The Isaiah Rice Collection at D. H. Ramsey Library, UNC Asheville

The Isaiah Rice Collection presents vivid images of African American life in Asheville, North Carolina, from the 1950s through the 1970s, and builds on other existing collections within Ramsey Library. Isaiah Rice was an Asheville native who lived from 1917 to 1980. He graduated from Stephens-Lee High School, worked with the Works Progress Administration, was an Army veteran, and worked as a delivery truck driver. He married Asheville native Jeroline Bradley Rice in 1942 and was father to Marian Waters.1 His grandson Dr. Darin Waters is a professor of history at UNC Asheville. Marian Waters and Dr. Darin Waters donated the collection to the library in 2015, and it was officially unveiled on October 23 at the second annual African Americans in Western North Carolina Conference at UNC Asheville.2

More than 100 images from the Rice Collection have been made available online through Ramsey Library's Special Collections, but these are only 1/10 of the total collection. Isaiah Rice photographed couples and small groups of people at their homes, churches, and along the streets as he passed by. Known as the “picture man,” Rice apparently considered his cameras carefully. He owned and used a Zeiss/Ikon Ikoflex, an Ansco Speedex, a Kodak Duaflex, a Polaroid, and most interesting, a Minox-B “spy” camera.3 These relatively expensive cameras demonstrate his seriousness about photography.

The Rice Collection documents significant time periods in African American culture and history, especially in this mountain town. As Waters, Hyde, and Betsalel remind readers, Isaiah Rice collected these images “during the post-World War II era of uneven national economic development, continued racial segregation, the ongoing fight for civil rights and racial equality, and the subsequent years of suburbanization and urban renewal in Asheville.”4 Asheville’s African population during the 1950s to the 1970s ranged around 20%, compared to less than 8% African American population in Knoxville, Tennessee, and less than 4% in the ten counties surrounding Asheville. Thus, Rice’s portraits of everyday life speak against the “trope of African American ‘insignificance’ in the region.” Yet, the images are not overtly political. There are no signs or slogans, no marches, but instead there are people going to church, to work, to the pool, or having dinner as a family.

Among the most compelling photographs are several related to church life. The camera captures people before and after services, images of church elders, a wedding, and a worship leader holding up a sheet of paper. There are also multiple pictures of couples, sitting on steps, standing outdoors, and crossing the street; pictures of children playing, groups of men talking outside buildings, and people just crossing the street. Many of these pictures seem taken on the spur of the moment rather than specifically posed. Most of the people in Rice’s photographs smile at and seem at ease in front of the camera—reacting to a friend rather than some impersonal “photographer.” These everyday images, documenting the life and work of their subjects, provide the primary sources to challenge the “incomplete picture.”5

The addition of the Isaiah Rice Collection strengthens and supplements Ramsey Library’s other photographic collections, including the Ball Collection and the Heritage of Black Highlanders Collection. Another significant local area collection with is
the Andrea Clarke Collection held in
the North Carolina Collection of the
Pack Memorial Library, a branch of
the Buncombe County Public Library.

Although the Ball Collection, with
more than 11,000 images of local
people and places, is perhaps the best
known of UNC Asheville’s photo-
graph collections, it has relatively few
images including African Americans.
The Andrea Clarke Collection at
nearby Pack Library contains roughly
500 images, documenting African
American people and places from this
neighborhood during a period of
urban renewal in the late 1960s and
early 1970s. Clarke’s photographs
include various buildings—among
them the Stephens-Lee High School
that Rice attended—and street scenes,
as well as images of people outdoors
or talking in groups.\(^5\) Thus, there is
some overlap of time period and type
of photographs with the Rice Collection.
Some of Clarke’s photographs
are collected in her book, East End
Asheville Photographs Circa 1968,
published by the North Carolina Hu-
manities Council.\(^6\)

Perhaps the best collection for fit
with the Rice Collection, though, is
the Heritage of Black Highlanders
Collection, which was established by
Asheville teacher and principal Lucy
Herring. This collection was one of
the first acquired by the university’s
Special Collection and celebrates its
40th anniversary with the founding
of UNCA’s Special Collections, which
was originally established as the
Southern Highlands Research Center
in 1977. The Heritage of Black
Highlanders Collection contains
images of African Americans at school
and in armed service, at work, church,
and in civic organizations. It covers
the period 1888 to 1972.\(^8\)

Among highlights of this collection
are images of Floyd McKissick and
his father Ernest, a photo of famous
singer Marion Anderson visiting
Stephens-Lee High School, and pho-
tographs of several “firsts” including
the first African American disc jockey,
the first African American employee
of the NC Employment Security
Commission, and the first African
American voter registrar in western
North Carolina. DigitalNC recently
made this collection available online

Taken together, the Isaiah Rice
Collection and the Heritage of Black
Highlanders Collection offer library
users documentation of a nearly a
century of African American life in
Asheville. Gene Hyde, Head of Special
Collections and University Archives
for Ramsey Library describes the
impact of this collection on users’
appreciation for the diversity of the
region: “The Isaiah Rice Collection is
important in helping people under-
stand that southern Appalachia is
historically much more diverse than

Street Scene in Downtown Asheville

Delivery Driver

Lucy Herring, Teacher and Principal
is widely believed, and challenges the traditional belief that African Americans were ‘insignificant’ in Appalachia.” Response to the Rice Collection has been very positive in Asheville and in the Appalachian Studies community. Visitors are welcome to view the Rice Collection at Ramsey Library.

Special thanks to Gene Hyde, Head of Special Collections & University Archivist, UNC Asheville

References


3 Waters, Hyde, and Betsalel.

4 Waters, Hyde, and Betsalel, 94.

5 Ibid., 94-96.


Images

Isaiah Rice, from the Isaiah Rice Collection, Special Collections, UNC Asheville. © Darin Waters; image used by permission, with thanks to Dr. Waters and the Special Collections at Ramsey Library. Available at http://cdm15733.contentdm.oclc.org/cdm/singleitem/collection/p15733coll11/id/49/rec/18.

Lucy Herring, Teacher and Principal, from the Heritage of Black Highlanders Collection, Special Collections, Ramsey Library, University of North Carolina Asheville, Asheville, NC. Available at http://library.digitalnc.org/cdm/singleitem/collection/ncimages/id/29872/rec/158.

Looking for help with collection development?

If you want to expand your library’s collection of novels set in North Carolina, you should visit the Read North Carolina Novels blog hosted by the North Carolina Collection at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (http://blogs.lib.unc.edu/ncnovels/).

If your interest in North Caroliniana is more general, the North Carolina Collection at UNC-Chapel Hill regularly posts lists of new additions to their collection at this address: http://blogs.lib.unc.edu/ncm/index.php/whats-new-in-the-north-carolina-collection/.