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The Paul Barker Ethnographic Research in Haiti, 1950s-1960s: Assessing the USM Vodou Collection

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Introduction
The Collection was obtained by Paul Barker, a faculty member of the Gorham State Teachers College, during the period of 1950s-1960s (see Figures 1-7). It is comprised of religious artifacts mostly relating to Haitian Vodou, with a few objects from Africa and the Dominican Republic. Haitian Vodou is heavily influenced by aspects of African religions that traveled to the Americas on the slave trade. It shares some characteristics with Louisiana Voodoo, Santeria, and other Afro-Caribbean religions who were also influenced by religions being introduced to the Americas by means of the slave trade. Each religion developed distinct characteristics shaped by the separate histories and influences of their geographic locations. In Haiti, the predominantly African rituals blended with elements of native religions and Christianity to create Haitian Vodou. This blending of religious elements is seen elsewhere across the African Diaspora, showcasing the survival and adaptability of African culture in the face of intense hardship.

Curation and research of this collection (see Figure 5) can provide context to the survival and movement of cultural and religious practices across the middle passage. Furthermore, it showcases the unique and regionally specific adaptations of Vodou, and other African derived religions, across the African Diaspora. Curation and display of these artifacts can assist in educating the public on often misunderstood, stereotyped, and vilified religions.

Methods
Work on this collection included referencing the original field and curation notes written by Paul Barker and scanning these notes to create digital copies (Figure 5). Matching artifacts with their assigned catalogue numbers in the original notes and assigning numbers to artifacts. Creating a digital database of the collection with catalogue numbers and a description of the artifacts. Photographing and editing images of each artifact to create a digital photographic database to accompany the collection (see Figures 6-7, 9-14). It also includes background research on objects as well as into the background of Vodou, as well as other African and African derived religions. This can provide important context on the characteristics, purpose, and significance of the artifacts. The artifacts will then be systematically organized and placed into collection boxes where their care will be maintained (Figure 15).

Next Steps
After the collection has been catalogued and a digital database has been created, the collection will be donated to the African American Archives housed in the University of Southern Maine Library’s Special Collections. Curation of these artifacts can provide necessary education on a religion that has been repeatedly vilified, exoticized, and misunderstood.