

## **The Benjamin Lawson Hooks Papers: An Introduction**

In 1996, Dr. Benjamin Hooks, three years retired as Executive Director of the NAACP, donated his professional papers to the University of Memphis library. A gift from Dr. Hooks, the time and scope of the papers range from the mid-1970s when Dr. Hooks served as commissioner of the Federal Communications Commission to the early 2000s when Dr. Hooks worked with the Hooks Institute for Social Change, an institute that continues to work from the University of Memphis to teach, study, and promote civil rights and social change in the Memphis area.

The papers were given in installments to the University of Memphis Library between 1996 and 2006. The papers were officially processed and boxed in 2007, with no new additions arriving until 2015 when Patricia Hooks donated 4 boxes of additions. As the collection stands now, it contains 397 archival boxes with close to 195,000 items that range from correspondence, to printed material, to memoranda, administrative files, photographs, and audio/visual material.

While there is substantive material on the FCC and Dr. Hooks' wife, Frances Hooks, the overwhelming majority of the collection pertains to Dr. Hooks' time as Executive Director of the NAACP. Of the 397 boxes in the collection, close to 380 pertain to the NAACP between 1977 and 1993. The NAACP materials are broken into sub-series that include General Activities, Administrative Files, Financial Materials, Legal Files, *The Crisis* Magazine Materials, Branch Files, Photographs, Sound and Film Recordings, Plaques and Awards, and Oversized Materials.

From the standpoint of research value, the "General Activities" are the richest in content. It includes correspondence, speeches, NAACP initiative proposals, subject files, and press releases. It contains the majority of documents either directly in the voice of Benjamin Hooks or the voice of someone writing on his behalf. While it is often difficult to surmise the difference between the writing and thoughts of Dr. Hooks and those of his writers and assistants, we can be assured that the speeches, correspondence, and press releases at least reflect his general will and thoughts if not exact words. The subject files, while often provocatively labeled (e.g. Ku Klux Klan) are generally topical files compiled by Hooks. There is little in the subject files in his voice and thus while it is of interest to know the kinds of issues Hooks and his team followed in the media, the subject files give little indication of his thoughts on their content.

The other main subseries of interest are the photographs and audio/visual materials. The photograph series primarily relate to NAACP events, namely the annual conventions, fund raisers, and meetings between NAACP executives and private donors or public officials. The number of photographs are roughly 1500; however, the volume is misleading. Of the 1500 photographs in the collection, many of them are either duplicates or multiple snaps of the same pose. Thus, when one accounts for duplicates and multiple snaps, there is probably close to 500 substantive photographs in the collection. The photographs are typically unannotated and do not immediately relate to other parts of the collection. While one can certainly draw parallels between the photographs and the General Activities subseries, the photographs primarily serve as a visual index of NAACP events and award ceremonies given for Dr. Hooks after his retirement. While we aim to digitize the approximately 500 photographs of substance, we also recognize that the photographs primarily serve as an aesthetic supplement and introduction to the collection more than providing interpretative substance.

The audio/visual materials, by contrast, provide much interpretative substance. There are roughly 100 audiocassette tapes we aim to record and make available to the public in digital form. These audiocassettes are comprised of sermons, speeches, and interviews given by Dr. Hooks over the course of his career as Executive Director of the NAACP and pastor of Greater Mt. Moriah Church in Detroit, Michigan. These recordings give the listener access to Dr. Hooks in his own words about topics he felt very passionately about, such as the crisis of the black family, the role of the church in society, and the most pressings political issues of the 1980s and 90s. There are also sermons and speeches of other individuals important to the church and the NAACP, such as Frances Hooks, Tom Diamond, and C.A. Clark. Some of the audiocassettes are mass produced commercial products about the black church or black history month which we most likely will not digitize. However, the speeches, sermons, and interviews given by Dr. Hooks are some of the most valuable aspects of the collection and will be made available to the public.

There are also many video cassettes in the collection that while valuable, cannot be digitized at this point. However, we hope that interested members of the public and researches will visit the Special Collections of the University of Memphis library to watch them.

On the whole, the Benjamin Lawson Hooks papers are rich in content but interested researchers are encouraged to approach the collection with realistic expectations. While the collection, including new additions, stands at over 400 boxes, there is not 400 boxes of substance within the collection. The initial processing team was conservative with discarding duplicates and thus a single speech file may contain five copies of a single speech. Further, one may find a copy of that same speech in other folders. One also finds duplicates of printed material and NAACP administrative files throughout the collection. Many of the files are also mechanical in nature, such as call logs, calendars, and editions of *The Crisis* magazine available in circulation and in digital format on the official NAACP website.

While we believe and work on this project in full faith of its value and richness, we also believe that the collection should be approached contextually, i.e. its value is best understood within the context of other collections and monographs written on the 1980s and Civil Rights, rather than as a standalone research project. We hope that researchers on both the professional and amateur level will use the collection to further the study and promotion of Civil Rights that Dr. Hooks dedicated so much of his life to defending.