

Material Memory Season 3, Episode 5
“By Actions and Not by Words”

Transcript

Amelia Boynton Robinson clip (cold open): And yet, in the light of this and much more, I am willing to fight for that which the land that I love owned.

[Music]

Narration: Hello, and welcome to Material Memory. I'm your host, Sharon M. Burney, and that voice you just heard was Amelia Boynton Robinson. This episode we'll be diving into the vast archives at Tuskegee University, listening to the words of iconic Black leaders such as Shirley Chisholm, Muhammad Ali, Myrlie Evers, and more. We'll also examine the voices in these collections that are often overlooked, but that remain a vital part of our historical legacy. And we'll talk about the unique and impactful history of Tuskegee University. For this episode we'll be joined by university archivist Dana Chandler.

Dana Chandler: My name is Dana Chandler. I am the university's archivist here at Tuskegee University. I am also an associate professor of history. This is my dream job. I am going on my 18th year here at Tuskegee.

Narration: As will become evident over the course of this episode, Dana is rightfully proud of Tuskegee's remarkable collections.

Dana Chandler: I'm the sixth archivist at Tuskegee. Our archives is one of the oldest in the nation. Our archives has 600 historically significant collections plus. Key phrase: historically significant. Most universities have between 10 and 20. We have over 600 and I can really fill you in on all the things that we have. It would take hours.

Narration: This doesn't surprise me given its history, which has helped Tuskegee become a household name.

Dana Chandler: Tuskegee University is important because of its firsts. You know, a lot of people think of Tuskegee. They think of Booker T. Washington, George Washington Carver, the Tuskegee Airmen and the infamous syphilis study. There's a lot more to us than that. The first four-year degree in nursing in the state of Alabama was at Tuskegee. The first female doctor certified in the state of Alabama happened to be African American, happened to be our doctor. The first hospital for African Americans in the state of Alabama: Tuskegee. We have the first African American to graduate from MIT with an architect's degree, [Robert R. Taylor](#) was our architect. It's been said by somebody who's doing research on sports programs with the HBCUs, it's been said that we had more national championships than any other university in the nation. And, you know, look, I can go on and on and on. *[Laughter]*

Narration: The university's legacy continues to benefit students today.

Dana Chandler: My students, I tell them, listen, your diploma's worth money. But I got an engineering degree from Tuskegee University, which supplies the 97% of all aerospace engineering students in the nation (African American). Oh, oh, where's that value at? Through the roof.

Narration: As you might imagine, Tuskegee's archive is as distinguished as the school itself.

Dana Chandler: Our collections: what's in our collections? The top three photographers, African American photographers, P. H. Polk, A. P. Bedou, C. M. Battey, were all our photographers, and we have all of their photos in our archives. And we have photographs that were done by P. H. Polk of Martin Luther King. One of them is a photograph after the Selma to Montgomery March, and Martin Luther King spoke in Montgomery right after the end of that march. He sat down and Coretta Scott King turned over and gave him a kiss. Now, as far as I know, that's the only photograph available of them showing any form of public affection—other than holding hands.

Narration: And it's not just their photography collection that's impressive.

Dana Chandler: We have 750 reel-to-reel audio tapes. Okay. A lot of places have audio tapes, but do you have all of the civil rights workers that came and spoke at Tuskegee, including Martin Luther King, John Lewis, Ralph David Abernathy? I could go on and on and on.

Narration: And Dana did just that, as he continued to share the wondrous treasures in Tuskegee's archives.

Dana Chandler: But you know, there are others. Jackie Robinson spoke here. And, you know, it was talk about how he overcame, how he was successful as a ballplayer, his time in the Negro leagues, and then his movement from the Negro leagues to the big leagues. In reality, those Negro leagues were probably better athletes and had better, stronger records than the big league did at that time.

Narration: Jackie Robinson was one of the most accomplished Black athletes of all time. In 1947, Jackie Robinson broke barriers as the first Black person to play in Major League Baseball, starting for the Brooklyn Dodgers. Equally monumental, and often unrecognized, was his commitment to civil rights activism, a commitment highlighted in his address to Tuskegee in 1959.

