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# “Go to the Attics, the Closets, and the Basements”: Black Women’s Intergenerational Practices of Memory Keeping in Oxford, Ohio

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**Abstract:** In 1993, eighty-nine-year-old Jennie Eunice Elder Suel, from Oxford, Ohio, donated a collection of personal and family documents to Miami University’s Walter Havighurst Special Collections. This article examines the Jennie Elder Suel Collection and the actions made by multiple generations of Black women, who chose to preserve their history. The first section traces the development of Suel’s collection and the way in which it is preserved in local archives today. The second section situates the Suel family in a wider context and discusses the archival challenges of recovering the lives and experiences of antebellum Black women in the Midwest, and the following section explores how I have attempted to navigate these challenges through a research method I have innovated called Descendant Archival Practices (DAP). The remainder of the article offers a careful analysis of Black women’s home-based archives and their implications for understanding nineteenth-century Black women’s motivations for archiving themselves. Part of this assessment includes analyzing which records these women deemed valuable to preserve, revealing the inner lives of Black women and the things they cherished. Through these deliberate and heartfelt choices, Black women ensured their legacy through the preservation of their ancestral history.

**Keywords:** Black women; African American history; Midwest; local history; archives; memory keeping; genealogy; nineteenth century; critical archival studies; libraries; cultural heritage



**Citation:** Sutton, Jazma. 2024. “Go to the Attics, the Closets, and the Basements”: Black Women’s Intergenerational Practices of Memory Keeping in Oxford, Ohio. *Genealogy* 8: 102. <https://doi.org/10.3390/genealogy8030102>

Received: 14 June 2024

Revised: 11 July 2024

Accepted: 1 August 2024

Published: 12 August 2024



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## 1. Introduction

In 1993, eighty-nine-year-old Jennie Eunice Elder Suel, from Oxford, Ohio, donated a collection of personal and family documents to Miami University’s Walter Havighurst Special Collections (see Figure 1). Her home-based archive preserved two centuries of African American history, including a bill of sale for an enslaved woman and her presumed child, freedom certificates, photographs of her nursing career, records of her scholarly achievements at Tuskegee Institute, and a 1910 letter from a Black girl who was denied admission to Miami University because of her race. This collection captured not only the lives of these Black Midwestern women, but also the inherent limitations of traditional archives.

Alta Jett, a Black woman living in Richmond, Indiana, in the 1980s, aptly described the issue of Midwestern archives and traditional approaches to them: “If you want the history of a white man, you go to the library. If you want the history of Black women, you go to the attics, the closets, and the basements” (Hine 1986, p. 1). Scholars have long known that records housed in predominantly white institutions obscure the lives of enslaved Black women and their descendants more than they reveal them. As a consequence, Black women have historically chosen to keep records from their lives with family.

This was not the case for Suel, though. Toward the end of her life, she donated her collection to Miami University at the request of her grandmother-in-law, Dawson Davis Drew-Stewart (Wright 1993). Dawson was a free Black woman born in Wytheville, Virginia, around 1843, and the freedom papers she used to relocate to Butler County are part of Suel’s collection (U.S. Department of Commerce 1850; Dawson Davis Drew 1854). An Oxford resident in her adult years, Dawson recognized the importance of Miami University

housing documents that highlight the tough questions our nation continues to debate. Whose history matters and whose does not. Whose life matters and whose does not.<sup>1</sup>



Figure 1. “Miami University gets black family’s legacy”.

While Dawson did not originate debates on whose histories matter, the fact that she chose Miami—the institution her family labored for in domestic and menial service roles—to house their history is no small decision. With knowledge of the inferior treatment Black students and workers received at the institution, placing her family’s archives at the institution is a considerable assertion of agency and worth.

Historians primarily rely on institutional archives and conventional sources to narrate the history of nineteenth-century Black women, including court, church, and organizational records as well as newspapers. In so doing, those who choose to center the experiences of their subjects read against the biased grain of slaveholder or colonial records to locate those not explicitly mentioned. Through this scrutiny of the archive itself, scholars acknowledged its limitations and role in the (re)production of violence. One historian sought out the things Black women cherished and passed down through the generations to fill in the gaps left behind in written records. Yet, even the most conscientious endeavors leave the narratives of Black women in the Midwest, particularly rural Black women, underexplored.<sup>2</sup>

Instead of allowing the silence of the archive to shape the argument, this chapter deliberately draws upon Black women’s historical knowledge and home-based archives. Even under the most precarious conditions, Black women preserved their ancestral history by keeping valued materials within their homes and other private spaces. I define home-based archives as the collections of oral histories, documents, and artifacts that Black women have curated, created, or preserved within their homes. At the heart of this chapter is the Jennie Elder Suel Collection and the actions made by multiple generations of Black women who chose to preserve their history. The first section traces the development of Suel’s collection and the way in which it is preserved in local archives today. The second section situates the Suel family in a wider context and discusses the archival challenges of recovering the lives and experiences of antebellum Black women in the Midwest, and the following section explores how I have attempted to navigate these challenges through a research method I have innovated called Descendant Archival Practices (DAP). The remainder of the chapter offers a careful analysis of Black women’s home-based archives and their implications for understanding nineteenth-century Black women’s motivations for archiving themselves. Part of this assessment includes analyzing which records these women deemed valuable to preserve, revealing the inner lives of Black women and the

things they cherished. Through these deliberate and heartfelt choices, Black women ensured their legacy through the preservation of their ancestral history (Sutton 2022).

