Ask Clifton Johnson his favorite item among the wealth of letters, diaries, memoirs, speeches, photographs, and other documents in the history-rich Amistad Research Center and he has no trouble deciding. It's a letter written by Nancy Ruffin, who was a freed black slave living in Virginia before the Civil War. Ruffin and her husband, Edmund, owned property and were well-off compared to almost all other African Americans living in the state at the time. The Ruffins wanted to educate their children, but Virginia law forbade the educating of blacks (free or slave), so Edmund Ruffin sent his wife and children to Boston, where the children could be enrolled in school.

Since another Virginia law forbade free blacks to return to Virginia if they left the state, the Ruffin family had to endure permanent separation, for Mr. Ruffin stayed in Virginia to earn the money he needed to educate his children. One son, George, eventually graduated from Harvard Law School and later became a member of the Boston city council and a judge for the Commonwealth of Massachusetts.

The letter Johnson remembers so vividly describes the heartbreak of family separation and reveals the degradation of slavery. "It's a beautiful yet sad letter that says as much about the institution of slavery as several history books," observes Johnson. "It graphically illustrates the indomitable strength of African Americans in that tragic period of American history."

Enriching the African American legacy

The letter, as poignant and significant as it is, is just one of the estimated eight million items that Johnson collected in the more than twenty-five years he spent working to develop the Amistad Research Center into a national treasure and the country's largest repository of primary documents on African American history. The fact that the letter has survived and is preserved is a testament to the Amistad Research Center's role in enriching the African American legacy.

"I never thought it would become the operation it is today," Johnson recalls. "It just grew and became bigger than I ever thought it would be." He adds, "But you don't know how we had to struggle at times. We had to cut back on staff; we had serious space problems. We wondered how we were going to get our funding."

Johnson is sitting in a cluttered upstairs room of the Amistad Research Center, which is located on the campus of Tulane University in New Orleans. It's a fitting academic setting for the rich scholarly resource. Outside, on quiet, tree-lined St. Charles Avenue, students on bicycles and streetcars move past its door. Downstairs in the center's main reading room, scholars and students peruse material provided by some of center's twelve staff members.

Johnson, grey-haired and relaxed, is dressed casually, as befits a man who has recently retired. In May 1992 he stepped down from active duty as the center's executive director. "It was time for me to leave," he explains simply.

It's difficult to see what more the man whom Frederick Stielow, Johnson's successor as Amistad Research Center executive director, calls "one of the world's great collectors" could have done to enhance his stature as a curator and archivist. Largely through his efforts, a vast resource for studying the history of American ethnic minorities, race relations, and civil rights has been preserved and is available for use.

The center's core collection is the American Missionary Association...
archives, but it also contains a diverse array of materials relating the African American experience. The activities and accomplishments of educators, politicians, civil rights activists, writers, musicians, and others are documented in over five hundred collections, with materials extending from the 1700s to the present. The center, for example, houses the papers of such notables as educator Mary McLeod Bethune, poet and Harlem Renaissance figure Countee Cullen, artist Victor DuBois, and civil rights activist Fanny Lou Hamer, as well as the records of over seventy-five organizations, including Operation Crossroads Africa, the National Committee against Discrimination in Housing, the American Committee on Africa, and the Federation of Southern Cooperatives.

In addition to its manuscripts, Amis-
tad has over 20,000 books, including a number of rare imprints; a historically rich pamphlet collection of approximately 30,000 items; 150 current journals; 900 additional journal series dating back to 1826; a clipping file of some 1.6 million items; tapes of numerous oral history interviews conducted by the Amistad staff; and 1,500 reels of microfilm.

The center has been used by students, scholars, and researchers from all over the world to write more than 80 books, 120 articles, scores of theses and dissertations, and many television programs and documentaries. Microfilm copies of eleven of the center’s collections have been purchased by numerous libraries in the U.S. and abroad.

