

Collection #  
M 1504

**INDIANA MUSEUM OF AFRICAN AMERICAN HISTORY  
COLLECTION, 1999-2007**

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## **COLLECTION INFORMATION**

**VOLUME OF COLLECTION:** 6 manuscript boxes, 1 half-sized manuscript box, 1 folder cold storage color photographs

**COLLECTION DATES:** 1999-2007

**PROVENANCE:** Alpha Blackburn, 2017

**RESTRICTIONS:** None

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**ALTERNATE FORMATS:**

**RELATED HOLDINGS:** Indiana Black Expo Materials (M1128)

**ACCESSION NUMBER:** 2017.0057

**NOTES:** Materials in cold storage need at least 4 hours to acclimate, so patrons should call ahead if they wish to view materials that are in cold storage.

## HISTORICAL SKETCH

“In January 2001, Indiana Black Expo, Inc. (IBE), under the direction of board chairman William Crawford and State Assemblyman Charles Williams, launched a task force for the conceptual development and planning of the Indiana Museum of African American History [IMAAH]. Dedicated to collecting, documenting, and preserving the history, life, and culture of African Americans in Indiana and beyond for the purpose of enlightening, encouraging, and empowering the public, the [...] Indiana Museum of African American History [was to] be the newest institution of the Indianapolis Canal Walk. The 120,000 square foot museum [was] envisioned to include exhibit space, a four hundred seat performing arts center, and the corporate offices of Indiana Black Expo and [was] scheduled to open in the summer of 2008.”

IMAAH board chairperson Alpha Blackburn was born Alpha Wilnet Coles 16 September 1939 to Minnie and Alphonso Coles in Lynchburg, Virginia. The youngest of a large family of meager means, Alpha worked hard throughout her school years and attended Dunbar High School, where she was on the student council. She managed to win a national competitive scholarship to Howard University in Washington, D.C. She graduated *cum laude* from Howard with a B.A. in Design and an M.F.A. in Painting and Art History. After her sophomore year, she married architecture student Walter Blackburn from Indianapolis. Walter’s father Cleo Blackburn was a social worker and the director of Flanner House for many years. Walter and Alpha established the firm Blackburn Architects in 1981 and designed many significant structures in Indianapolis (and beyond) such as the Hoosier Dome, the ArtsGarden at Circle Centre, and Grace Apostolic Church.

In 2000, while working on the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center in Cincinnati, Walter Blackburn succumbed to cancer. Alpha took the reins and worked for six years to get the museum finished. At the same time, the idea of the Indiana Museum of African American History was taking shape. Alpha and the board hired Rita Organ, Director of Exhibits and Collections at the Cincinnati museum, as executive director for the Indiana effort. A site for the new museum was chosen in White River State Park, and Blackburn architects developed a building plan. In the meantime, Rev. Charles Williams, an early champion of the museum, also passed away. The board pressed on, determined to make Rev. Williams’ vision a reality. A feasibility study was completed in 2004. Fundraising efforts for the estimated 50-65 million dollar project ensued, cresting in the form of the Living History Gala at the Westin Hotel in Indianapolis on 4 February 2006. Honorees were US Rep. Julia Carson, broadcaster Tavis Smiley, and basketball great Oscar Robertson.

However, momentum for the museum slowed significantly after the Gala. Operating expenses for the ambitious museum project exceeded fundraising totals. By the summer of 2006, the board had changed course to pursue a scaled-down version of the museum on a different site. By September, Organ had resigned as executive director. Judging by the last materials in the collection, Alpha stepped down from the board shortly afterwards.

Sources:

Ancestry.com

Materials in the collection

“Philanthropist, Fashion, and Interior Designer Alpha Blackburn,”  
<http://frontrunnersinnovate.com>, 8 August 2019, accessed Sept. 2022

“Walter S. Blackburn,” <http://indyencyclopedia.org>, accessed Sept. 2022

## SCOPE AND CONTENT NOTE

The collection consists of correspondence, meeting minutes, research, and proposals regarding the (unrealized) effort to establish the Indiana Museum of African American History in White River State Park, Indianapolis. The correspondence is made up almost entirely of internal emails among the IMAAH staff and architects on the project.

The collection has been arranged into three series. Series I is the most extensive and consists of Alpha Blackburn's project files. These files include correspondence, board rosters, meeting minutes, press, as well as research material she collected regarding similar institutions, fundraising and marketing strategies, and possible exhibit subjects. A document titled "Hoosier African Americans" may be from a draft of the book *Hoosiers in Hollywood* by David L. Smith (2006). The "Agendas and Minutes" folders also sometimes include documents which were distributed or otherwise referred to during meetings.

Series II comes from a binder belonging to Blackburn Architects Executive Vice President Ted Givens. This material consists mostly of correspondence among staff at Blackburn Architects. Series III consists of material from Blackburn Architects Project Leader Tad Lupton. In addition to email correspondence, it includes things like cost estimates, surveyor drawings, product information, and design sketches.

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