Jackie Robinson clip: I begin to see that where the new Negro today is no longer interested in laughing when he isn't tickled. He's no longer interested in scratching when he is not itching either. He's determined, to the man, that we're gonna get our rights.

Narration: I listened to several of the speeches in this collection and two things stood out to me. First, there was something about being in front of an audience of Tuskegee's young Black students that

seemed to amplify the urgency people felt to speak truth to power. Second, I was moved by how deeply significant the HBCUs were for these luminaries. Here's a clip here of Myrlie Evers-Williams speaking at Tuskegee in 1973. Evers is a noted civil rights activist and writer who fought for justice following the assassination of her husband and fellow activist Medgar Evers. She has served as the chairwoman of the NAACP, among other honors.

Myrlie Evers clip: Sometimes, I think it's necessary to go back to your roots, back home, back to the South, in my instance. To reach out and touch and to be touched by those, like you, who understand and who are aspiring for the same things that you are.

Narration: When you delve into the archives of HBCUs, the significant impacts these institutions hold for the Black community are clearly evident. Here's archivist Dana Chandler again.

Dana Chandler: Tuskegee is a unique place in many ways, because of the interaction of the public, and especially when it comes to politics. So many things happened here in Tuskegee and Macon County. You know, Rosa Parks was born here. The importance of the political scene here is unbelievable. There's Gomillion versus Lightfoot. You know, that Supreme Court case, if it didn't happen, you know what? There wouldn't have been a 1965 Voting Rights Act at the time it was given, and Gomillion was a professor here on campus. How important are HBCUs to their communities?

Narration: Historically Black Colleges and Universities are the anchors of the Black community. They provide students with an opportunity for academic excellence in a safe and value-centered community. They produce village-centered scholars, who push society forward, and challenge the world to be a more just and equitable place.

[Music]

Narration: We'll continue our tour through Tuskegee's incredible archival collections later in this episode, but first we wanted to talk about what's going on behind the scenes at Tuskegee's archives, who works there, and what it takes to sustain these historical gems. Tuskegee archives are old and illustrious. There have been moments when the university prioritized these collections, but support has been inconsistent over the years and there have also been times when the archives didn't receive the attention they deserved. Here's Dana Chandler.

Dana Chandler: First day I walked in, oh, it was a mess. It had been closed for 10 years. It had gone through three moves. There was rat poop in the boxes. There was bugs, there was trash in every room. This was my dream. You know, I'm going to sit here. And it seemed—there was a young man who helped me part-time through all this. And he made the comment. He said, it seems like every Thursday we find out some special treasure, and we did.

Narration: Dana came to Tuskegee at a time when their archives were struggling, and he took an unconventional path to get there.

Sharon Burney: I was reading your resume. And it's really interesting to me how you went from construction and engineering to then archeologist to now archivist, which may seem so disconnected, but they aren't.

Dana Chandler: You know, when I started out, I would've never guessed that in a million years that I would be asked. I was working in an engineering firm. And at the time, I was one of the three people in the United States that could do telemetry—early form of GPS. And I got to be a part of an archeological project. And one thing led to another. And so, I became a specialist in pre-Columbian stonework, and I got to do some pretty interesting digs. And, then because of that, I got to travel to some pretty neat archives around the world. I told my students, “I went from digging in the earth to digging in papers.”

Narration: Dana’s background in engineering isn’t the only reason it can be surprising to learn that he’s the archivist for Tuskegee.

Dana Chandler: You know, being a middle-aged white man at an HBCU in a position that would normally have fallen to an African American—I've had to convince the community to trust me. And my students, I have to get them to trust me too.

Sharon Burney: Earlier in our conversation we spoke about your transformation into archival work and this HBCU, which you clearly love. And you talked about, as a cultural heritage keeper and archivist, understanding that you are a White man in a Black space and walking that fine line. And I would love for you to expand on that between trust—from unfortunate historical relevance of archives being stolen from the Black community, right?—and being a gatekeeper of the archives. How do you balance that, and how do you establish trust for a new narrative?

Dana Chandler: I've always been a firm believer that you treat people like you want to be treated. And I always approach people with understanding. I approach them honestly. And I think the fact that I follow through. And I think working in an HBCU has been a very big deal for me too. The reason why: I got to expand my horizons and Tuskegee was a fit for me. And granted there have been some bumps along the road, but I still love this place.

