

## **The Virgil Darnell Hawkins Collection: A Special Collection at the Heart of An HBCU Law School**

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### **Abstract:**

*The Florida A&M University College of Law has several special collections, but the most significant of those special collections is one that is on the fourth floor of the law library. When you look at it you will see several ranges of books that are outdated. They include case reporters, statutes, secondary sources and other legal materials that are no older than the 1960s. This collection, frozen in time, is named in honor of Virgil Darnell Hawkins, an African-American who, while little known, was critical to the creation of the Florida A&M University College of Law and had an impact on African American access to higher education in the state of Florida, as well as on the civil rights movement in the United States nationally.*

**Keywords:** Law Libraries, Civil Rights, Special Collections, Digital Archives

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The Florida A&M University College of Law has several special collections, but the most significant of those special collections is one that is on the fourth floor of the law library. When you look at it you will see several ranges of books that are outdated. They include case reporters, statutes, secondary sources and other legal materials that are no older than the 1960s. This collection, frozen in time, is named in honor of Virgil Darnell Hawkins, an African-American who, while little known, was critical to the creation of the Florida A&M University College of Law and had an impact on African American access to higher education in the state of Florida, as well as on the civil rights movement in the United States nationally.

The Florida A&M University College of Law was established in 1949, and its first class entered in 1951. It was created in response to an application by Mr. Virgil Hawkins, an African American, to the University of Florida College of Law. At that time, there was no access for African Americans to graduate education of any kind in the state of Florida, and black applicants were routinely sent out of state to pursue graduate education in more integrated areas. Expenses were paid for by the state of Florida.

Although the College of Law had essentially been created specifically for him to attend, Mr. Hawkins did not accept the admission offer because he viewed it as a segregated institution. Mr. Hawkins eventually went to law school out of state and never attended Florida A&M, but his pioneering efforts opened the door to the integration of graduate education in Florida.

Because of advances and gains in the civil rights movement, by the 1960s there were many who thought that there was no longer a need for a “separate but equal” law school in Florida. The original College of Law was closed in 1968, but it was reopened in 2002. When the College of Law was reopened, a collection of the books from the original law library was returned by Florida State University, which opened in 1966. It was also located in Tallahassee and had preserved many of the materials. Books were also returned which had remained in the basement of the main campus library of Florida A&M, which was the site of the original law school building.

There were mixed feelings about the offer to return the books. Some thought that books from the library of the original College of Law represented an ugly chapter in the history of Florida and in the history of the United States that should remain closed. However, Grace Mills, the first law library director of the new Florida A&M College of Law, felt that it was important to have a tie between the old school and the new school. Some thought that it was in fact inspirational that the books had been held, even though they were very outdated by that time. The books were returned and are held as a special collection at the Florida A&M University College of Law called the Virgil Darnell Hawkins Collection. The Florida State University School of Law Library gave Florida A&M a plaque to display with the reconstituted collection.

In 2015, the a bepress digital archive was created by the Florida A&M Law Library about the life of Virgil Hawkins and the physical Virgil Hawkins collection at the College of Law (<https://commons.law.famu.edu/virgil-hawkins-archive/>). The online exhibit includes a timeline of Mr. Hawkins life, a video documentary, and sample pages of the books from the original library. Students and others can see what it was like to research a legal issue such as abortion using only print resources. The digital archive also includes an image of the plaque from Florida State which includes background about the Virgil Hawkins Collection (<https://commons.law.famu.edu/hawkins-photos/7/>).

The Virgil Darnell Hawkins Collection at the Florida A&M University College of Law Library stands as a monument to a tumultuous time in the history of our nation that we should be hopeful is, indeed, history. As of this writing the name of the library director for the original Florida A&M University College of Law Library, or the person who functionally managed the collection, remains unknown. But what should never be forgotten is the dedication of the librarians who at a very difficult time in our history preserved the books of a library that was not in existence for over 30 years.

The Florida A&M University College of Law Library strives to honor the legacy of Virgil Darnell Hawkins through its mission to support the teaching, learning, research, and service to the community conducted at the College of Law as part of its social justice mission. Virgil Hawkins' story will live on as a testament to one man's dedication for equal opportunity in education, and the dedication of librarians to the preservation of information.

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