The Amistad Research Center’s books, manuscripts, and records have established its preeminence in the world of scholarship, but it also houses one of the country’s outstanding collections of African and African American art. The Aaron Douglas and Harmon Foundation collections include over two hundred paintings, drawings, and sculptures created by almost every major African American artist. African artwork is represented in the John Bayers, Jessie Covington Dent, and Victor David DuBois collections.

Sources of support

Johnson’s forte may be collecting, but he has also been successful in establishing a financial base that has allowed the center to thrive. Since its inception, the center has secured grants and financial support totaling over $1 million from such institutions as the Ford Foundation, the Rockefeller Foundation, and the National Endowment for the Arts. Meanwhile, the center’s annual budget has spiraled from $70,000 in 1967 to more than $400,000 in 1991.

Supporting the center’s mission is a Friends group of eight hundred members. “We have three very active chapters in Cincinnati, Chicago, and Raleigh,” says Elise Cain, the group’s membership secretary. “The membership has been very supportive.”

The Amistad Research Center story and how it became what it is today is both interesting and unusual. The center takes its name from a famous incident that occurred in June 1839, when, on the third day of the schooner La Amistad’s voyage from Havana to Guanajay, another Cuban port, fifty-three Africans led by Cinque revolted and demanded that their captors return them to Africa. But the ship’s crew foiled the Africans, and instead of taking them home, steered westward towards the United States. A U.S. naval vessel seized La Amistad off the coast of Connecticut, and the Africans were jailed and later charged with piracy and murder.

Abolitionist Lewis Tappan, a wealthy merchant from New York, formed the Amistad Committee to find funds for defending the Africans. The case eventually reached the U.S. Supreme Court, where ex-president John Quin- cy Adams argued that the Africans had been brought to Havana from Africa in violation of Spanish laws and treaties and illegally sold as slaves. The court agreed and found the defendants not guilty.

In 1842, free blacks joined Tappan and other abolitionists to form the American Missionary Association (AMA), an interracial nonsectarian, antislavery organization that fought for the rights of African Americans. One hundred years later, in 1942, the AMA established the race relations department at Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee to “promote research and education and to provide a forum for the exchange of ideas among African Americans and other ethnic groups.” During the next twenty-seven years, it exerted a strong influence on race relations in the U.S.

Pursuing and documenting civil rights

As a young man growing up during this period, Clifton Johnson couldn’t accept the racism, the status quo, and the argument that blacks were inferior to whites. While serving in the army during World War II, he had struck up a friendship with a black man who was a pharmacist by profession. The two young soldiers lived in racially segregated barracks and couldn’t see each other, even though the two served in the same detachment. “He was the first black man I ever met who was educated,” Johnson recalls. “We would play cards and bridge together, but we would have to go to the back of the pharmacy to do it, playing late into the night, because I couldn’t go to his dormitory and he couldn’t go to mine.”

After the war, Johnson went to college, earning a B.A. at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, an M.A. from the University of Chicago, and a Ph.D. from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. To research his doctoral dissertation (about the history of the AMA from its beginning to the Civil War), Johnson used the association’s records, which were stored at Fisk University. “Those records were packed away in wooden boxes,” Johnson remembers. “They were totally disorganized, which meant that my research took a lot longer than I thought it would.”
At the suggestion of the AMA's general secretary, Johnson organized the AMA's records. "I did a lot of things that a professional archivist might not have done, but what I did was a godsend for researchers," he recalls. "I compiled a very valuable index to the collection."

It was the beginning of a close relationship between the young scholar and the venerable civil rights organization. Throughout the 1950s and early 1960s, Johnson helped organize yearly civil rights seminars that were attended by legendary African American leaders like Thurgood Marshall and activist labor leader Asa Philip Randolph. With a growing reputation as a scholar on southern and African American history, Johnson was asked by the AMA and Fisk University to head up Fisk's race relations department in the mid-1960s. Johnson told the institutions that he would take the job only if they allowed him to establish an African American research center. The AMA and Fisk agreed, and in 1966 the Amistad Research Center was born. "I always say I took two jobs to get the one I wanted," Johnson remarks with a smile.