Narration: And while some of us, myself included, may always wonder what a Black archivist might have done differently in this role, I will say that Dana is a staunch defender of the collections. There is a long history of predominantly White institutions (or PWIs) taking valuable records out of communities of color. This is something Dana has witnessed at Tuskegee and other HBCUs in his time as archivist. Of course, it’s not just the HBCUs’ collections that are at risk of being lost to PWIs.

Sharon Burney: But we are seeing this trend, which I think about all the time and that is gentrification's role in the GLAMs. And I don't see that being addressed as much as it should be. What are your thoughts on that?

Dana Chandler: What can we do to help the situation with HBCUs? I see a lot of them starting to make transitions to be tied to a PWI because of financial reasons. You know that's coming and I do too, right? I think you are right to concern yourself with gentrification and, and what's happening. I'm working with Hinds Community College, which is in Mississippi. Utica was the original name of that HBCU, and Utica is now part of Hinds Community College and they're losing their identity.

Sharon Burney: Wow.

Dana Chandler: And we're trying to save it through the archives. So, you know, there's so much that archives can do to preserve that. You know, we may lose HBCUs to PWIs.

Narration: The risk of losing HBCUs is a very real threat. Some HBCUs are encountering gentrification and land grabs. It is imperative we continue to support these institutions and communities, and archival advocacy can play a vital role.

Sharon Burney: What are some of the obstacles that you're facing, resource wise?

Dana Chandler: Well, having the right kind of facility. You know, is it temperature and humidity controlled? That's number one. Number two, the place to store the material. It's one thing to have the stuff, you know, processed, but if you can't store it, if it's gotta be put on offsite storage or something like that, what good is it? You know, you need to have it accessible. Like here I need probably another hundred thousand dollars' worth of compact shelving. I won't say that that will get me where I need to be, but it will certainly help. But understand, Sharon, we need archivists too. You know, most of the work like that has to be done by me. So, we need help. I need at least three more employees to do a good job here. We need the supplies. When you get down to the end of your year, and you've got one box of paper left, you know, that's a hard thing to deal with.

Narrative: All treasures can be stolen, broken, or lost, and this includes the records of our heritage. It's critical that we ensure HBCUs have the resources so that these collections are with us for generations to come.

[Music]

Narration: We're dedicating this final segment to digging into Tuskegee's incredible collections.

Sharon Burney: You have one minute to grab the most precious thing out of your archive collection and run out and save it for the world. What would it be?

Dana Chandler: George Washington Carver's notebooks.

Narration: George Washington Carver was an agricultural scientist in the late 19th to early 20th century who helped poor farmers overcome soil depleted from over-planting cotton by championing alternatives such as sweet potatoes and, most famously, the peanut.

Sharon M. Burney: And why?

Dana Chandler: Because most people thought that George Washington Carver wasn't a good scientist because he didn't keep notes and records. What they didn't know is he did. I think that that would be one of the things that I would grab. But I don't want to be in that situation. *[laughter]*

Narration: Tuskegee has an abundance of material from well-known figures, such as Carver or Booker T. Washington. But some of the richest materials in the Tuskegee archives are from less well-known historical figures.

Dana Chandler: Sharon, do you know that Monroe Work, the first archivist at Tuskegee—and, you know, we're two years younger than the oldest public archives in the nation, which is Alabama Department Archives and History that was started by Monroe Work in 1904. He wrote the *Negro Year Book* from 1912 to 1943, everything statistical about African Americans. And then he wrote a bibliography of documents, books, articles, et cetera, from both Africa and the United States, written by African Americans or Blacks. Monroe Work's a brilliant guy. He's the one who compiled the lynching records. But I have so many people that come to do research from that time period from 1912, 1943. And they don't even know that Monroe Work's books exist.

Narration: Some of the most fascinating and vital communities represented in Tuskegee's collections shared their story the only way they were afforded—through photography.