Black women's home-based archives challenge the historical profession's over-reliance on white, state-supported archives in the Midwest, along with the theories, methods, and practices that validate them. More than just centering the lives of African Americans, Black women's home-based archives require history professionals to trust African American women as knowledge producers in their own right. The oft-used excuse that it is impossible to write about the lives of Black women in the antebellum Midwest due to small population numbers and scant records is a lie. As the Jennie Elder Suel Collection, along with countless others stored in attics, closets, and basements, remind us, Black women in the Midwest have always archived themselves.

## 2. "Miscellanea Collection"

Christmas 1854 must have felt special to eleven-year-old Dawson Davis Drew. Not only did she have the holiday and her birthday to look forward to, but she was also preparing to leave behind the horrors of antebellum Virginia in search of the "Promised Land". Whether this distant place of Butler County, Ohio, would or could keep its promise to the girl and her family, an adult Dawson would assess in her later years. But at that moment, the girl must have jumped for joy as she exited Wythe County courthouse with her certificate of freedom (see Figure 2).

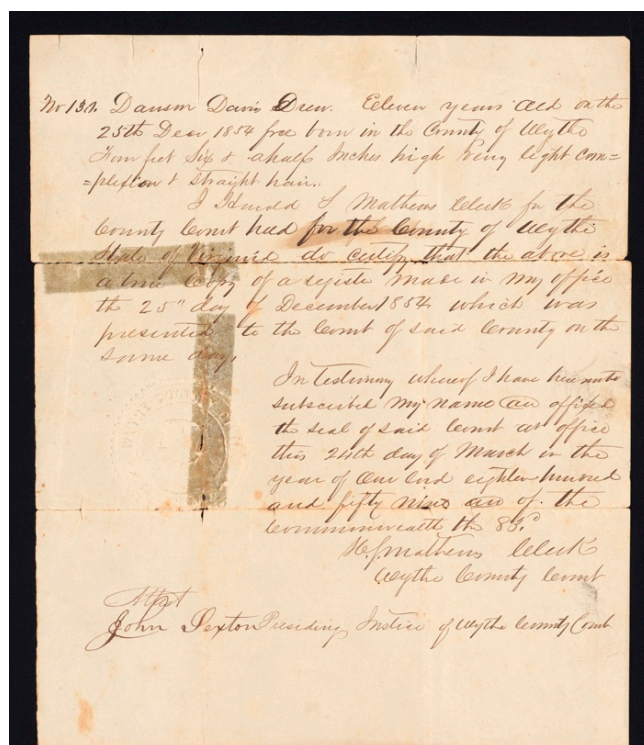


Figure 2. Dawson Davis Drew 1854 freedom certificate.

Leaving the people and place she knew throughout her adolescence might have worried Dawson. Despite being part of a free Black community, the Drew family kd danger every day. Perhaps her mother shielded her from some of the concerns she herself carried while preparing to move to an unknown place. Out of earshot of the younger children, or perhaps in conversation so they could take heed, Dawson's parents, Jane and Robert Drew, and other Black parents, might have expressed sentiments similar to those of other free Blacks on the Midwestern frontier. Drawing on letters one descendant family kept of their ancestors' correspondence from Indiana back to North Carolina, the conversation might have gone as follows.



It is our responsibility to take our children out of this “old, worn out country”. If we decide not to, they will be forced to “slave on”, finding themselves “in between two fires, as we may call them”. We all know “that where there is slavery it is not a good place for us to live”. And, although we know it is not true, most individuals there are “very disagreeable and think themselves above free people of color”. In Ohio, we will not be “always in danger of them doing us injury by some way or other”. We cannot imagine keeping our small children in this place without being able to “tell how soon we may be taken away from them, and they may come under the hands of some cruel slaveholder”. We know that “if they can get a colored child, they will use them as bad again as they will one of their own slaves. It is right that parents should think of this” (James Roberts to Willis, Roberts 1830).

Dawson’s freedom certificate would be the first of a handful of documents safeguarded to memorialize the Suel family’s legacy of freedom. Four years earlier, Dawson’s future husband John Henry Stewart had also been granted his freedom papers by the same court ([John Henry Stuart 1850](#)). The document described John as “a free boy of colour about thirteen years of age, four feet and one-half inch high, dark mulatto, scar on two forefingers of right hand, middle finger of right hand off above first joint, born free in the county of Wythe, state of Virginia”. At eleven, the county court described Dawson as being “four feet six and a half inches high, very light complexioned and straight hair”. In addition to this written description, someone preserved a picture of John. I have not uncovered one of Dawson. Maybe she never got around to taking one, or maybe she did, and it was destroyed, misplaced, or considered unworthy of being saved.

What is certain is that no one at Miami University thought it necessary to identify her gender when cataloging the Jennie Elder Suel Collection, highlighting the inherent violence in some archival practices disguised as “best practices”. This decision could have resulted from the catalogers’ biases or lack of interest in the subject matter. It could have been the result of collection-level description and folder-level organization. Regardless of the reasons, it raises questions about whether such organization was driven by individual choices or considered a “best practice”. If it was the latter, it prompts the question: best practice for whom? Certainly not Drew, the woman whose freedom papers are the foundation of the university’s acquisition. Stunningly, until 2023, Drew was thought to have been a young boy when my interrogation of a newspaper interview of Suel and Ancestry.com revealed that the person on that 1854 freedom certificate was, in fact, a girl ([U.S. Department of Commerce 1930](#)). Thirty years misgendered. Twenty-three years hiding in a folder in the Miami University archives. While no pictures of Dawson have been discovered yet, we know more about her life than most women who lived in what is now the Midwest during the same time period. We can trace the life of a young Black girl, born during the period of enslavement, from the age of eleven to eighty-seven, all because Drew first insisted on holding onto her freedom certificate and leaving it behind to tell its own story.