Few thought that the center would work. As Johnson explained in an article in *Black Issues in Higher Education*, "They thought a center for black history made no sense because most blacks were illiterate and didn't write letters or get them. Well that was a lie. We found that there had been a lot of record-keeping going on in the lives of black people."

**Outgrowing two homes**

Within three years of its founding, the center had three million items and a reputation as one of the country's great repositories of African American materials. Johnson says that he never had any trouble collecting black historical materials even though he is white. "Oh, yes, some people would say, 'Why are you doing this?' I would answer, 'Because I'm interested.' But they couldn't challenge what I was doing with the Amistad Center. It was my baby. It helped that I had become well known in the black community. Besides, I was also able to point out that I am included in the *Who's Who of Black Americans*.

Outgrowing its space in 1970, the Amistad Research Center accepted Dillard University's proposal to move to that university, which is located in New Orleans. During the next decade, the center's growth continued to mushroom as it reached out to collect not only the papers of the movers and shakers of black history, but also those of the less well known.

"We didn't care if they were famous or not," says Johnson. "It makes no difference to us. How do we know what will be important one hundred years from now? A lot of people from whom we get records aren't famous, but the information in their papers is important."

And the center grew. In 1979 Johnson told the AMA board that something had to be done to maintain the center's collections. Scattered among four different locations, the valuable material was in danger of being destroyed. Researchers had inadequate space in which to work. He couldn't honestly go out and ask for more papers. Johnson told board members, if the center couldn't take care of what it had. The board agreed and gave him permission to explore other locations.

A number of universities, including Harvard University, Hampton University, Howard University, the University of North Carolina, the University of Mississippi, Rutgers, the University of Georgia, and Tulane University, tried to coax the center to move to its campus. After much intensive negotiating, the Amistad Research Center chose Tulane and moved there in 1987. Johnson believes Tulane will be the center's final home, although space continues to be a problem. "I think Tulane will come through with more room," Johnson says confidently.

A tour of the center, conducted by reference archivist Andy Simon, reveals that boxes are stacked so tightly in some areas of the center that staff can barely move around. "Dr. Stielow, our new director, wants to eliminate the backlog," Simon explains. "But that doesn't mean that the Amistad will stop collecting. We are doing what we call 'quick and dirty' arrangement, which allows researchers to have access to collections that would otherwise be closed until they were completely organized. It may take them a lot of time to find information, but at least they will have access. Many archives close access to their collections until they are completely processed."

After graduating from the University of Chicago in 1989, Simon moved to New Orleans. One day, he heard Johnson on a black-owned radio station talking about the center. Simon went to see Johnson about a job. "I was surprised to learn that he was a white man," Simon recalls. "That amused Dr. Johnson, but I know it has caused him a lot of agony in the past, when the South was not as open as it is today. The cops didn't treat him very well. But I got lucky and Dr. Johnson hired me. I've learned about archives under Dr. Johnson, and for that I'm grateful."

**Collecting for the future**

The new director, Frederick Stielow, has two Ph.D.'s, in history and American studies, as well as an M.L.S. and extensive background in information technology, making him well qualified to head the center. Under his direction, one of the center's first priorities will be to automate its operations. "We plan to upgrade the entire center," Stielow explains. "It's an ongoing, time-consuming process."

Even given the center's space problems, the big backlog, and the long-term computerization project, Stielow still sees much room for growth and expansion. He talks enthusiastically about collecting material on the so-called "new immigration. "It's a wide-open field and a vital area to collect in," Stielow explains. "We need to think of history as not just something that happened a hundred years ago, but as something that is going on around us today. It's difficult to document the history of immigrant groups like the Irish or Italians because no one collected their records when they were immigrating to the U.S. in large numbers during the last century. People didn't think those records were significant. You see the same thing happening today."

But as Stielow continues the work of Clifton Johnson at the Amistad Research Center, documentation on this latest chapter in African American history will be preserved for future generations along with the other riches of this great repository.