

The Remarkable Record of Nancy Mildred Harper Nilon

Nancy Mildred Harper Nilon (1920-2017) was the first African American librarian hired at the University of Colorado Boulder Libraries (CU Boulder). For a quarter of a century, she contributed to the mission of the libraries with a diverse portfolio of expertise that spanned reference and user services, collection development, and cataloging. Her knowledge and vision were evident as she was promoted to positions of leadership, including Head of Reference and Assistant Director for Public Services. Throughout her career, Nilon mentored students and faculty while building community across racial and ethnic groups on campus and throughout the state of Colorado. The story of her life as an academic librarian is not well known beyond CU Boulder Libraries and the University's African American alumni. Because the account of her early life is accessible online, this post examines Nilon's librarianship through the lens of her curriculum vita (CV), specifically her librarianship and research. Combining historical research and interviews with family, friends, and CU Boulder alumni, this post offers a different view of one Black woman's contributions to the field of library and information science through her scholarly record.

Nilon was born July 26, 1920, in Montgomery, Alabama. In an oral history interview, she explained that she was the youngest of three children who grew up near the Alabama State campus and attended the University's Laboratory High School.¹ Nilon enjoyed school, which explains the trajectory of her education: a Bachelor of Science (BS) degree earned in 1939 from Alabama State University and a Bachelor of Library Science (BLS) degree from Atlanta University in 1947.² Significantly, she was an alumna of the new Atlanta University Library Science Program, which began in 1941 and was accredited in 1943.³ *The Black Women Librarians* project traces the impact of twentieth-century Black women who migrated from the

South to public and academic libraries across the United States. A project of this nature recovers stories of remarkable women like Nilon, who was in the initial wave of Atlanta University's library science graduates.

As with most twentieth-century African Americans, Nilon's early life and career can be mapped to segregation in the United States and African American education and library science history. In an interview for the Voices of Black Women of Boulder County History Project, she shared what life was like in Montgomery and in mid-twentieth-century Boulder.⁴ Readers may be unfamiliar with the history of education in the United States, which included separate and unequal, substandard facilities for Blacks, and library history, which included substandard community libraries (if a library was funded at all) in Black communities. This author wondered whether Nilon was aware of the 1936 controversy of the annual American Library Association (ALA) conference held in Richmond, Virginia, in the Jim Crow era when Southern business establishments only refused service to Black librarians attending the conference.⁵ Racist incidents in which Black librarians were denied conference lodging and ordered to enter establishments through service entries to attend sessions took place eleven years prior to Nilon earning her Bachelor's degree in library science. If she was aware of the 1936 ALA conference, it did not deter her.

Moreover, this historic event reveals the lack of courage on the part of ALA leaders and members, underscoring the racism within the profession. One ALA member and critic, Eric Moon, editor of the *Library Journal* in 1936, referred to racism within the profession as the "Silent Subject."⁶ This author agrees that the history of racism in library and information science has only recently received serious attention. Yet, it was into this environment that Nilon strode with energy and enthusiasm, armed with her intellectual wit.

Before arriving in Boulder, Nilon held library positions at Atlanta University, Alabama State University, and Wayne State University. She came to Boulder with her husband, Dr. Charles Nilon, who accepted a position with the CU Boulder Department of English. Upon his appointment, Dr. Nilon became the University's first African American faculty member.⁷ Two months after moving to Boulder (October 1956), Nilon gave birth to their son Charles H. Nilon, Jr.⁸ Her CU Boulder Libraries career began in 1960 with a temporary one-year part-time position as an assistant circulation librarian while she artfully managed parenthood since Charlie was four years old at the time. At the conclusion of the initial year, she continued to accept part-time positions, first as a reference librarian and then in the Interlibrary Loan unit. These positions served her well as she developed a deep knowledge of the library's holding, learning the strengths and identifying the gaps in the collections.

Most importantly, Nilon understood how and when students used the library to conduct research. By 1962, she had earned her master's degree in library science from the University of Denver (DU), which had become a requirement for all library faculty positions. In 1967, Nilon was asked to apply for and then offered a full-time permanent position as the Head of the Reference Department, which she led until 1978. She achieved the rank of assistant professor in 1972 as CU Boulder librarians had gained faculty status as early as 1962.⁹ In 1978 Nilon was promoted to Assistant Director for Public Services, a position she held until her retirement in 1986.