That life included her marriage to John in Milford township, Butler County, Ohio, in 1862 (marriage certificate 1862). Eight years later, they lived in Oxford in a household headed by her father ([U.S. Department of Commerce 1870](#)). She and her husband had three children, one of whom, Clifford Eugene Suel, married Jennie Elder McCoo in Liberty, Indiana, in 1932 (marriage certificate 1932). While his grandfather, John Henry Stewart, worked at Miami University as a manual laborer, Clifford worked for the institution as a chef for twenty-seven years. The length of John’s tenure at Miami is less clear, although he “helped cut down trees to make room for Miami dormitories and for Western College”, and earning fifty cents a day to do so ([Wright 1993](#)). Jennie, like generations of Black women before her, worked in domestic servant roles in the local community or for Miami University and its faculty and staff. Jennie and Clifford’s adopted daughter, Joan, attended Miami but passed away before she could graduate. In 1994, a year after entrusting her family collection to Miami, Jennie received the inaugural Jennie Elder Suel award, which was continued in her name as late as 2019 ([Jennie Elder Suel Award 2016](#)). The family’s connections to the university are deep and multigenerational.

I wonder if I would have learned about Jennie Elder Suel's collection without the assistance of Jacky Johnson, the Black woman archivist in Miami University's library. When you search for Suel's papers in the catalog, it is hidden within the large and nondescript, "Miscellanea Collection" (Miscellanea Collection 2016). Aside from the name of the finding aid's preparer and year published, there is no relevant information to the contents of Suel's collection in the collection overview, collection organization, and container inventory tabs. While Miami University was eager to celebrate their "commitment" to a Black family's legacy in the early 1990s, it was Johnson who knew Suel personally through Bethel AME, Oxford's oldest Black church, that helped me locate her archive thirty years later (Wright 1993).

The Smith Library of Regional History, which holds scanned copies of Suel's records, has similarly downplayed the collection's contents (Oxford Black History Finding Guide). The library has seventeen family collections listed in their finding guide. Jennie's collection is among thirty-five family folders in a collection titled "Oxford Black Families".<sup>3</sup> It is simply scanned copies of the collection housed at Miami University. While family folders are primarily assembled by the donor, there are instances where library staff continue to curate original series as new material is acquired. Everything in the Jennie Elder Suel Collection appears to have been donated by her, except for a thank-you card she wrote to the head of Special Collections the year she donated her collection. The issue with the registers that might otherwise be useful is that they are vaguely described. Black women's names are prevalent as donors, but the archivists do not disclose familial lineages or any information about the Black women they represent. Family folders contain the detailed recollections of Black women's early migration, everyday lives, homes, values, family genealogies, and the stories they found significant enough to pass down. Something as simple as carefully chosen keywords could inform researchers of the value of these collections and help descendants envision Black women's lives in ways that archives have not traditionally facilitated. Suel's collection is similar to many other rural Black women descendants' practices of preserving private family collections. Where she differs significantly is in her decision to donate these records to Miami University. This decision, discovered alongside students in my Black Women in America course, on the surface seems straightforward: "My husband's grandmother wanted the documents donated to Miami University" (Wright 1993). Yet, it conceals a more complicated history: the century-long relationship of one Black family with Miami University, the obstacles African Americans encountered as they eked out a living in Oxford, and the traditions of memory keeping cultivated by Black women across generations.

### 3. The Problem of Midwestern Archives

The idea of Black women being free, establishing dignified homes, keeping their families intact, and claiming citizenship rights contradicts the commonly held perceptions of the region. Researchers often believe that the limited sources and small population numbers have made it impossible to document the experiences of Black women in the early Midwest. Scholars who have focused on the experiences of white women on the frontier cite these factors for Black women's omission or marginalization in the revisionist histories of the American frontier. Despite the proliferation of scholarship on enslaved and free Black women in the United States and new research methods, there have been no full-length studies of Black women in the antebellum Midwest.<sup>4</sup>

The problem of Midwestern archives and their silencing of Black women is not a new one. In the 1980s, as the field of Black women's history emerged, Darlene Clark Hine collected and preserved historical documents related to Black women and their organizations. This effort culminated with *The Black Women in the Middle West Project: A Comprehensive Resource Guide Illinois and Indiana* (Hine 1986). Two years later, in her study of the migratory trends of Black women in the Midwest in the early twentieth century, Hine coined the term "culture of dissemblance" to describe the "cult of secrecy" Black women developed to "protect the sanctity of their inner lives" when confronted with the almost

constant threat of disrespect and rape (Hine 1989, pp. 912, 915). The memory-keeping practices of an earlier generation of Black women suggest this culture of dissemblance as well.

The Midwest was in name a free territory, but in practice never truly free. Historical records reflect this precarious nature of freedom and explain archival silences. Black women's socio-political status situated them as witnesses to and coerced participants in the major transformations of the nineteenth-century Midwest, including American imperialism and settler colonialism (Roberts 2021). Their physical and reproductive labor under chattel servitude was crucial to the successful settlement of the frontier and establishment of white pioneer homes. But, early African American migrants appear in the archive as free people, pioneers, fugitives, and property-owning men. Their identities as formerly enslaved people or individuals with deep roots in slavery have been lost or obscured in the historical record. While it is true that descendant archives produce silences of their own, I argue that they offer information about the slave past that many have ignored in their analyses of slavery or believed did not exist in the Midwest.<sup>5</sup>

Still, Black women found ways to develop their own regional and gendered identities. Amidst white hostility, outright violence, and restrictive laws, Black women stayed put instead of accepting the notion that they did not belong. They built dignified homes, established schools and churches, and assisted self-liberated people on their journey to freedom. Indeed, Black women "took hold of their communities", assuming the responsibility of preserving cultural heritage for future generations (Du Bois 1909). The archival paper trail of this first generation of Midwestern Black women—housed in predominantly white institutions—are written by individuals other than themselves. As a consequence, what remains is only what Black women were willing to let be perceived, and not the ways they themselves made meaning in the region.