Dana Chandler: The Gullah community is a very old community located in South Carolina that settled off in a community of their own. But, you know, they tried to maintain a lot of their cultural heritage. This book called *Roll Jordan Roll*, published at the turn of the century, was a series of photographs that were taken and corresponding commentary about the Gullah, several photographs in these books. And they were purchased by Black families all over the South and throughout the nation. And because at that time you just didn't see art, photographs showing cultural settings of Black families—you just didn't see them. And these books would be bought up quickly. I think it was over 500 volumes that were originally published. And as soon as people bought them, they would cut the photographs out of the books and put them up on their walls. Cause they just didn't have those photographs. You know, when they looked in the newspaper, they saw white faces, white advertisements, everywhere.

Sharon Burney: I would love for you to expand on the importance of Black newspapers for the local communities.

Dana Chandler: You know, black newspapers are really singularly important. One of the things that we have here in the archives at Tuskegee is a newspaper called [*the Southern Courier*](#), which was for the

South to provide African-Americans with a resource specific to the South that they couldn't have normally gotten information from because of the White newspapers. What we have is this collection called the *Southern Courier* collection, which is letters and other documents outside of the newspapers themselves, which we have copies of them too. But it's the background that people don't get to see that's amazing to me. A lot of these newspapers gave rise to independent neighborhood newspapers and newsletters, and they were oftentimes handwritten, hand drawn, that have all kinds of information in them that they would send to the *Southern Courier*. "Look what we did here in our community, because we were reading the *Southern Courier* and only we could get one copy. So, we took that news and disseminated it in another way to the community."

Sharon Burney: I also was seeing that something that is very important too, is not only to tell the stories of our struggle here as Black people in this country and in the diaspora, but also of our triumph and fortitude and innovativeness, and I would love for you to tell me of some of the most empowering audio collections that you have.

Dana Chandler: It comes from a collection that we call the Chapel Collection. These are our tapes that were made by the folks that recorded the sermons and things at the chapel. And they also recorded all these speeches. As I said before, Sharon, one of the most interesting audio recordings that we had was Myrlie Evers speech, how powerful it was.

Narration: I want to play another clip from Evers' 1973 speech here.

Myrlie Evers clip: And somewhere along the line, we have either become battle fatigued or we have become so apathetic until we have ceased to care. We have, to a point, pulled back into ourselves, and find our concerns only with our own families or our own small family groups. And my question tonight is when will that end? And what will it take to end it? Must we wait until something again happens within our communities, our states? Where we all find ourselves, regardless of education, finances, color of skin, or whatnot in the same boat? Will we wait until it's almost too late to act?

Narration: What makes these Tuskegee speeches so continuously profound? It's partly the amazing lineup of historical speakers. It's partly the parallels of social justice that are as relevant today as they were in the past, but part of it is the Tuskegee audience itself.

Dana Chandler: There's so much insight. Now think about it for just a minute. Okay. They're speaking in an all-Black audience. They're not speaking in front of the white media. They're not speaking in front of a mixed group. Do you think that their speeches are going to be different than what they would have given in front of the media? Yes, they are. How they say things, what they reveal, what buttons are they trying to push and how do they push those buttons?

Narration: You can see this in professional boxer and activist Muhammad Ali's speech at Tuskegee in 1966. As you may know, Ali loves to talk, so we've made some in-line cuts to this quote for time. We'll link to the full version on our website.

Muhammad Ali clip: I was taught that the American so-called Negro woman is the mother of all civilization and the queen of the whole planet Earth! When I first heard that the honorable Elijah Muhammad taught this, it shocked me. I said “That’s a heck of a label, man!” So he said, “Who’s the world’s greatest woman runner in all history?” I said, “Wilma Ruldolph.” Where’s her mother from? Somewhere down in Tennessee. And she birthed a girl who would outrun every woman’s child in the world. Jim Brown, can’t nobody top his record in football. Nobody! Willie Mays... Me! [laughter]. Jazz musicians, rock and roll artists. He said, “We are the greatest people.” So he said, “If the world’s greatest everything comes from this woman sitting out here and she can produce a child that can outmaneuver anybody on earth, that makes her the world’s best.” He said, “We will never get the respect as a nation of people if our women can be mistreated and used.” He said, “The so-called Negro woman is the only woman who anyone in the neighborhood can pick up in their car and drive her to some motel and the men are looking, don’t say a mumbling word.”