Nilon's CV reveals that her mission was to teach, connect with campus and the public, and improve access to resources and collections. Importantly, students from underrepresented communities were arriving on campus in small numbers, and her presence, along with her husband's, served as visual cues of a changing social demographic in the halls of academe.¹⁰

Librarianship / Teaching

Term papers, long a staple in the US undergraduate curriculum, required students to learn how to navigate the card catalog, not yet automated in the late 1960s and in transition in the 1970s. When Nilon joined the Reference Department in 1967, she was experienced in teaching the use of the card catalog. She and her colleagues recognized that meeting students at their time of need to complete term paper assignments presented an opportunity to demonstrate how libraries could serve as both an academic resource and a student support service. The teaching section of her CV traces her “Term Paper Techniques” workshops from 1975 to 1981. This type of outreach was highlighted in the first issue of the *Journal of Academic Librarianship* in May 1975. In a piece entitled “Term Paper Clinic,” this strategy was explained:

Now in its fourth year, the Term Paper Clinic is for those who start late and who doesn't? — and who need help NOW. “We don't try to teach them,” says Mildred Nilon, the head of CU's Reference Dept. “We help our students find the materials they need when they need them most: in those hectic days of the second half of each semester known as ‘term paper time’.” It's eyeball-to-eyeball assistance; double-staffing evenings and weekends; faculty and staff volunteers from all departments of the CU library system; staying with the student for as long as he or she need help. This one-to-one commitment by library faculty and staff for three weeks each semester is the key to the TPC's success.”¹¹

The “eyeball-to-eyeball assistance” described the strategy of connecting with students and of the commitment that the libraries' faculty and staff had for an all-hands-on-deck approach fifty years ago, which remains relevant in 2022.

For graduate students, Nilon was both coordinator and co-teacher of a series called *Dissertation Acupuncture*, taught over the summers of 1972 to 1977. She taught research methodology, organized as six two-hour sessions over the fall and summer sessions from 1977 through 1979. Dr. George Jones, a doctoral candidate in CU's Department of Sociology at the

time, explained that Nilon was the sixth member of his dissertation committee.¹² As ex-officio in 1973, she helped him organize his primary research and introduced him to information sources. Jones described the weekly coaching and counseling sessions that she held with him. It is logical to assume that the unpublished paper, “Library Instructional Programs for Graduate Students,” highlighted her work with students like Jones — a non-traditional graduate student in need of academic support that differed from the instruction that undergraduates required. Other forms of graduate instruction included her supervision and mentorship of DU MLS graduate students: Yvonne Richert in the summer of 1968 and Patricia Storey over the summer of 1974. In 1969, she collaborated in training two interns from Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), who were funded by a Ford Foundation Grant. For Nilon, connecting with a range of students with her “eyeball-to-eyeball” approach was standard operating procedure throughout her tenure as an academic librarian and underscored the importance of connecting with students individually.

For many African Americans, education continued beyond the classroom. Because Black history was overlooked and given short shrift in the public schools, learning about African American history was the responsibility that Black families and the community maintained. In her oral history interview, she described the Nilons as a family of readers and remarked on the importance of the Freedom School in Boulder, which son Charlie attended. These schools provided the Black community an alternative education to counter “the sharecropper education” or second-class citizen education, which prevailed in much of the South.¹³ Education was at the forefront of everything the Nilon’s undertook.

Research

Nilon's 1983 CV listed seven publications, three unpublished papers, and a co-edited script for a video production that formed her research agenda from 1966 until 1981. The first five entries were not reviewed due to COVID-19 pandemic access restrictions at CU Boulder Libraries. The 1975 and 1981 co-edited editions of "Library Guide for the Faculty" are in microfiche but were inaccessible. A reader may imagine that the guide orients teaching faculty to the physical spaces and location of reference tools while explaining the open stacks for circulating materials and highlighting unique resources and services.

Her earliest publication from 1966 is the "Programmed Textbook on the Use of the University of Colorado Libraries," co-authored with Mary Lou Lyda, Joseph M. Mapes, and Ruth Carol Scheerer. This work instructed students in the public catalog before online catalogs became a reality in many US college and university libraries' instruction. The organization of a bibliographic record, understanding the meaning of different parts of a call number, and how to locate books and use indexes to locate periodicals and journal articles — all things related to identifying and accessing books, serials, and various media formats — were introduced in this text.

One publication that stands out is the 1974 article she wrote with Marcy Murphy, "The Reference Advisory Interview: Its Contribution to Library-User Education," published in *Educating the Library User*.¹⁴ This piece remains relevant in 2022 with the thesis that ". . . the concern here is not with librarians' knowledge of information sources or its transmission to the users. The focus is rather on the interview itself as an educational medium, that crucial exchange which takes place between the librarians and the user before the retrieval of the information

begins.”¹⁵ Their qualitative study of the graduate curriculum in communication skills is an unrecognized and underappreciated contribution to library and information science research.

