A. Philip Randolph and the Writing of Civil Rights and Labor History

Eric Arnesen, Vice Dean for Faculty and Administration at the Columbian College of Arts & Sciences at the George Washington University, explains how ProQuest History Vault provides students and scholars with invaluable primary source information for deeper, more robust research and learning experiences. He has relied on History Vault in writing a full-length biography of black labor leader A. Philip Randolph.

A. Philip Randolph (1889-1979) was arguably the most important black labor leader and civil rights activist in America during the mid-20th century.

In 1943, a black journalist named him the “foremost leader” of black America. Another journalist called him “the creative brains, the dreamer, the fearless spokesman who typifies, more than any other modern leader, the hopes and aspirations of millions of voiceless colored citizens.” In 1965, the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. described him as a man “whose total integrity, depth of dedication, and caliber of statesmanship set an example for us all.” Over the years, Randolph earned many titles: “the ranking hero of the race,” “Mr. Black Labor,” an “Elder Statesman,” “a legend in his own time,” “an American Gandhi,” and a “Gentleman of Mass Protest.”

During some six decades of public activism – from the era of World War I through the late 1960s – Randolph conducted countless campaigns against racial discrimination, cultivated a new political sensibility among African Americans, and contributed to the forging of an organizational approach to social change that relied more on confrontation than conciliation.
Who was A. Philip Randolph?

Born in 1889 and raised in Jacksonville, Florida, Randolph migrated to New York in 1911, founded and co-edited the radical *Messenger* magazine, and quickly came to be seen as the most "dangerous Negro in America," in the words of one government official. A leading black member of the Socialist Party and proponent of "New Negro" politics, he was opposed to U.S. participation in World War I and advocated on behalf of interracial unions. Randolph led a successful union campaign among Pullman porters from the mid-1920s to the mid-1930s, and continued to direct the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters (BSCP) for the next several decades.

From his base in the BSCP, Randolph engaged in union and political activities that promoted him into national prominence, making him one of black America's most influential leaders by the early 1940s. Frustrated by persistent discrimination during the U.S. preparation for war in 1941, Randolph created the March on Washington Movement and threatened to bring 100,000 blacks to the nation's capital to protest discrimination in employment and the armed forces, pressuring President Franklin Roosevelt to take the unprecedented step of issuing an executive order creating the Fair Employment Practice Committee.

During the war, Randolph led numerous demonstrations and protests against segregation, which he deemed "wholly untenable and indefensible," especially while the nation was ostensibly fighting to end fascism abroad. In the late 1940s, he opposed peacetime draft legislation for its sanctioning of segregation and even counseled young black men to "refuse to fight as slaves for a democracy they cannot possess and cannot enjoy."

As the nation's most prominent black labor leader, Randolph spearheaded the crusade to unionize black workers and consistently preached a gospel of an interracial labor movement. For decades, he waged a relentless campaign against discrimination within the ranks of the American Federation of Labor (AFL) and its successor, the American Federation of Labor-Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO), hammering away at their racist practices. Until the end of his life, he maintained that equality for black Americans required both civil and economic rights.

Working with the new church-based civil rights movement, Randolph ensured that the 1963 March on Washington raised fundamental economic issues, including demands for the passage at the federal level of anti-employment discrimination legislation, a higher minimum wage, and a substantial public works program. Randolph was, in many ways, a living link between an older grassroots civil rights tradition and the emerging civil rights movement of the late 1950s and 1960s, keeping alive a critique of racial inequality in the labor market initially ignored by many of the newer civil rights activists.

Central to Randolph's vision was the need for vigorous federal action, particularly a resurrection of fair employment legislation and the creation of public works programs aimed at combating structural unemployment disproportionately affecting minorities. At the moment that the civil rights coalition was splitting into irreconcilable radical and more moderate wings in 1965, Randolph offered a social democratic program – his $180 billion anti-poverty "Freedom Budget" – as a solution to the growing urban crisis. By this time, Randolph's vision was increasingly out of step in a nation polarized by the Vietnam War, the rise of black power, and student protests. Despite the failure to accomplish many of his specific goals, Randolph had witnessed – indeed, he had contributed centrally to – nothing less than a revolution in labor and race relations in America.
History Vault provides unparalleled information and insight

How do the resources contained in History Vault, along with other ProQuest digital projects, inform a project like this? The short answer is simply that they are indispensable. The modules in The Black Freedom Struggle in the 20th Century touch upon virtually every aspect of Randolph's political life and on the many movements with which he worked. In the “Organizational and Personal Papers” module, the Papers of A. Philip Randolph, housed at the Library of Congress, are digitally available.