Narration: “Black Women are the Mules of the World,” Zora Neale Hurston’s powerful hypothesis of the plight of Black women from her novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, reminded me of another interview from Tuskegee’s collections: the interview with Amelia Boynton Robinson, activist and central figure in the civil rights movement in Selma, Alabama. Here she is speaking at Tuskegee in 1970.

Amelia Boynton clip: I am proud to be a Negro, I am also proud to have been born in America, a land that I love well enough to buy interest in her stock.

Narration: Do you remember that [photograph from several years ago](#) of the Obamas walking with John Lewis at the 50th anniversary of the Selma to Montgomery March? Remember the elderly woman in the wheelchair holding President Obama’s hand? That woman was Amelia Boynton. The picture of Boynton on the anniversary isn’t the photo for which she’s most famous. The images that brought her to the public attention were of what law enforcement did to her in the aftermath of the original Selma to Montgomery March on March 7, 1965, or Bloody Sunday.

Amelia Boynton clip: But though I am an American citizen, a taxpayer, a joint owner of America, I have been beaten, gassed, left on the roadside to die. I have been jailed because I dared to walk down the streets that were paved with the help of my tax-paying money. I know the pain, the damage, and the disturbance, of Negroes going through internally and externally. And yet, in the light of this and much more, I am willing to fight for that which the land that I love owned.

Narration: The peaceful march in Selma and the brutal response by state troopers and local law enforcement is seen by many as a turning point in the civil rights movement. The photos of Amelia Boynton and her fellow marchers helped catalyze Americans of all races, and Boynton continued fighting until she passed away at 104 years old. HBCUs contain some of the richest histories of civil rights and specifically of the Selma to Montgomery march, including collections that have barely been studied.

Dana Chandler: In Selma, there are two HBCUs. One of them, Concordia, there is a room there right now in a building that's defunct that is full of photographs and other documents about the Selma to Montgomery March taken from the standpoint of the people there at Concordia. That's gold. That's stuff that we don't know. We're not getting that perspective.

Narration: The stories from these activists who risked so much for our rights are breathtaking, and so many of them exist only in the archives.

Sharon M. Burney: Can you give me some examples of when you've seen students, when you've had them actually get in the archives, especially BIPOC students, and they may see something about themselves or the transformation that occurs when they realize how powerful they are?

Dana Chandler: Actually, there've been several of them. I've had several students that have worked for me that come in, and they're listening to a speech, and they're trying to analyze that speech for metadata. And they forget that they're working to do this metadata, because they're so enthralled with what's being said. "Hey, professor, did you know, have you heard this? Did you hear this?" And the excitement that I get from my students. When that light comes on, they look at you like, "Oh, where's this been? Why didn't I know?"

Narration: There are countless people and events that have changed history and directly impacted our lives that no one has bothered to teach us about. I want to end this episode with a clip from an often-overlooked historical icon, Shirley Chisholm, the first Black woman in Congress, and first woman and Black person to seek a US presidential nomination for a major political party.

Shirley Chisholm clip: We've got to understand whether or not we really believe in the concept of brotherhood. We've got to show by action and not by words whether or not the brotherhood of man can become a reality in the United States of America as we move into the seventies. The time for cliches and all kinds of political, social, ideological and philosophical phrases is over. The time in America now has come for the action to be suited to the word.

Narration: "By action and not by words": these words resonate today. They are a rallying cry that challenges society to move beyond performative work in the name of social justice, diversity, equity, and accessibility. They challenge the informational field to ask the uncomfortable questions: What are we doing to teach an accurate and complete history that centers Black communities and Black thought? What does it mean to be an authentic ally? What are we doing to save the tapestry of our journey? Most importantly, where is the money? Amidst the current attacks on critical race theory and libraries, now is the time for us to show—by action and not by words—the urgent importance of preserving, protecting, and making accessible the sources that document the Black experience.

[Music]

Narration: Thanks for joining us. To learn more about the collections at Tuskegee University and for links to the full speeches of all clips featured in this episode, check out our show notes at material-memory.clir.org. In our next episode, we'll be talking with Wanda Scott-Kinney and Porchia Moore about the history and collections of Benedict College. We'll also take a journey to the neighboring Low Country and its Gullah community.

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I'm your host, Sharon M. Burney, and this is *Material Memory*.