmingham and Jefferson County government, the DAM performs a core function of local government by providing access to the records documenting government actions.** Citizens have a right to examine these records regardless of the financial condition of the City or the BPL. That access should be managed by professional staff to ensure the records are secure and remain available for other researchers in the future.

We acknowledge the severity of the fiscal crisis created by a collapse in local revenue during the COVID-19 pandemic, and we understand that public services at city-supported entities must join other city functions in absorbing the effects of the shortfall.

Nevertheless, we respectfully urge the Mayor, the City Council, and the Library Board to find a budget solution that does not disproportionately place the burden of cuts on cultural agencies. **Specifically, they should provide a solution by which a leading Alabama research institution can properly protect historical treasures belonging to the citizens of Birmingham and maintain the staff expertise that will be essential to the operation of the DAM and DSH in the years beyond this crisis.**

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