The issue with Midwestern archives extends beyond the representation and preservation of Black women in the historical record. It also encompasses how Black women, whether historians or community members, experience the archive and the challenges of navigating the inherent whiteness of that space. "Midwest nice", a cultural stereotype that attempts to hide the region's long history of racism and violence behind outwardly friendly, polite, and welcoming demeanors, plays out in these county historical societies in deeply problematic ways. Racial insensitivity abounds, causing harm to researchers and obfuscating archival holdings (Berry 2021).

While conducting research on Black women in the Greenville Settlement at a local historical society, I first heard the all-too-familiar statement for those of us who study Black women's history, "We don't have sources on Black women". The presiding research volunteer then continued to explain her own family's arrival in the Midwest. She, like many other gate-keeping volunteers endowed with immense power, lacked a fundamental understanding of the county's racial history where she worked. Or maybe she was aware of it and, for whatever reason, chose not to acknowledge it.

Intentional or not, her response was a form of erasure. What information she felt she could offer me about the county's *three* free Black settlements was not in the main room, but in a single file cabinet in a back room. As the volunteer collected the folders on the African American settlements that, in 1860, comprised Indiana's largest concentration of Black people, I made my way to one of the main room bookshelves (Tucker 1882, p. 136). Browsing a land record book for the county, I almost immediately found Thornton Alexander, the first Black person to purchase land in Randolph County and one of the founders of the Greenville Black Settlement (Thornton Alexander, 1967). The worker returned shortly afterwards with a handful of folders containing miscellaneous photocopies of documents and genealogical records, preserved largely by African American descendants. This archival encounter encapsulates the problem of the Midwest archive. Scholars and archivists perceive African American Midwestern history to be preserved only in scant genealogical files and the occasional outdated local history. In actuality, it is also preserved in frequently used primary sources, if only researchers could transcend their narrow historical imaginations

to consider the deep entwinement of African Americans in their communities. Or if they understood that, as Laura Helton explains, “Black history existed everywhere, and abundantly, even where unmarked or unexpected—in the basement, “in your own town archives”, and sometimes in hostile territory” (Helton 2024, p. 128). In some cases, however, the issue extends beyond the knowledge of local history to underscore the fact that these archives are “oppressive by design” (Caswell 2021). They reflect the power structures of the institutions that created them and were never established to represent African Americans, let alone through their own perspective.

As archivist Dominique Luster notes, “history is a series of strategically curated decisions” (Luster 2018). Unfortunately, during these first research forays, I had to reframe my requests with language that these workers knew best—whiteness. Instead of centering the actual historical actors of my research, “I am looking for records on free Black women in the county” was replaced with more familiar, even comfortable queries, such as “Can you point me to the records on Quaker communities?” Historians, archivists, librarians, educators, and everyday people hold the power to make decisions—decisions that uplift some while silencing others. From that point on, I accepted that, to recover historical documents related to Black women in these institutions, I could not simply disclose my research interest in Black women.

#### 4. Descendant Archival Practices

Looking beyond “the archive” or “official record”, I discovered the Greenville descendant community “disrupting cycles of archival oppression” with technology. The community’s Facebook page, *Remembering Freedom: James Clemens and the Longtown Settlement*, preserved over one thousand photos of historical documents and thirteen years of posts, creating a discovery gateway (Remembering Freedom). Through the Greenville descendant community, I learned that individual members have compiled, written, and published family histories for over a century, a pattern repeated by many other descendants throughout the Midwest. A descendant collective aided my research, generously sharing records and oral histories and sending the research findings they found when visiting local libraries by mail. Our relationship proved to be mutually beneficial, as I shared my resources which contextualized their own work.

To highlight the efforts nineteenth-century Black women and their descendants undertook to preserve their place in history, I have innovated a new research methodology called Descendant Archival Practices (DAP). A mixed-methods approach, DAP involves the identification, preservation, and improved discoverability of descendant archives, including oral histories, historical documents, and material artifacts for use in archival research. It seeks to interrogate, imagine anew, and reconfigure traditional archives, while recognizing Black women memory keepers as experts and authorities on their family histories, and thus on Black history. Taking Ashley Farmer’s call for scholars to “do more with less”, DAP suggests that less is actually more when we prioritize, or even accept, descendant archives—those created by African Americans, reflecting their experiences, and motivated by a desire to preserve ancestral history—as legitimate sources of knowledge (Farmer 2018, p. 293). In descendant archives, Black women have not been erased, forgotten, or silenced. Instead, they have been preserving, collecting, and archiving records of their own lives.<sup>6</sup>

Descendant Archival Practices respond to and resist disciplinary practices that result in the invisibility of nineteenth-century, and for that matter twenty-first century, Black women in publicly recognized archives. The method emerged from the need to address the presumed absence of free and enslaved Midwestern women in slavery’s archives by studying their lives through the archives of their descendants. It contributes to an emergent body of scholarship that uses Black feminist historical methods to interrogate the violence of slavery’s archives. DAP draws inspiration from methods such as Saidiya Hartman’s critical fabulation—a style of historical writing that is semi-fiction, critically speculative of the gaps and silences of official archival records, and bound up in the past, present, and future (Hartman 2008, 2019); Marisa Fuentes’s “reading along the bias grain”—an approach

that allows us to write about enslaved women despite the “violence” and “distortion” of the archive (Fuentes 2016, p. 7); Tiya Miles’s use of material culture—“the things enslaved people touched, made, used, and carried—to understand the past (Miles 2021, p. 19);” and Tina Campt’s listening to images—a method that relies on the grammar of Black feminist futurity to reclaim the “archive of precarious and dispossessed Black subjects” and contend with the “relationship between quiet, the quotidian, and everyday practices of refusal enacted and inherited by” Black communities (Campt 2017, pp. 4, 11). What sets DAP apart from these historical methods is its simultaneous engagement with critical archival studies and the memory work of non-academic Black women.