Murphy and Nilon analyzed responses to a survey they deployed nationally to gauge whether librarians received formal interview skills training in graduate library science programs or post-graduate in professional development offered in public, academic, or state library settings. Their thesis was that a reference interview is an overlooked teaching opportunity in a librarian-patron interaction and crucial to understanding a patron’s expressed need or research question. In fact, the co-authors noted that with changing patron demographics in public and academic libraries in response to twentieth-century social movements, librarians’ communication skills varied significantly given that the majority of academic librarians were white and from middle-class backgrounds.¹⁶ To gauge specifically where or how a librarian would acquire and/or improve interview techniques and communication skills, they analyzed the inclusion of this skill set in the curriculum of graduate programs and professional development offered in various libraries.

Murphy was a librarian at the US Air Force Academy Library in Colorado Springs, Colorado. Collaborating with a colleague on this type of research shows how Nilon’s professional network spanned the state. Moreover, some fifty years later, one sees that interpersonal skills of librarians remain an issue, which the authors referred to as “approachability” in 1974. Their overall finding was that “...although several academic and public libraries seem committed to the concept of continuing educations, their course offerings seem almost exclusively dedicated to improving managerial and technical skills rather than communicating with users.”¹⁷ Specifically, they categorized the reference interview in three parts, the first being:

“... that which establishes the climate in which good interpersonal communication can occur . . . the second part . . . consists of the actual question negotiation, when the users try to communicate to the librarian what their respective needs are and the librarian attempts in each case to be open, perceptive, and empathetic . . . to check constantly for feedback, in order to assure that the message received by the librarian is in fact the once intended to be conveyed.² . . . the third part of the interview is the follow-up, the actual search for information, that is subsequent to the first two stages.¹⁸

The relevance of their research to the present day is striking and documents how communication skills historically were underrecognized yet remain paramount to the profession. Akin to a physician’s “bedside manner,” librarians must be skilled interacting with and listening to a range of constituents. In 1976, CU Boulder Libraries’ colleague and head of ILL, Virginia Boucher, cited their research in her *Research Quarterly (RQ)* article, “Nonverbal Communication and the Library Reference Interview,” categorizing their work as establishing climate during questioning and negotiation of a user’s expressed need.¹⁹

In the time of COVID-19, the importance of interpersonal communication, specifically “approachability,” has been compounded due to the abrupt move to online learning and reference services. Librarians and personnel must be astute to visual cues and body language in an online venue, and interview skills remain as relevant an issue as in the time of this prior scholarly research. Ultimately, of the publications available to review, one sees the range of instructional and research interests that Nilon had over the course of her career. From guides to the library system, instructional textbooks, and the quantitative analysis of their national survey regarding a professional skill, the research of Nilon and Murphy was foundational to twentieth-century library and information science literature.

Observations

Nilon was the first degreed African American librarian on the faculty of the University of Colorado Boulder Libraries. This post is by no means an exhaustive review of her scholarly and professional record. Instead, it is a snapshot based on her CV. Future researchers may consider analyzing Black women's CVs and résumés in college and university libraries, in particular noting professional networks that Atlanta University graduates developed and maintained through national ALA service. These women may not have preserved their personal papers for placement in their university or local history archive, and a CV or résumé may be one of the few extant sources available to trace twentieth-century Black women librarians. For example, the papers of Dr. Virginia Lacy Jones, Dean of the Atlanta University Library Program, are one source that researchers of US library and women's studies may use to trace Black women librarians' social networks. Nilon remained close both professionally and personally to Jones and Barbara Pickett, a librarian at the Louisville Free Public Library after graduating from Atlanta University's program and frequently met with both at ALA conferences.

For historical context about the social climate, the Nilons arrived in Boulder two years after the May 17, 1954, SCOTUS *Brown v Board of Education* decision and eight years before the 1964 Civil Rights Act signed by President Lyndon B. Johnson. This is significant because Black students from Colorado and the US South enrolled and attended CU Boulder as early as 1945, yet their numbers remained low through the 1980s.²⁰ The couple created a community with other African Americans in Boulder and campus personnel, and this is significant because they supported minority students in ways that have not yet been fully recognized and researched. As a librarian, Nilon worked across disciplines to teach research fundamentals and connect students and faculty alike with resources. For some students and faculty, she may have been the first African American they met or came to know as a person of color in a library leadership position.

