

The African Studies Center at Boston University: A Historical Sketch

Dedicating the Adelaide Cromwell Suite (seminar room and Outreach Library) on February 11, 2000 stimulated a discussion within the community about the history of the ASC, its foundation, and early years. Why was it founded, who were the key players, and how did it evolve from its early roots as a purely graduate program to study a then still-colonial Africa? I have always had a nascent interest in these issues and have tried over my many years at the African Studies Center to piece together scraps of documentary evidence (there is surprisingly little) and shards of personal memories from people like Dan McCall, Adelaide Cromwell, Elizabeth Colson, George Bond, George Lewis, and Edouard Bustin. Dan McCall himself has been working for several years on a collection of ASC memories from those associated with it over the last half century. The overall goals and current programs described on this website move us in new and creative ways that build on the Center's 56 year history.



James McCann, Former Director

The Foundations

Center lore has it that early in 1951 a group of young assistant professors at the University discovered a shared interest in Africa and decided to approach the Dean of the Graduate School (Dean MacDonald). This group included George Lewis (Geography), Zeb Reyna (Psychology), William Newman (Political Science), Lyn Watson (Anthropology), and Al Zalin (Sociology). Also on the scene was a young Radcliffe doctoral candidate named Adelaide Cromwell (Hill) who taught sociology in the University's Sargent College and was recruited to join the group from the College of Liberal Arts. At least one story has it that the group of young professors initially had in mind establishing an Africana library collection, but that the Dean "enthusiastically" suggested a program of graduate study instead. The hiring of its first director, and a grant from the Ford Foundation, established the ASC's formal foundation as the African Research and Studies Program. Initially the founding committee approached and discussed the directorship with Dr. Heinz Wieschoff, then Director of the Division of Trusteeship at the United Nations who had been involved in University of Pennsylvania's African studies committee (founded in 1941, but disbanded at the end of the war). Dr. Wieschoff declined, wishing to continue his work on the U.N. Trust Territories, which at that time included administering Southwest Africa (Namibia) and establishing Eritrea's controversial 1952 federation with Ethiopia. Wieschoff continued his UN work until 1960 when he died tragically in the same plane crash that killed U.N. Secretary General Dag Hammarskjöld.



William O. Brown, first Director of the African Studies Center



Adelaide Cromwell (Hill)

Geographer George Lewis, then on a trip to Washington, D.C., approached sociologist William O. Brown, an African Affairs specialist at the State Department (his Africa interest stemmed from his service there in the OSS during World War Two) who accepted the directorship. With the arrival of Dr. Brown in September 1953 the Boston University African Studies Program officially began (it later took the name African Research and Studies Program) at 154 Bay State Road.

In that year Adelaide Cromwell Hill, a newly minted Radcliffe Ph.D. in sociology formally joined the Program as Program Administrator and Research Associate. One of Bill Brown's first tasks as director was to seek external funds and in 1954 the Program received its first five-year Ford Foundation Area Studies grant. In that same year Ford also offered its first African area studies grants to three other African studies programs: Northwestern (under Prof. Melville Herskovits) and Howard University (under Prof. E. Franklin Frazier). UCLA (under Prof. James Coleman) also received funding in that year, though UCLA's African Studies Center was not formally established until 1959. Among the first post-WWII generation of African studies programs, Boston University's was distinctive in that it began as an interdisciplinary research program that worked with departments to offer disciplinary social science degrees at the graduate level. The focus on expanding undergraduate Africa-content courses began in the post-1980 Title VI era. The ASC's original intended focus in 1953 was all areas of Africa (including North Africa), but excluding Egypt (presumably following State Department divisions that placed Egypt in the Middle East).

Prof. Elizabeth Colson in a 1958 article describing the Program stated: "In both research and teaching it [the Program] deals with the whole of Africa, with the exception of Egypt, but the emphasis falls upon the analysis of situations and problems rather than upon area focus." Adelaide Cromwell, however, recalls a heated exchange between Dan McCall and Mark Karp in the early years about whether Egypt fell under the new Program's library collection efforts. Egypt (and Dan) won the day. Ford Foundation graduate fellowships provided the regal sum of \$2,250 plus tuition and University support complemented the Ford grant.