Almost four decades ago, Darlene Clark Hine suggested that the recovery of Black Midwestern women’s archives and history would necessitate collaboration among historians, archivists, and community members (Hine 1986, p. 1). The critical archival studies provide usable theories and practices to support this endeavor and move the decades-long discourse about archival silence in Black women’s history into practice.<sup>7</sup> By applying critical archival studies to descendant archives, DAP reframes the analyses of knowledge production and power in the archives to capture the range of strategies Black women memory keepers have mobilized outside of institutional spaces to archive Black history. It models the approach of scholars in critical archival studies who not only identify and interrogate injustices in current archival practices but also propose solutions to these challenges that empower us to imagine and enact the emancipatory potential of existing and future archives (Caswell et al. 2017, p. 2). DAP also embraces the notion that African American women have undertaken significant memory work to create, preserve, and protect Black archives both outside of institutions and as outsiders within those institutions. The historian Laura Helton highlights the work of Black women bibliophiles and librarians who brought their own clandestine methods of recordkeeping and record collecting into institutions to ensure the future use of Black collections, prioritize Black knowledge, and increase the accessibility of Black archives (Helton 2024, pp. 21–22). A group of archivists who work on African American collections, including Chaitra Powell, Holly Smith, Shanee’ Murrain, and Skyla Hearn, demonstrate what is possible when Black women cultural memory workers with institutional power collaborate with local communities to develop better practices around preserving African American cultural heritage and providing these communities with resources and support (Powell et al. 2018). Building on and expanding these approaches, DAP adopts the social justice perspective of critical archival studies to hold archivists and historians accountable for bringing descendant archives and the intellectual knowledge traditions that descendant women and their communities contributed to their creation in the archival and historical profession. Real change in archival practices is impossible without these practices of care and community building.

To make sense of Black women’s ephemera or other items intentionally preserved in their home-based archives, I critically read them alongside interviews of formerly enslaved people, biographical sketches of white pioneer women, and other written documents related to Black women (Sutton 2022, pp. 115–48). Upon completion, I created a list of keywords that could uncover traces of Black women in other records. For example, returning to the WPA narratives and county histories and searching for terms like trunk, bible, mirror, brush, spoon, bed, jewelry, window, book, basket, and quilt provided additional insights to Black women’s approach to homemaking, a radical strategy of survival within a system that sought to deny their womanhood.

Drawing from bell hooks:

In our young minds, houses belonged to women, were their special domain, not as property, but as places where all that truly mattered in life took place—the warmth and comfort of shelter, the feeding of our bodies, the nurturing of our souls. There we learned dignity, integrity of being; there we learned to have faith. The folks who made this life possible, who were our primary guides and teachers, were Black women. (Hooks 1990, p. 384)



When employed as a theoretical framework, these items illuminate not just the material objects of Black women's homes, but the processes through which they maintained rich interior lives. If considering Hine's employment of "the culture of dissemblance", centering Black women's homes through DAP reveals more about the subjects' true lives than that which they hid away from recorders whose documents would ultimately end up in traditional archives. This may also demonstrate why African American descendants return home annually to celebrate the legacy and memory of their ancestors at homecomings.

Descendant Archival Practices take a critical stance against reducing Black archives to their relationship to white supremacy and oppression, advocating instead for understanding them through the archival practices and ideas Black people developed independently of institutional connections (Howard 2023). As Robin D.G. Kelley argues, "to speak of 'the archive' almost exclusively as an imperial space of unremitting violence" is to deny the fact that "there have always been alternative archives, oppositional movements that keep their records, oral histories, and the like" (Kelley 2023). These spaces exist not only in opposition to traditional archives but to "provide the raw materials for mapping a potential future. . . a world without exploitation, oppression, or occupation" (Kelley 2023). We must view Black people as archives themselves and part of a living archive of slavery. DAP seriously considers the archives that enslaved people and their descendants have built as a framework that has preserved a wealth of history outside the white gaze (Howard 2023; Kelley 2023).

Narrowly defined archives are impediments to writing freedom-oriented histories. Archivist Dorothy Berry distinguishes between *the archives* and archives, one "capacious and expansive" and the other "woeful" and "hegemonic". Moreover, Berry argues that the very foundational concepts of special collections contribute to "continued ignorance and avoidance of Black history in our midst" (Berry 2021). For Berry, "Black archives are whatever Black people want them to be" (Berry 2023). In employing such a far-reaching definition, she demonstrates the following.