While forging a path for newly arriving minority students, Nilon developed relationships with campus allies, professional staff, and teaching faculty. CU Boulder Ethnic Studies Professor William King recounted the mentorship and friendship that the Nilons provided when King joined the faculty in 1972.²¹ The culmination of their work at the University of Colorado was acknowledged in 1986 as they received the Robert L. Stearns award in recognition of their extraordinary achievement in teaching and service to the University and community. Thirty years later, in 2016, CU alum Thomas Windham (PhD Psych '75) partnered with CU's School of Education to honor the couple by establishing the Charles and Mildred Nilon Teacher Education Scholarship, which as of 2021 has funded three undergraduate students in the CU School of Education. In a statement made in a 2017 interview, Windham said, "When they saw you, they really saw you. They wanted you to know that just by being who you are, you deserved respect and opportunity."²² Windham's memory reaches across time to connect with Nilon's 1975 "eyeball-to-eyeball assistance" teaching philosophy. Son Charlie Nilon summed up his support of the Nilon Scholarship with his observation that, ". . . his mother often remarked that she had one son but many children."²³ The scholarship developed and funded in admiration and gratitude from former students, colleagues, friends, and family, will create the next wave of teachers and perhaps a few librarians.

Summary

This LCHS project recovers an overlooked aspect of African American women's history. When Montana State University offered Dr. Charles Nilon a position at the 1956 Modern Language Association (MLA) conference only to rescind it shortly after the conference, CU Boulder Libraries and the small African American community in Boulder could not have known that racism opened the door to the Nilon's Colorado entry.²⁴ Montana's loss was Colorado's

gain as the couple joined the community to support the incremental changing demographics of Boulder. One cannot know whether Nilon would have been offered a position at the Montana State University Library or built the type of career she had at CU Boulder Libraries. Many similar scenarios played out in the twentieth century across the country, resulting in Black women librarians working in locations they may never have imagined but located to for employment.

Historical research remains to be undertaken to interpret the social and academic impact that the first wave of twentieth-century Black women librarians had in the early days of social and employment gains made through US federal legislation and US Supreme Court decisions — chiefly those women who were the initial Atlanta University library science graduates. Twentieth-century Black women librarians are integral to understanding social changes in US higher education, and Assistant Professor Nancy Mildred Nilon’s scholarly record is one example.

Gallery



The author acknowledges that Elsevier granted permission for the use of the first two images by W.H. Webb that appeared on page 25 of “The University of Colorado's Term Paper Clinic.” *The Journal of Academic Librarianship* 1, no. 1 (1975).

The third photo is Nilon, Nancy, portrait from the University of Colorado Boulder Publicity Offices Collection (COU: 3331), University of Colorado PhotoLab, Series 1: 1940s-1979s, Box 35.

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Nilon, Nancy, portrait from the University of Colorado Boulder Publicity Offices Collection (COU: 3331), University of Colorado PhotoLab, Series 1: 1940s-1979s, Box 35.

¹ Gage, Margot, “(Nancy) Mildred Nilon. Born 1920.” Transcript of an oral history conducted 2001 by Margot Gage, *Voices of Black Women of Boulder Country Oral History Project* directed by University of Colorado Boulder Media Studies Professor Polly McLean. Maria Rogers Oral History Program, Boulder Public Library, [OH 1311](#). Page 3.

² Nancy Mildred Nilon, “Curriculum Vita (CV) of Nancy Mildred Nilon, 1939 – 1983”, typed copy, University of Colorado Boulder Libraries, Boulder, CO. Page 1.

³ Dumont, R. R. "The Educating of Black Librarians: An Historical Perspective." *Journal of Education for Library and Information Science* 26, no. 4 (1986): 240-241. See also Velez, LaTasha and Melissa Villa-Nicholas. "Mapping Race and Racism in U.S. Library History Literature, 1997–2015." *Library Trends* 65, no. 4 (2017): 540-554.

⁴ Gage, Margot, “(Nancy) Mildred Nilon. Published as McLean, Polly E. Bugros. [A Legacy of Missing Pieces: The Voices of Black Women of Boulder County](#). Boulder, Colo: University of Colorado, 2002.

⁵ Lipscomb, Carolyn E. "Race and Librarianship: Part I." *Journal of the Medical Library Association* 92, no. 3 (2004): 299-301.

⁶ Lipscomb, Carolyn E. “Race and Librarianship: Part I.” p. 1.

⁷ Davis, William E. *Glory Colorado: Volume 2: A History of the University of Colorado, 1963-2000*. Boulder, Colo: University of Colorado, 2007. Page 8.

⁸ Gage, Margot, "(Nancy) Mildred Nilon. Page 14.