Randolph's papers provide extensive coverage of his involvement in the BSCP's development, the rise and fall of the National Negro Congress, his challenges to the racial practices of organized labor, his leadership of the World War II-era March on Washington Movement, his opposition to communism and colonialism, and the civil rights marches he organized — among many other things:

- The papers of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, whose originals are at the Chicago History Museum, allow historians to probe the organization's emergence, its fight against the Pullman company, and its participation in civil rights coalitions.
- The NAACP Papers, a series of 6 modules in History Vault, include considerable correspondence from, to, and about Randolph and his various endeavors, including his leadership of the National Negro Congress in the late 1930s, his alliance with the NAACP during World War II, and his postwar campaigns against segregation in the military and for civil and voting rights. The NAACP records also contain considerable complementing material on the BSCP that does not appear in either the Randolph or Brotherhood papers.
- The Claude A. Barnett Papers, also part of the Black Freedom Struggle in the 20th Century: Organizational Records and Personal Papers, include considerable material from the Associated Negro Press files on Randolph, the Brotherhood, and black radicalism.
- The Papers of Bayard Rustin, a close Randolph ally, touch extensively upon the campaign against military segregation, various demonstrations (particularly the 1963 March on Washington), and anti-poverty struggles in the 1960s.
- In the “Federal Government Records” module, the “Federal Surveillance of Afro-Americans” records cast considerable light on government monitoring of Randolph and other black radicals and the fears that white government officials — in the Bureau of Investigation, Military Intelligence, and the Postal Service in particular — had about black activists and organizations that challenged the racial status quo. Selected Records of the Committee on Fair Employment Practices — the agency created by President Franklin Roosevelt’s Executive Order 8802 (prompted by the March on Washington Movement’s crusade) — paint a dismal portrait of racial conditions on the home front against which Randolph and other activists protested.
- And the multiple collections of presidential records on civil rights — from the Truman, Kennedy, and Johnson administrations in particular — are crucial for researching not just Randolph’s campaigns but broader struggles for civil rights in these decades.
ProQuest offers additional resources beyond its History Vault holdings

ProQuest Congressional contains digitized records of numerous hearings and reports of the House of Representatives and the U.S. Senate that involve Randolph and the organizations with which he worked. For instance, Randolph's testimony before the “Investigation of Communist Propaganda” hearings in the House in 1930 outlines his tense relationship with the American Communist party and his hostility to communism; Randolph's exchanges with Senator Wayne Morris in 1948 over Randolph's threatened civil disobedience campaign against segregation in the Armed Forces are found in the Congressional Record in 1948; and Randolph's powerful testimony on the subject of unemployment, poverty, and despair and the need for a “Freedom Budget” appears in the 1966 Senate subcommittee hearings on the “Federal Role on Urban Affairs.”

Finally, ProQuest's digital Black Historical Newspapers offer a treasure trove of information on Randolph, the Brotherhood, and a vast number of civil rights organizations and campaigns. The nation's most important black papers – the Chicago Defender, the Amsterdam News, the Pittsburgh Courier, the Atlanta Daily World, the Norfolk Journal and Guide, and the Baltimore Afro-American – as well as a number of smaller papers – the Los Angeles Sentinel, the Cleveland Call and Post, and the Philadelphia Tribune – contain literally thousands of articles on Randolph, the Brotherhood, the National Negro Congress, the March on Washington Movement, the campaign against military segregation, and the modern civil rights movement. Given the importance of these papers and their availability, it is difficult to imagine any historian writing on modern civil rights without making extensive use of these sources.

Would it be possible to write such a biography without ProQuest resources?

The answer is yes… with a caveat: doing so would require traveling to various archives around the country and spending months to examine records that can otherwise be downloaded onto one's laptop quickly or reading hundreds – even thousands – of reels of microfilm. This would add years of research time to the project. While there are undigitized materials at various archives across the United States that should be examined, the availability of these records in digital form – as well as their searchability – makes researching a project like Randolph's life vastly easier and faster.

Having labored on Randolph's biography for a number of years now, I can attest to the richness of the resources, their indispensability to my project, and their ease of use. The relevance of these resources to historians is undeniable and well established. But what of their relevance to our students? Students in history courses are often instructed to work with primary sources. In many cities and towns across the country, the primary materials necessary to write a research paper are simply not available or located nearby; in other cases, students' busy schedules (and social lives) means that they lack the time to travel to archives close by or far away.
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– Eric Arnesen
**A wealth of primary documents**

The documents in History Vault and ProQuest’s Historical Newspapers provide students with a wealth of primary documents at their fingertips. Crafting a specific topic, locating relevant documents, constructing a narrative, and framing an argument, of course, constitute the hard work students will have to undertake. The Black Freedom Struggle in the 20th Century’s modules, NAACP Papers modules in History Vault, as well as other ProQuest sources, do not eliminate that necessary hard work. Rather, they provide students and their instructors with abundant resources on a wide range of subjects that allows them to concentrate on learning the historian’s craft though independent research.

Learn more about ProQuest History Vault at [proquest.com/pdpq/historyvault](http://proquest.com/pdpq/historyvault)

Visit [proquest.com/go/blackhistory](http://proquest.com/go/blackhistory) for additional resources

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**About Eric Arnesen**

Eric Arnesen is professor of history and Vice Dean for Faculty and Administration in the Columbian College of Arts and Sciences at The George Washington University. A graduate of Wesleyan University and the recipient of a Ph.D. in History from Yale University, he is a specialist in the history of race, labor, politics, and civil rights. He is the author of several books and articles as well as a contributor to the *Chicago Tribune*, *The New Republic*, *The Nation*, *The Washington Post*, *The Boston Globe*, *Dissent*, and *Teamster*. A recipient of fellowships from the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Fulbright Commission, and the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, he serves as co-chair of the Washington History Seminar at the Wilson Center. He is currently completing a biography of A. Philip Randolph.

More information is available on Dr. Arnesen at [history.columbian.gwu.edu/eric-arnesen](http://history.columbian.gwu.edu/eric-arnesen)

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