Teachers examine black history treasures

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The State Archives of Florida has a whopping collection comprising about 50,000 cubic feet of records documenting Florida’s history and culture from the 16th century to the present.

Recently, more than 50 elementary and secondary educators got an in-depth tour through some of the collections’ historically significant documents, private manuscripts, photographs and other materials when they attended the “Examining African American History in Florida” seminar.

Hosted by Leon County Schools and the State Archives, the all-day seminar focused on several different topics including the activism of Mary McLeod Bethune, Zora Neale Hurston’s documentation of Florida railroad workers, African Americans in antebellum Florida, and the integration of Florida’s schools.

Talia Cotton attended the seminar and said “I am an African American woman and my mother actually integrated schools. I’m one generation from that. My great-great grandmother was a slave. I talked to my great-grandmother about what her mother went through. My students are so disconnected, and I want them to see a more holistic view.” Cotton teaches 10th grade English at Rickards High School and is a GED Prep Instructor at TCC. Her students are currently studying rhetoric and she said “seeing these documents and some of the arguments that the slave owners had for slavery, they weren’t sensible, but it made sense if you were in their shoes. I thought that was interesting. I can definitely see myself using these specific documents in my class.”

By examining the resources available through the archives, Cotton believes researchers can construct a more complete narrative of those who have been historically marginalized. “African Americans have been so silent because we didn’t write the laws and we did not have our voices heard,” she said. “If you leave us out, you’re neglecting an experience. All cultures matter and if you don’t see them in your history books, you’re missing something.”

Jenna Martin echoed that sentiment and said “this is our story; the many different strands of us as Tallahasseeans, as Floridians, as Americans. Black history is American history.” Martin teaches fourth and fifth grade at The School of Arts and Sciences (SAS) on Thomasville Road. She recognizes the cross-curricular potential for the content she gained in the seminar. “I foresee using it not only in a thematic social studies context but in a writing context as we are working on details and elaborations.”

This gets to the heart of what State Archives Historian Dr. Josh Goodman and Education Officer Katrina Harkness hoped teachers would gain when they designed this seminar in partnership with Leon County Schools.

Goodman explained “When you read the letters and cookbooks, reports and speeches, and all the various kinds of

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documents that are in our collection, you are, in a sense, having a conversation with that person from the past. You’re hearing directly from their perspective what their world was like and what they were feeling, what their hopes were and what their fears were.”

Harkness elaborated “there are all these details in history that make it really exciting, that are the voices of the people who lived in this time. All those things that make it real would be lost forever if we didn’t work to preserve them.”

More than anything, Goodman and Harkness wanted the seminar attendees to understand that the State Archives was a valuable teaching tool for them. “Not only is our collection open to the public, we’re ready to bend over backwards to make it as easy to access as possible,” said Goodman. “Educators are not just an afterthought in our customer base, they are the very people we would like to see use these collections creatively in the classroom.”

Anyone can come to the State Archives to do research on historical projects relating to the state, their community, or their family. There is a research and reading room that’s open for that purpose.

Goodman recognizes “not everyone is able to make it to Tallahassee or has a project that’s serious enough that they want to come in and do research. We encourage those folks to take a look at FloridaMemory.com where we have digitized our greatest hits, so to speak.”

Though textbooks are very important for giving students an overview, they often compress the historical record into one linear story. History books, no matter how well researched, have to narrow their scope and leave out meaningful details. “Having an archive like ours allows you to inflate that history. It gives history a sense of dimension,” said Goodman.

“Archivable records document where we come from, good, bad or indifferent. They tell us a lot about who we are now and where we are now, and I think they inspire us about where we’d like to go from here.”

Visit the State Archives at the R.A. Gray Building, Second Floor, 500 South Bronough St. Hours are 9 a.m. - 4:30 p.m. Monday - Friday. Visit the Florida Memory digitized collection at FloridaMemory.com.

Amanda Karioth Thompson is the Assistant Director for the Council on Culture & Arts. COCA is the capital area’s umbrella agency for arts and culture (www.tallahasseearts.org).