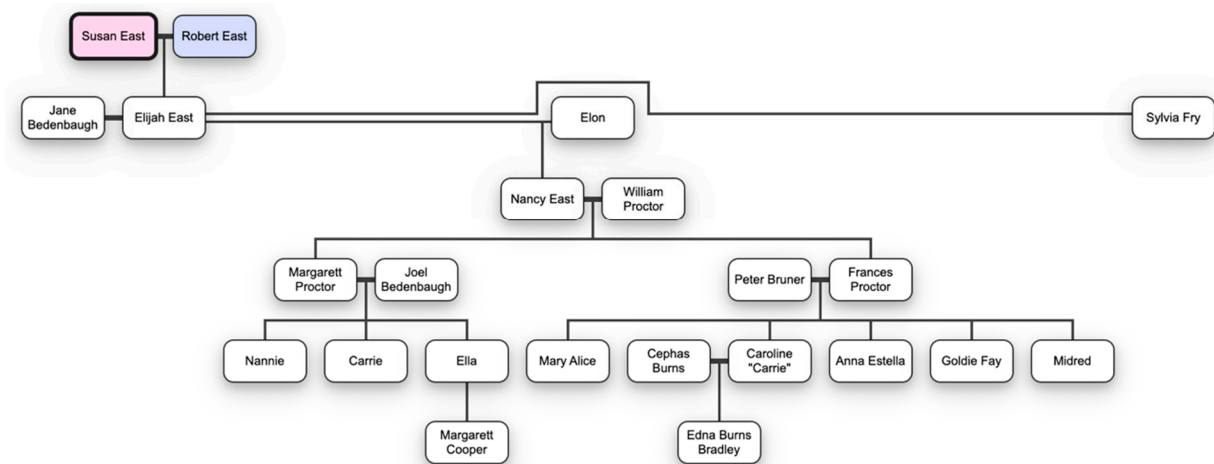
Black archives are signifying of a desire to be remembered in the face of violent erasure, a right to control one's own narrative from past to future, a rebellion against the story being told wrong, a conflict with institutional control, anger at structural racism, joy at community understanding, relief at seeing yourself in the past and the future, understanding the power of history, honoring ancestors and elders, imagination in spite of circumstances, and hundreds of thousands of individual experiences (Berry 2023).

Building on the critical interventions of Berry and other womanist scholars, I center Black women's descendant archival practices to question the authority of the archival profession. In so doing, scholars can critically address questions of authority and credibility in the creation, maintenance, and dissemination of Black women's history (Moore 2023).

A careful analysis of the Descendant Archival Practice collections available of Black women in Oxford demonstrates the significant promise of this research method. In many ways, county history books, written primarily by white men, remain the definitive histories of local communities in the Midwest (*A History and Biographical Cyclopeda 1882*; Bartlow 1905; Tucker 1882). However, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, at the time of their publication beyond the purview of the historical discipline, its founders, professionalizing organizations (think Mississippi Valley Historical Association 1907, now the Organization of American History), and Black women and their families were solidifying their own legacies in the form of autobiographies, family histories, oral and cultural traditions, and home-based archives.

The act of Black women's archival practice was a communal one. In 1996, Margaret Cooper decided to donate a typed history of her family to the Smith Library of Regional History in Oxford. Someone, possibly Margaret's cousin, Audrey Prince, wrote in pen on the first page, "From Margaret Cooper 1996 Ella is Margaret's Mother" (from Margaret Cooper, 1996). I speculate that this was Prince because the handwriting matches other documents in the collection that she wrote. Nonetheless, this was Prince's way of citing her cousin as the contributor of this document.

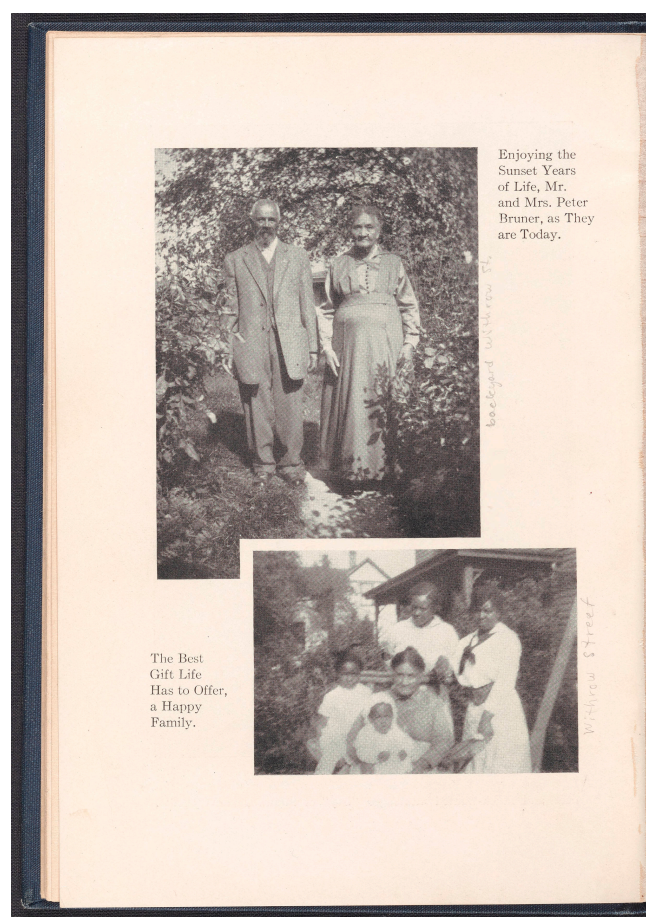
Cooper comes from a long line of memory keepers who understood the power of oral history and the written word. Their visions were future-oriented (see Figure 3). Caroline “Carrie” Burns, for example, is responsible for writing her father Peter Bruner’s autobiography, *A Slave’s Adventures Toward Freedom: Not Fiction, but the True Story of a Struggle* (Bruner 1918). Although Carrie did not live to see its publication (she died in 1900, thirteen years before it was rediscovered), in it, it is possible to identify a gendered approach to memory keeping that resembles that of other descendant women in the region (Bruner 1918). The publication contributes the names of nineteenth-century Black girls and women to the historical record, as it is dedicated to Peter’s “children and grandchildren” (Bruner 1918). In a poem titled “Peter Bruner” on the closing pages of the text, his granddaughter Edna Bradley made sure to list his four daughters by name and remember them in their humanity (Bruner 1918). Furthermore, the autobiography sheds light on Peter’s enslaved mother’s resistance to the institution of slavery, recalling how he “quite frequently” witnessed his mother and her enslaver “fighting over her children” (Bruner 1918). This was his mother’s attempt to prevent family separation. Peter and Carrie’s motivation for documenting his life was rooted in the hope that “in this form it might be of some inspiration to struggling men and women” (Bruner 1918). Throughout the twentieth century, Edna Bradley continued this work as Miami University frequently called on her to help the university and community commemorate the memory of her father and grandfather. Black women’s actions suggest that they did not only want their families to remember them; they wanted the nation to remember their lives and contributions.<sup>8</sup>



