Research of any kind often begins with a name or two, and that is especially true when researching minorities in particular professions. Victoria A. Roberts, Dennis Archer, Reginald Turner, and W. Anthony Jenkins are familiar as past presidents of the State Bar of Michigan. In Michigan legal circles and beyond, the names Damon J. Keith and George W. Crockett Jr. are well-known. After we exhaust the renowned, however, we want to dig deeper. A recent interview on National Public Radio with Claudette Colvin who, at 15 years of age refused to give up her segregated bus seat 10 months before Rosa Parks did the same thing, illustrates the value of the well-known as well as the fascinating stories of the less famous.

“Well, today I'm 75 years old. It's good to see some of the fruit of my labor,” says Colvin. “To me, I don't mind being named, as long as we have someone out there to tell our story.”

Michigan libraries and archives offer a treasure trove of information to tell the story, from legal history to contemporary practice. Several collections have been in existence for some time while others have been developed more recently. The variety of formats, both digital and print, require familiarity with diverse research techniques including search strategies and the use of old-school library catalogs to locate all the available material.

Researching black lawyers in Michigan's legal history is helped immeasurably by Edward J. Littejohn's publications Black Lawyers, Law Practice, and Bar Associations—1844 to 1970: A Michigan History and African-American Lawyers in Nineteenth Century Michigan, and J. Clay Smith Jr.'s Emancipation: the Making of the Black Lawyer, 1844–1944 also includes a short section on Michigan in its chapter on northwestern states. Identifying additional law review or journal articles with traditional sources such as the Index to Legal Periodicals (and Retrospective) or LegalTrac (available to all Michigan residents via the Michigan Electronic Library's Legal Gateway) may require advanced search strategies. Depending on the date of the material, subject headings may reflect terminology used at that time. For example, the Index to Legal Periodicals uses “African Americans” in current entries, but its historical counterpart, Retrospective, uses “Blacks” with a notation of its historical subject, “Negroes.”

Research may require going to individual school websites and digging for historical data. For instance, the University of Michigan Law School's History and Traditions page includes a biographical sketch of Gabriel Franklin Hargo, the law school's first African-American graduate. Additionally, a search for scholarships and a black student organization may lead to some recognized leaders in a specific university. The African Americans in the Law Collection at the University of Maryland's Thurgood Marshall Law Library “seeks to document the development and growth of the African American legal community in Maryland from 1877 to date” with personal manuscripts and organizational records including the Papers of the NAACP. The Howard University School of Law Library is processing the J. Clay Smith Jr. Collection, “a vertical file on African Americans in the law….” as well as public speeches and ephemera from the former dean and professor of that law school.

The Damon J. Keith Collection of African-American Legal History, a partnership between the Walter P. Reuther Library and Wayne State University Law School, is the country’s first and only archive dedicated to perpetual care of the papers, artifacts and memorabilia of African-American legal history. The available collections, from prominent lawyers, judges, and law faculty, illustrate the emphasis on civil rights and social justice. Each of the collections’ entries includes a finding aid from the Reuther Library identifying the material as well as providing the scope, content, and important subjects and names contained within.

The Library of Michigan and the Detroit Public Library also have materials to offer those researching black legal professionals. Biographies of Michigan Judges Claudia House Morcom and Otis Milton Smith are available from the Library of Michigan along with publications from the Michigan Legislative Black Caucus and a publication on Tapping into research on lawyers and judges who have come before us can provide insight into where the profession is today and hopefully provide inspiration for future legal professionals.
libraries in the entire United States, including 63 in Michigan.28 For researchers seeking more current data, the U.S. Census American Fact Finder provides the option to tabulate census data by location, occupation, ethnicity, and sex.29 In addition, the American Bar Association provides statistics on race and ethnicity,26 and American Lawyer Media keeps track with a diversity scorecard.27 A recent American Lawyer blog entry indicates a continued downward trend in the number of black attorneys.28 Tapping into research on lawyers and judges who have come before us can provide insight into where the profession is today and hopefully provide inspiration for future legal professionals. “If I have seen further, it is by standing upon the shoulders of giants.”29

Jan Bissett is a librarian with Wayne State University’s Arthur Neef Law Library and an advisory member of the State Bar Committee on Libraries, Legal Research, and Legal Publications.

Margi Heinen is the manager of research services for Sherman & Howard LLC in Denver, Colorado.

ENDNOTES


8. See, e.g., Shores, The Negro at the Bar, 2 NAff B J 266–272 (1944) [indexing subjects: legal profession, blacks; historical subjects: legal profession, negroes].