One of the Program's original foci was also to train State Department officers and in 1959 it signed a 3-year contract with the International Cooperation Administration (a precursor to USAID) to train four groups of officers in 6-7 month programs. For that

project the Program obtained additional program space in a building at 206 Bay State Road, a building directly east of the current Department of History.

The First Faculty, Associates, Visitors, and Students



State Dept. Officer trainees in front of the 206 Bay State Road office, c.1959.

The original interest group of faculty that approached Dean MacDonald included no full time Africanists, so one of the director's first tasks was to build a staff and faculty of specialists. Dr. Adelaide Cromwell Hill, a sociologist who had worked with Heinz Wieschof at the University of Pennsylvania, joined as Program Administrator and Research Associate. Dan McCall, an anthropologist from Columbia then doing research in Liberia, was the first of the new faculty hired and he took an active role in building the program. Economist Mark Karp was the next hire, reflecting the strong policy and social science emphasis of the early years. In quick succession Brown recruited two anthropologists: Elizabeth Colson came from Goucher College and George Horner brought the first research interest in Francophone Africa. By the time of its 1958 report to the newly formed African Studies Association in 1958, the African Research and Studies Program at Boston University listed the following faculty:

William O. Brown (Sociology)
Elizabeth Colson (Anthropology)
Adelaide C. Hill (Sociology)
George R. Horner (Anthropology)
Daniel F. McCall (Anthropology)
Mark Karp (Economics)
Carl G. Rosberg (Political Science)
George Lewis (Geography)
William Norton (History) William Newman (Political Science)

Norman Bennett, historian of East Africa, finished his degree and joined the faculty in 1961. Others who joined the faculty in the late 1950s and early 1960s were Jeffrey Butler, Ruth Schachter (Morgenthau), Creighton Gabel, Phillip Gulliver, and Edouard Bustin. Alphonse Castagno (Political Science) became the Center's second director in 1966, after William O. Brown's death, until his own death in 1974. Economist John Harris (hired from M.I.T.) served as Director from 1975 through 1985, followed by anthropologist Allan Hoben (1986-92), historian James McCann (1992-2005) and James Pritchett (2005-2009).

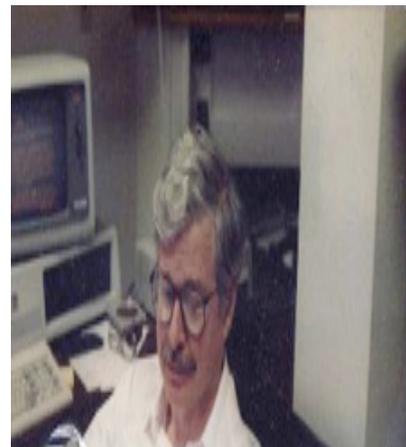
In U. S. African studies programs in the late 1950s and early 1960s few faculty from Africa participated in African studies activities. This was also true of the ASC, though visitors with bright futures regularly called in, attracted by Boston and the Program's early reputation for its Africa focus. These visitors and scholars included young Julius Nyerere, Kenneth Kaunda, and Abdoulaye Wade. In the early 1960s a young Edwardo Mondlane came to Boston and the African Studies Program to write his dissertation (he was a then a Ph.D. student at Northwestern) and met his wife, Janet, who was then a student at B.U. In 1958-59 Dr. S. Fawzi, Head of the Department of Economics at the University of Khartoum, spent a year as visiting lecturer, making him perhaps the Program's first African faculty member. Prof. Wande Abimbola is a worthy successor to these scholar/leaders. Many other teachers, scholars, visitors, and students from Africa followed as have a series of important institutional linkages (including Study Abroad in Niger) have followed in the past two decades.



Alphonse Castagno



Edouard Bustin



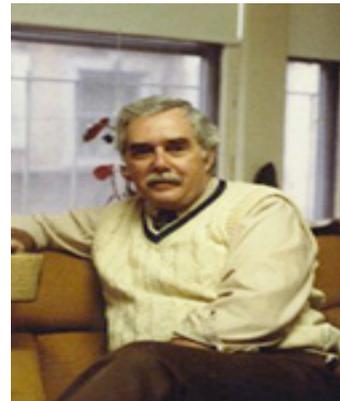
Alan Hoben



Creighton Gabel



Norman Bennett



John Harris

ASC Campus Locations



African Studies Center
154 Bay State Road,
mid-1950s

Our colleague Sara Berry chose the title of her Herskovitz Prize-winning book an inscription she seen on a Nigerian city bus: No Condition is Permanent. Over the ASC's 55 year history we have almost defied that rule. Six locations in 55 years are not exactly peripatetic. For each of our locations there has been among the African studies community members a strong sense of place and belonging – and a sense of permanence as a set of people and goals.

