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Douglass Day at UCSB invites the public to transcribe Black history

On Friday, Feb. 13, UC Santa Barbara will host a transcription “birthday party” with an unusual mix of activities: students, staff and community members will spend the afternoon transcribing digitized records drawn from 19th-century Black history. Then they’ll pause to sing “Happy Birthday,” eat cake and keep going.

“Douglass Day transforms the work of remembering into an act of resistance and renewal,” said [Michael Douglas Dean of Humanities and Fine Arts Daina Ramey Berry](#). “By transcribing the Colored Conventions, we enter a conversation across time with ancestors who refused to be erased. UC Santa Barbara is honored to serve as the institutional home for this global initiative, uniting our community to amplify the enduring demand for ‘All Rights for All.’”

Blending serious archival work and public engagement, [Douglass Day](#) is a collective action to preserve and celebrate these histories while advancing new historical research. “Douglass Day offers space for difficult conversations about hard histories,” [said Jim Casey](#), an assistant professor of English at UCSB and director of the event, “but we also want people to have a sense of these histories as moments of resilience and even joy.”

A global transcription event, now headquartered at UCSB

Douglass Day has run annually since 2017, and this year marks its 10th year. The event invites participating groups — schools, churches, community centers and more — to help transcribe and enrich a single collection of digitized materials drawn from Black history, often from the 1800s. Over the years, Douglass Day has seen over 1,000 events with around 46,000 participants. In 2026, thousands will watch the live broadcast from the UC Santa Barbara campus.

Casey emphasized that Douglass Day is a collective endeavor involving faculty, staff and students across multiple universities, supported by a multi-campus research team working to locate and organize dispersed archival materials, including long-time collaborators at Penn State, Denise Burgher, Gabrielle Sutherland, Jenn Isasi, and P. Gabrielle Foreman.

He added that the initiative has always been designed to foreground collaboration rather than individual leadership, with a particular emphasis on the leadership of undergraduate and graduate students such as Eden Mekonen (PhD student, Penn State) and Courtney Murray Ross, (now assistant professor of English at James Madison). “It’s very much a collective, collaborative group that works on these projects.”

Now based at UCSB on an ongoing basis, the campus serves as the initiative’s home as organizers plan future events in concert with key collaborators at the UCSB Library along with Douglass Day co-sponsors in the departments of English and Black studies along with the Multicultural Center, and others.

“UCSB Library is proud to partner with the Colored Conventions Project and our campus colleagues to co-host UCSB’s inaugural Douglass Day,” said University Librarian Todd Grappone. “This collaboration exemplifies how innovative digital scholarship and public engagement can advance the mission of both the library and the university. We hope this year’s events mark the beginning of a vibrant and enduring Douglass Day tradition at UCSB.”

What happens on Douglass Day

The UCSB in-person gathering will take place from 11 a.m. to 2 p.m. in the Multicultural Center Lounge. After welcome remarks from campus leaders, participants will transcribe documents on their own laptops and computers, page by page, using an easy-to-use, nonprofit platform named [Zooniverse](#) that assigns each

person a scanned document image and a space to type. Laptops can also be borrowed from the UCSB Library.

“We welcome people who don’t work in archives or research libraries to immerse themselves in historical materials,” Casey said. “For a lot of participants, this is the first time they’ve ever encountered documents like these directly. It can be fun and captivating!”

The point isn’t only accuracy. Casey said Douglass Day is also about access: inviting people who are not professional historians — and who may never set foot in a research library — to spend time with original historical records.

The UCSB program will also be livestreamed to connect with scores of simultaneous events. The live broadcast, he said, helps people feel connected to “the liveness of the event.”

No specialized background is required. Douglass Day is open to everyone, of all ages. The initiative also produces K-12 curriculum materials aligned with classroom standards, meant to make it easy for teachers to bring the work into schools.

This year’s focus: the Colored Conventions and “All Rights for All”

Each year’s transcription materials change. In 2026, participants will work with documents tied to the Colored Conventions — a long-running movement of 19th-century Black political conventions.

“It is one of the largest racial justice movements in American history,” Casey said, “Beginning around 1830 and continuing to around 1900, the Colored Conventions involved tens of thousands of free and formerly enslaved African Americans who gathered to debate voting rights, citizenship, education, labor rights and more.”

The documents are scattered across “more than 100 different libraries and archives,” Casey said, and Douglass Day’s transcription model is one way to help make them more visible and usable.

This year’s theme, “All Rights for All,” is rooted in the post-Civil War era of Reconstruction. It is closely tied to the past and present debates about the 14th Amendment. “We need to understand what the Fourteenth Amendment actually means,” Casey said. The project will invite participants to engage directly with the historical arguments Black communities made around citizenship, civil rights and

due process.

In everyday terms, the Fourteenth Amendment establishes the right of birthright citizenship and a set of civil rights that no state can “deprive any person of life, liberty, or property, without due process of law; nor deny to any person within its jurisdiction the equal protection of the laws.”

A quilting workshop and a cake tradition

In addition to the main Feb. 13 event, UCSB Library’s Makerspace will host a quilting workshop on Tuesday, Feb. 10, from 4 to 6 p.m. Participants will create patchwork pieces responding to themes of citizenship and civil rights, with the finished work displayed at the main gathering.

Douglass Day is also structured around the birthday of Frederick Douglass as it was observed later in his life. Born into slavery, Douglass did not know his exact birth date; he and his family chose to celebrate on Feb. 14. After he passed, the date became an annual holiday that would eventually evolve into Black History Month. The event marks that tradition with performances, speakers, cake and song, alongside the archival work.

In recent years, the celebration has expanded into an informal [online birthday cake “bake off,”](#) with participants sharing increasingly elaborate designs to social media. “We’ve had people make fondant sculptures of historical figures,” Casey said. “One year, someone even made a cake with a graph of the number of pages being transcribed. It shows the power of collective actions to preserve and celebrate these forgotten histories.”

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About UC Santa Barbara

The University of California, Santa Barbara is a leading research institution that also provides a comprehensive liberal arts learning experience. Our academic community of faculty, students, and staff is characterized by a culture of interdisciplinary collaboration that is responsive to the needs of our multicultural and global society. All of this takes place within a living and learning environment like no other, as we draw inspiration from the beauty and resources of our extraordinary location at the edge of the Pacific Ocean.