“Black Spartans (1907-1948)” represents ongoing research in SJSU Special Collections & Archives identifying documentation of Black experiences throughout SJSU history. This exhibit is the first of several installments. Much of the information we have comes from the Spartan Daily student newspaper and the La Torre yearbooks. With too few exceptions, Black Spartans’ stories are not told in their own words but from the perspectives of their majority white classmates. This is reflected in the language and focus of the articles. We invite you to read critically.

The Black Spartans featured in this exhibit pursued their educational goals while contending with institutionalized racism and other major crises of the 20th century: two World Wars, the influenza pandemic of 1918, and polio. Locally, “the deed to virtually every home in San Jose” included restrictions against Black and Asian residents known as “restrictive covenants” (Spartan Daily, February 16, 1948, page 2). On campus, blackface and minstrel shows were a regular part of student events.

“Black Spartans (1907-1948)” is an invitation to the community to join us in surfacing these stories, ensuring these histories are preserved and presented in a way that honors these students’ lives. Contact us at special.collections@sjsu.edu to participate.

Carli V. Lowe - University Archivist
Kate Steffens - Special Collections Librarian

The “Black Spartans (1907-1948)” exhibition is a homage to Black culture and history at San José State University and the Bay Area at large. Until recently, the significance of Black bodies in Bay Area history (as well as U.S. history) was overlooked. Unless it was associated with the struggles of civil rights leaders, athletes, or celebrity-personas, the story of a graduate from a state school wasn’t valued because we weren’t part of the mainstream culture. As a Black Spartan myself, I was deeply connected to these individuals that started out just like me. I saw a reflection of myself and my community throughout the process of making these mixed media portraits and came to realize how important it is to know your history because it becomes a catalyst for knowing who you are.

My work explores the intricacy of identity and the role culture, tradition, and history play. These portraits are embodiments of our Black Spartans, they are visual representations of the colorful and captivating lives they led. Through this work, I hope to influence other artists and individuals to take part in researching and finding out the infinite layers of what it means to be Black. Our history is beyond our struggle. We are the blueprint.

Yeab Kebede
‘22 Digital Media Arts
Originally from Los Angeles, Hal Capers attended San Jose State College in 1943. He was a member of the track team and specialized in the broad and high jump. As a high jumper, Capers was one of only two first place winners from San Jose State during a Spring 1943 meet against U.C. Berkeley, and the sole first place high jump winner at the 1943 Stanford Invitational. At the end of Spring quarter 1943, Capers withdrew from school and returned home to Los Angeles, his reasoning being that he was bound to be drafted into World War II.
Hal Capers first appears in the San Jose State student paper in 1943, as a newcomer to the school and the track team. He quickly makes a name for himself with his high jump skills.
Hal Capers competes in the high jump against U.C. Berkeley.
Spartan Daily

April 30, 1943

Hal Capers travels to Stanford’s Angell Field to compete with his fellow track teammates, hailed as “practically a cinch winner” in the high jump event.
Hal Capers is among a group of 10 winning members of the track team that provided San Jose State's first big win of the season, winning both the high jump and the broad jump events against Fresno State, along with a shared win in the mile relay.
Hal Capers and three of his teammates were responsible for a staggering 41 points out of the 71 point team total.
Hal Capers’s burgeoning college track career is cut short by the strong possibility of being drafted into service in World War II.
Called "the school’s number one high jumper," Hal Capers is immediately missed by his coach and teammates after his return to Los Angeles.
Hal Capers is highlighted in the school yearbook, shown here in a group photo with the track team, along with a photo of him at the high jump.