⁹ University of Colorado. "University of Colorado Directory." *University of Colorado Directory* (1962).

¹⁰ United States. Bureau of the Census. *1950 Census of Population, Preliminary Reports [Population of States by Counties] Colorado*. Washington: 1950. And The population of Boulder city in 1950 was 19,916. Specifically, the Negro population in Boulder was 56. See Brunsmann, Howard G. and United States. Bureau of the Census. *Census of Population, 1950: Volume II, Part 6, Characteristics of the Population, Number of Inhabitants, General and Detailed Characteristics of the Population. Colorado*. Washington: U.S. G.P.O, 1952. By 1960, Boulder's population had grown to 37,718, an increase of 88.6% from 1950 according to United States. Bureau of the Census. *Census of Population, 1960: Volume 1. Characteristics of the Population: Number of Inhabitants, General Population Characteristics, General Social and Economic Characteristics, and Detailed Characteristics*. Washington, D.C: U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1963.

¹¹ "The University of Colorado's Term Paper Clinic." *The Journal of Academic Librarianship* 1, no. 1 (1975): 24.

¹² Dr. George Jones (retired) in discussion with the author, May 5, 2021. At the time Jones was the Director of Developmental Disabilities for the State of Colorado and had received a six-month research leave to complete his doctorate. His dissertation was entitled, "Some Dimensions of an Urban Experience: The Wananchi of Nairobi, Kenya, and their Perceptions of the Health Care Delivery System." 1976.

¹³ "Civil Rights Teaching: Freedom Schools," Social Justice Books: A Teaching for Change Project. <https://socialjusticebooks.org/booklists/civil-rights-teaching/freedom-schools/> Accessed September 3, 2021. See also, "Exploring the History of Freedom Schools," Civil Rights Teaching, Teaching for Change. <https://www.civilrightsteaching.org/exploring-history-freedom-schools> Accessed September 3, 2021.

¹⁴ Lubans, John. *Educating the Library User*. New York: R.R. Bowker Co, 1974. Murphy and Nilon, "The Reference/Advisory Interview: Its Contributions to Library-User Education," pp. 287-306. <https://archive.org/details/educatinglibrary00luba> Accessed September 3, 2021.

¹⁵ Murphy and Nilon, "The Reference/Advisory Interview," p. 287.

¹⁶ Murphy and Nilon, page 288-289. "There is nothing new in the idea that the library has served a middle-class elite; the Public Library Inquiry state that some 20 years ago.⁴ What is newer is the effort made in recent years by an increasing number of "socially responsible" librarians to reach out to other subcultures within our society and mount campaigns to heighten awareness and raise public consciousness regarding the kinds of services libraries are capable of offering,

beyond their traditional confines... The impact of this trend has been particularly visible in the experimental outreach of public libraries and the notable High John project of the University of Maryland Library School.” A now all but forgotten experiment (in 1967) that author Laurier L. Cress described as an “...experiment of . . . how *not* to engage with a community.” In her June 17, 2020, *Library Journal* article, “[Never Forget the High John Experiment](#).” Nonverbal communication has become more important since the covid-19 shut down of in-person reference services and new research regarding online interaction with underrepresented communities.

¹⁷ Murphy and Nilon, p. 295.

¹⁸ Murphy and Nilon, pp. 287 – 288.

¹⁹ Boucher, Virginia. “Nonverbal Communication and the Library Reference Interview.” RQ 16, no. 1 (1976): 27-32.

²⁰ David M. Hays, Archivist, Rare and Distinctive Collections, CU Boulder Libraries, email message to author, July 28, 2021. “In 1945, there may have been 10-15 African American students attending between September and June, perhaps a few more. During the summer, that amount increased by 5 or six times as folks came up from the south to finish degrees, get teacher’s training and advanced degrees they could not as easily get in the South. The pattern of increased CU summer attendance by Southern Blacks may have been maintained until Southern universities began opening their doors generally.”

²¹ Professor William King (retired) in discussion with the author, May 11, 2021.

²² “New education scholarship continues the legacy of CU Boulder luminaries, Charles and Mildred Nilon,” CU School of Education, October 9, 2017. <https://www.colorado.edu/education/2017/10/09/new-education-scholarship-continues-legacy-cu-boulder-luminaries-charles-and-mildred> Accessed September 3, 2021.

²³ “New Education Scholarship Continues the Legacy of CU Boulder Luminaries, Charles and Mildred Nilon.”

²⁴ University of Missouri Professor Charles Nilon, son of Mildred and Charles Nilon, in discussion with the author April 30, 2021.