The Oliver F. Atkins collection is the largest photograph collection in Special Collections & Archives. The Atkins collection is used often for reference requests, exhibits, and class instruction. The Arthur E. Scott collection contains subject matter that complements the Atkins collection, particularly scenes of Washington, D.C., people and events in the 20th century. The collections were stored in a variety of ways, including in filing cabinets, acidic boxes and folders, and plastic sleeves. The assortment of storage methods and descriptive schemes resulted in an inefficient and confusing system for both staff and researchers to locate materials.

The photographic prints, negatives, contact sheets, and large format prints were arranged and described in hundreds of pages of typewritten and handwritten inventories. By creating a finding aid with specific naming conventions, the NHPRC grant project team hoped to provide fast searching across both collections to aid in completing reference requests and reproduction orders in a more timely fashion. For many years, SC&A relied on one or two staff members who were intimately familiar with the collections for service.

The project team completed surveys of the collections and chose sections with descriptions already available, although the descriptions largely lacked consistent, controlled vocabulary. The project team used a Google Docs spreadsheet to manage controlled vocabulary terms for both subject and genre access; the spreadsheet also assisted with creating metadata for EAD finding aids, MARC records, and selected digital images. The arrangement of the Atkins collection changed over the course of the project from one based on Atkins’ career to one based on format then by career. This arrangement maximized the preservation and storage. The emphasis in the Scott collection on particular groups of people in Washington, D.C., made a subject arrangement preferable.

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The NHPRC grant allowed SC&A staff to process/reprocess the two collections according to proper archival standards while also using previous description efforts where appropriate. The result is that both of the collections are far more accessible to the research community both inside and outside the university than they have ever been before. By standardizing subject and genre terms, we improved the project workflow and devised procedures for processing photographs and other graphic material collections. This project also highlighted the challenges of working with 20th century collections consisting of many images with known copyright restrictions.