**Figure 3.** Margaret Cooper’s family tree. Created by the author.

Instances of racial terror, like the murder of Carrie’s maternal grandfather, William Proctor, reveal one of the many reasons Black women might have taken on the responsibility of chronicling their own histories. They read the newspaper articles characterizing their sons and grandsons as “brutes”, accusing them of raping “estimable” white women, and then taking justice into their own hands, ensuring that the only account of their beloved family members in local archives would reflect the views of white newspaper editors and not their own (Anonymous 1877). They knew how local whites in Oxford viewed them too, and these factors likely compelled them to write and pass down their own versions of what happened in the past. As their family’s oral history suggests, Proctor was “brutally killed by an Irish mob while he was on his way to notify relatives of trouble in the community. This was the Irish Riot, a disastrous free-for-all which occurred in Oxford, Ohio during the Civil War” (From Margaret Cooper 1996). She goes on to say “Nancy was left with her young children and a hard time making ends meet”. This memory is crucial to understanding Black women’s memory-keeping practices. Not one newspaper from the time cared to document the difficulties Nancy encountered as a widow and single mother after her husband’s death. How she felt did not matter to them. No one, other than her family,

considered that she was left to make a living, raise her children, and maintain what was left of their family estate (see Figure 4).<sup>9</sup>



**Figure 4.** Peter Bruner and Frances Proctor Bruner in the top photograph. Frances is seated in the center with her daughters and grandchildren in the bottom photograph. The caption reads “The Best Gift Life Has to Offer, a Happy Family”.

DAP also evinces how Black women’s naming practices are passed down along matrilineal lines and across generations, enabling researchers to trace entire families of women dedicated to preserving their history. Margret Cooper and Carrie Bruner are named after elders in their family (see Figure 4). The 1900 census shows Nancy Proctor at the age of seventy-eight living in the home of her daughter, Margaret Bedenbaugh, with Margaret Cooper’s mother Ella, who was sixteen at the time (U.S. Department of Commerce 1870, 1880, 1900). It makes sense to assume that the family history titled “From Margaret Cooper 1996: Ella is Margaret’s Mother”, held in the Oxford Black History Collection today, is one that was originally passed down from Elijah and Elon, later expanded upon by their daughter Nancy, and then passed down to her daughter Margaret and granddaughter Ella, possibly when they lived under the same roof. Ella would subsequently pass it down to her daughter Margaret Cooper.

Another tradition that emerged in the late nineteenth century, through Black women’s efforts to pay tribute to their families’ perseverance, was the celebration of annual homecomings and wedding anniversaries. The homeplace, providing African Americans with respite from the “hostile heartland” they inhabited, was the natural setting for the commemoration of wedding anniversaries (Campney 2019). In 1893, Frances and Peter Bruner celebrated their 25th wedding anniversary with Miami University faculty and students who “agreed to make this a day never to be forgotten” (Bruner p. 52). Peter recalls “They were invited to my home in the afternoon and they gave me many beautiful pieces of



silver. At night we had a reception and invited our friends and we received many more beautiful presents” (Bruner p. 52). Lezli Davis, a descendant of the Roberts Settlement, a historic African American settlement in Hamilton County, Indiana, keeps a collection of historical documents related to her ancestors Nancy and John Roberts’ 50th wedding anniversary in her home-based archive (John and Nancy Photograph). Nancy was born in Rush County, Indiana, in 1844, and John in Hamilton County in 1837. The Roberts family traces their free people of color heritage to the Piedmont region of North Carolina, to a couple named Elijah and Keziah Roberts, who married there in 1816 and later moved to Indiana (Happy Distinction Enjoyed, 1913). At some point, the community chose to immortalize their shared heritage and sense of pride with a photograph. With meticulous care, Lezli researched and then typed onto a digital copy of the original photograph the names of all the family members in attendance, ensuring their enduring presence in the historical record and this precious keepsake (see Figure 5).<sup>10</sup>



**Figure 5.** John and Nancy Roberts’ 50th wedding anniversary. Annotated by descendant Lezli Davis.

Black women’s publications of their family histories offer us insight into their generational transfers of ancestral history rooted in positive images of Black womanhood. Elizabeth Gilchrist Craig, of Oxford, published a book, mainly of poems, in 1919, in remembrance of her upbringing and her mother, Susan Ross Craig (Craig 1919). She titled it “Mother’s Training” and it is “Dedicated to Mother In Grateful Appreciation Of My Early Training” (Craig 1919). Elizabeth also boasts about her sister Nellie Craig Walker, who was the first African American to graduate from Miami University in 1905, having earned a two-year teaching certificate (Craig 1919, p. 12). Nellie’s descendants have cherished their own memories of their ancestor over the years. Melanie Walker, Nellie’s great-granddaughter, conveyed in a 2021 university newsletter that “Every generation of our family has gone on to become college graduates after she obtained this ground-breaking achievement” (Kissell 2021). Despite lacking formal education, a fact her descendants do not shy away from pointing out, Sarah, a formerly enslaved woman, instilled the importance of education in her children. We can now witness the fruits of her labor through her daughter. The former Campus Avenue Building was renamed Nellie Craig Walker Hall in 2021. It stands as the first and only building at the university to be named in honor of a woman of color (Kissell 2021).