In its early years after 1953 the African Studies Program occupied a temporary structure on Bay State Road in a space that is now affectionately known as the SMG parking lot. Then in the mid-1950s, as recognition for what Prof. Emeritus George Lewis calls “a reward for being a good program,” the Program moved east down Bay State Road. Those more elegant quarters at 154 Bay State Road were in the building

next to the current Department of International Relations. With its State Department training grant in those years the Program expanded to include another brownstone, now a residence hall, on a corner opposite the Gothic gabled Castle, the oldest building on the Charles River campus. Between 1966 and 1982 the African Studies Program (designated as a “Center” in 1965) occupied a large Tudor-style house at 10 Lenox St. near the University President's house in Brookline. That building's sweeping staircases, wooden paneling, and spacious faculty offices is the space that many senior visitors and Africanist scholars recall as the ASC's benchmark location of those academic generations. In 1982 the ASC moved back to the heart of the Charles River Campus, occupying the marble floored townhouse at 125 Bay State Road, next to the Office of Admissions.

In 1984 the ASC moved to the fourth and fifth floors of 270 Bay State Road, which would be its home for 25 years. This was the location that was a home for faculty, valued research fellows, staff, and six generations of students. Its views of the BU “Beach,” the Charles River and the campus' most extensive green space on the Alpert Mall established a strong, stable sense of place for the ASC's classes, offices, and community events. Joanne Hart and the staff were able to create an ideal space for intellectual engagement, social conviviality, and teaching. There were no marble floors (as at 125 Bay State Road) or wood paneling (at 10 Lenox St.) but its dedicated seminar rooms, Outreach Library (later renamed the Adelaide Cromwell Suite), lively bulletin boards, and art displays made it a distinctive and effective academic space –the place had a heart. We often argued that 270 Bay State Road was the most intellectually appealing and comfortable quarters of an African Studies program anywhere in the nation for the study of Africa.

No Condition is Permanent. Dean Sapiro in April 2009 told us that a realignment of several campus programs meant that the African Studies Center (along with International Programs, Economics, and the School of Social Work) after 25 years in place would be trading spaces to create a new alignment of offices along Bay State

Road. In late spring we organized an African Studies Bazaar to prepare for our move by exchanging books and carefully boxing our art collection, and ritually marking our move 150 meters east down Bay State Road to spacious and carefully renovated quarters on the 4th and 5th floor of 232 Bay State Road. These new offices place African Studies in the same building as the Departments of Anthropology and Political Science, and next door to the Department of History. Faculty and students arrived for the Fall 2009 semester at the new offices to find views of the Charles River and MIT, an elegant and renovated entranceway, and quarters that, again, make the ASC the best-appointed physical space in the nation.

The new space includes new carpets, newly appointed seminar rooms, faculty offices, built-in state of the art media equipment, an Outreach Library, kitchen, lounge, and sunlit interior hallways. Our main William O. Brown seminar room holds 45 people and includes the familiar New Hampshire hand-made cherry seminar table, a LCD projector, maps and chalkboard. Around the new ASC there are familiar objets d'arte, cloth, colloquy seating areas, bulletin boards, a kitchen, a lounge, a graduate student office, and lots of natural light. Over the first few months the ASC community itself will find places to meet, have lunch, discuss, and share information about teaching, events in Africa, and common interests. The new space will bring us together in familiar ways, but also perhaps in some new places with new people in the new academic year. The Condition already feels permanent.



African Studies Center, 10 Lenox St., 1966-1982



African Studies Center, 125 Bay State Road, 1982-1984



African Studies Center, 270 Bay State Road, 1984-present

Note: This sketch of the ASC's institutional history is a draft and, of course, needs comments and corrections by alumni, friends, and critics. An obvious need is to link the developments in African studies at Boston University to the sweep of events and processes in Africa and Africa's meaning in the American context. That is a much larger project of research and reflection that I hope this current exercise will stimulate. To that end I hope others will contribute documents, memorabilia, notes, etc. to the ASC to allow us to establish an ASC institutional history collection at the African Studies Library.