Through EN 658 History of Rhetoric, students organize and archive documents in the historically black town of Hobson City, Ala.

BY ERIN MOSLEY

P ennsylvania native Aleah Goldin says she chose to study in Alabama because of her interest in the civil rights movement and how its narratives are told and, sometimes, not told. So when the University of Alabama graduate student concentrating in creative writing, composition and rhetoric learned a master’s-level English course would give students the chance to create a documents archive for a historically black town, she enrolled in the class immediately.

Through EN 658 History of Rhetoric, students are partnering with Hobson City, Ala., to develop, organize and digitize a community archive. “I learned more about the way writing is recorded and how easy it is for moments of history to be lost or destroyed,” Goldin says of her experiences in the course and working in Hobson City.

Hobson City, Ala., a two-hour drive from The University of Alabama campus in Tuscaloosa, lies just outside Anniston, Ala., and is at risk of losing much of its history. Hobson City was established on Aug. 16, 1899, making it the oldest incorporated African-American city in Alabama and the third oldest in the nation. Originally part of Oxford, Ala., Hobson City was first known as Mooree Quarter, which had a predominately African-American population. By 1899, these residents had voting rights, and Mooree Quarter was a decisive factor in many city elections. When a black man was elected justice of the peace in Oxford in 1899, many whites sought to redraw district lines to weaken the power of black voters. In response, the 125 black residents of Mooree Quarter petitioned the county court to incorporate as Hobson City.

The new town prospered in its first few years, partly due to Anniston’s thriving steel industry, but after the decline of the steel market during the latter half of the 20th century, Hobson City began to struggle with poverty. According to the 2010 census, Hobson City had a population of 771, a little more than half the number of residents it had in 1980. Approximately 86 percent of Hobson City’s residents identified as African-American in 2010, and the median household income was $25,563, according to the 2011-15 American Community Survey. The Alabama Historical Commission declared Hobson City one of Alabama’s “Places in Peril” in 2010.

Many cities have municipal archives where residents can search for historical documents. In Hobson City, however, the archive room in 2015 was stacked with boxes, many filled with unsorted bank notes, utility bills and other records, according to Mayor Alberta McCrory. The documents contained important links to the city’s past, she says, but were inaccessible to the public.

In Fall 2015, Dr. Michelle Bachelor Robinson, coordinator of composition, rhetoric and English studies at UA and instructor of EN 658, and her class of 10 students traveled to Hobson City three times to begin work on a community archive. They dedicated a total of 165 service hours, organizing 60 storage boxes of documents. Several students continued working on the archive after the semester ended, and 70 percent of the documents have been organized.

“We got pretty invested,” says Brett Carter, a PhD student from Charleton, S.C., studying composition and rhetoric. “We really wanted to see it through.”

The concept for the Hobson City archiving initiative began with a collaboration between Mayor McCrory and Everett Fly, an architect whose work in historic preservation is nationally recognized. In 2015, their partnership resulted in the establishment of the Historic Black Towns and Settlements Alliance, a group of historic black towns whose mission is to “protect and preserve for future generations the heritage, history and cultural traditions of alliance members such that those who follow will have the ability to assume active stewardship to understand, interpret and appreciate these historic places through the lenses of their inhabitants.”

In addition to Hobson City, HBTSA originally consisted of Tuskegee, Ala., Grambling, La., Eufaula, Fla., and Mound Bayou, Miss. McCrory says other cities have begun to join the organization.

HBTSA members developed a plan with six objectives for preserving their towns. Several goals emphasize the importance of document preservation. “In addition to original town records, documents need to be digitized, resorted and permanently housed,” the fourth objective states.

In 2014, Robinson learned of the Historic Black Towns and Settlements Alliance and met McCrory. The two quickly realized their work could be mutually beneficial. Robinson, who grew up near Hobson City, decided to pursue a writing center and to bring [those centers] into smaller towns,” she says, to help children who might not receive writing assistance at home.

EN 658 is only offered every four years, but Robinson and graduate students continue to work in Hobson City and hope to finish the archiving project in 2017. Once it’s complete, Hobson City will have searchable physical and digital archives where members of the public will be able to find information about their ancestors and learn about the town’s history.

“We could hear their voices,” Candace Chambers, a graduate student studying composition and rhetoric, says of past Hobson City residents, “and we played a part in archiving their history.”

To learn more about EN 658 History of Rhetoric and the Hobson City archiving project, contact Dr. Michelle Bachelor Robinson at mrobinson@ua.edu or 205-348-4177.