## 5. Conclusions

The documents analyzed in this chapter trace their “provenance” to a Black woman memory keeper, or the home-based archive she kept. Even when Black women did not create an actual document, they decided what was worthy of keeping and representing their families. Many of the documents in these sacred repositories do not exist outside of these spaces, which is critical as we think about the future of Black Midwestern and slavery studies grounded in archival research. When they do, they are often buried in backlogs, obscured in outdated or outright racist collection descriptions, and cataloged under other people’s named collections, which begs the question: Why do we use their archives to tell our stories?

The picture of Sarah Ross Craig’s home is reminiscent of the memory-keeping spaces Black women across the United States have built to revere the men and women who made life possible for them as they attempted to do more than just survive slavery and its afterlife (see Figure 6). Alta Jett implored scholars to seek the places where Black women keep their histories; she conjured an image and practice known to most African American women (Hine 1986, p. 1). She foreshadowed that Descendant Archival Practices would be at the vanguard of a golden age of Midwestern and Black history telling.



**Figure 6.** Elizabeth Gilchrist Craig in her mother Susan Ross Craig’s home.

Jennie Elder Suel built upon the archive her grandmother-in-law dreamed up in 1854 throughout the twentieth century. The items she added—her Harlem School of Nursing degree, newspaper features, and proof of her formerly enslaved foremother Henrietta Harrison’s marriage for a pension application after the Civil War—piece together her life the way she wanted it remembered. Jennie was an intellectual and a community leader. There is no doubt that what she kept and left out of the collection she donated to Miami University was intentional. Each document carries a message. As she offered, “I’ve learned in all my years that you are responsible for your own actions” (Purdy 1994). In that spirit, Black women have shouldered the responsibility of documenting their lives, as well as the moments of celebration, terror, homemaking, and everything in between (see Figure 7).



**Figure 7.** Jennie Elder Suel.

**Funding:** This research was funded by the Black Midwest Initiative.

**Institutional Review Board Statement:** Not applicable.

**Informed Consent Statement:** Not applicable.

**Data Availability Statement:** The primary sources referenced in this article are now available on the Jennie Elder Suel and Black Women of Oxford Digital Collection on Miami University Libraries website, <https://cdm17240.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/suel> accessed on 8 May 2024. The digital archive was created in collaboration with students in Dr. Jazma Sutton's Black Women in America course at Miami University, Miami University Libraries, and the Smith Library of Regional History.

**Acknowledgments:** I would like to express my gratitude to the Black Midwest Initiative for their financial support through the 2023 Black Midwest Summer Institute at the University of Illinois Chicago, which made this research possible. Special thanks to Alia Wegner, Digital Collections Librarian at Miami University, and Brad Spurlock, Library Manager at Smith Library of Regional History, for their assistance and expertise during the research process. Finally, I extend my appreciation to Ashley Howard for her constructive feedback and suggestions, which greatly improved the quality of this manuscript.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares no conflicts of interest. The funders had no role in the design of the study; in the collection, analyses, or interpretation of data; in the writing of the manuscript; or in the decision to publish the results.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> I will refer to Dawson by her first name throughout this chapter.
- <sup>2</sup> For works on free Black women, see (Nunley 2021; Myers 2011; Millward 2015; Baumgartner 2019; Jones 2007; King 2006; Dabel 2008; Dunbar 2008).
- <sup>3</sup> Surnames of the African American family collections include: Jackson, Bruner, Sidney, Dickerson, Ryal-Piatt, Cowen, East, Burns, Bedenbaugh, Craig, Langford, Jones, Miller/Miller-Jones, Proctor, Williams, Rockhold, and Christy.
- <sup>4</sup> For studies that examine white women on the frontier, see (Riley 1988; Jeffrey 1998; Myres 1982; Farmer 2018).

- <sup>5</sup> For scholarship on slavery in the Midwest see, (Miles 2017; Heerman 2018; Salafia 2013; Dunn 1888; Finkelman 1986; Du Bois 1909).
- <sup>6</sup> For works on Black women’s archiving see, (Ewing 2022; Brooks 2021; Stoever 2021).
- <sup>7</sup> For scholarship on critical archival studies see, (Caswell et al. 2017; Punzalan and Caswell 2016; Berry 2022; Hughes-Watkins 2018; Sutherland 2017; Zinn 1977; Dunbar 2006; Tansey 2020).
- <sup>8</sup> Peter Bruner is considered the first African American to work at Western College and Miami University. Western College merged with Miami University in 1974. Edna Bradley’s father, Cephas Burns, a third-generation stone mason, and descendant of slaves, built ten bridges and sixteen lampposts on the Western College campus, engineering them all himself and handpicking the stones.
- <sup>9</sup> From Margaret Cooper 1996 Ella is Margaret’s Mother, Murdock Family Folder, MS 87-1000, Oxford Black History Collection, SLRH, Oxford, Ohio. “A Black Brute: Horrible Outrage Upon an Estimable Lady of Oxford: Unsuccessful Attempt of the Indignant People to Lynch the Perpetrator”, *Cincinnati Enquirer* (Cincinnati, OH), 3 September 1877 and (U.S. Department of Commerce 1860) U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, Eighth Census of the United States, 1860 (Oxford, Butler, Ohio): Roll M653\_940; Page 210, *Ancestry.com*.
- <sup>10</sup> Lezli Davis explains that she “added the names of close family members in attendance to a digital copy of the original photo for posterity”.

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