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Preserving our treasures

Like Schomburg, we can save the records of African American life

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Each year when February comes around, we African Americans dust off our African attire, help our children search for a famous African American for their school assignments, and participate in activities and programs. This year I challenge us to ask ourselves: What contributions will I, as an African American, leave to the world?

Many years ago "Negro" societies, literary clubs, organizations, book collectors and historians served as ambassadors, proving to the world how intelligent "Negroes" were. But more important were the contributions they made -- contributions based not on how much money they had but on their sacrifices and their devotion to making a difference.

Many were collectors who spent their lives preserving the treasures of African Americans. In a time of prejudice and racial tension, they knew the value of dairies, letters, manuscripts, books and artifacts. These seemingly insignificant materials proved how great an asset African Americans were to the world.

One of the greatest collectors was Arthur Alfonso Schomburg (1874-1938). Schomburg came to the shores of America at the age of 17 from Puerto Rico. His mother was African American and his father was European. His passion at a young age was to find his identity. Before he left Puerto Rico he had already collected books, pamphlets and pictures that related to the history of black Puerto Ricans.

Schomburg's long-term mission in life was to tell the story of the black man, whose culture and history were largely hidden or distorted in the historical records of America. Persistently unfolding the truth about the contributions of the black man in many parts of the world became his lifetime occupation.

Schomburg's urgency to document, collect and preserve the history of blacks came about after he read a quote from "Retrospection," written by a white historian, Hubert Howe Bancroft: "The Negro is too incompetent and unreliable ... as a citizen ... he is an unmitigated nuisance and judging from the past he will remain so. However learned he may become, however lofty his ideals or how high his aspirations, he must wear the badge of ignorance and servitude, he and his children forever. God hath made him so. ... The Free African in America is a failure. ... We do not need the Negro for any purpose and never shall."

He clipped these words from the pages of Bancroft's book, and at the bottom of the page he wrote in bold script: "Where are our Negro historians, our defenders who have let Bancroft commit such a dastardly crime against the Negro race?"

After reading those quotes, he spent his life becoming a master at locating and collecting evidence to combat anti-black propaganda. His collection would extend beyond slavery to the soil of Africa. He collected rare books, pamphlets, manuscripts, rare articles, autograph letters, photographs, paintings and artifacts. His collection dealt with information on anthropology, folklore, sociology and customs of people of the Congo, West Indies, South America and the Ashanti nation. He collected sermons on slavery written by ex-slaves, nursery rhymes in Bantu by the Zulu tribe, and manuscripts of Lemuel Hayes, a black revolutionary hero. He also collected autographed copies of Phillis Wheatley poems and books by Paul Cuffee, a wealthy black merchant mariner and leader of an early movement to settle African Americans in Sierra Leone.

Surely it can be said that this was an act of love for the advancement of his people -- and a sacrifice. His memories live on in thousands of books, manuscripts, prints, posters, photographs, tape-recordings, microfilms, newspaper clips and letters, leaving a glimpse into the black man's contribution to the world.

Schomburg's dedication and legacy as a collector and historian lives on at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture as part of the New York Public Library.

Hats off to Arthur Alfonso Schomburg this Black History Month. History may write his occupation as a pager/messenger for the Banker's Trust Company in New York City, but he was our hero as collector and historian.

Schomburg's story is a reminder of how one person can make a difference. We all have something to share, something to contribute to society. It is through the eyes of people that stories are told, and histories survive from one generation to next. This is why your family's personal papers, photographs and memorabilia are important. This is why we need historians, collectors and bibliographers to continue documenting and preserving the history of African Americans. This is how people continue to hear and learn about our experiences and contributions.

So what contributions will you leave? I hope it will be a letter, a diary, a photograph or a book. These simple treasures document and preserve the activities of our heroes. This month let us go into our attics, basements or closets and dust off that family memorabilia. Let's start preserving our treasures.

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