



## DISTINGUISHED ALUMNI AWARDS

### Charles L. Blockson '56



**To Charles L. Blockson for devoting his life to research, scholarship, and collecting and preserving significant materials related to African American history.**

A comment from Charles Blockson's fourth-grade teacher in Norristown, Pa. would determine his life's work. "We were studying prominent Americans but we were only hearing about white people," he recalls. So he asked her about prominent blacks. She told him there weren't any and, "Negroes were born to serve white people."

In many ways, Blockson has been proving her wrong ever since. He started collecting historical items related to African Americans as a fourth grader, at first searching through Salvation Army and Goodwill stores before graduating to more serious collecting venues like antiquarian bookstores. Eventually, he amassed what is considered one of the top African American historical collections in the United States.

At the same time he was a budding collector, Blockson also excelled as a high school athlete. He played football and won five state championships in shot put

and discus and the national indoor shot put title at Madison Square Garden. Penn State offered him a scholarship in football and track and field. He accepted, in part because of Penn State's trailblazing black athletes Wally Triplett '49 and Dennie Hoggard '49, who both played football in the late 1940s, and in part because head football Coach Rip Engle was known for being open minded.

"Penn State had the largest number of minority athletes outside of the Midwest," Blockson said.

Also influencing his decision was the fact that two of his high school rivals—Lenny Moore '56 and Rosey Grier '56—were Penn State bound. He played fullback for the Nittany Lions, earning the nickname "Blockbuster Blockson" for his blocking prowess, and was a member of the 1954 IC4A national champion track and field team. Following his Penn State career, Blockson passed on an opportunity to play professional football to pursue his greater passion: researching and studying African American history.

Blockson taught local and multicultural history while serving as a human relations advisor for the Norristown Area School

District. He also traveled extensively, acquiring rare African, African American, and African Caribbean publications dating to the 16th century. He donated his collection—now known as the Charles L. Blockson Afro-American Collection—to Temple University in 1984. He served as curator of the collection until 2006 when he retired and was awarded emeritus rank. The collection includes prints, slave narratives, manuscripts, original works by many prominent African Americans such as W.E.B. DuBois, Phyllis Wheatley, and Paul Robeson, and more than 500,000 photographs.

In 1975, Blockson published the first of three books he wrote on the Underground Railroad. His work has also appeared in *National Geographic* and numerous other publications. Considered the foremost expert on the Underground Railroad, Blockson has lectured widely in the United States and abroad and for seven years served as chair of the National Park Service Underground Railroad Advisory Committee. The former president of the Pennsylvania Abolition Society, he's also a founding member of the African American Museum in Philadelphia and has worked

with many organizations dedicated to African American history. He has received three honorary doctoral degrees, been listed in *Who's Who Among Black Americans*, and was selected as one of Philadelphia's most influential African American citizens, among many other honors.

Blockson has served on the Penn State Alumni Association's Alumni Council and the University Libraries Advisory Board. He received an Alumni Fellow Award in 1981 and is a member of the Penn State Alumni Association.

Blockson was married to the late Elizabeth Parker. His daughter, Noelle, is a 1987 Penn State graduate. Blockson lives in Gwynedd, Pa.

