Prioritizing Black Digital Narratives from Process to Preservation

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Abstract

An outreach endeavor that centers African American experiences at the core of its mission, the Robert F. Smith Fund project is one of the major public programs for National Museum of African American History and Culture. Because many collections capturing African American history are not accessible to the general public, there is knowledge, culture and lived experiences lost in boxes and unreadable recorded formats. The Smith Fund consists of multiple components entrenched in the idea the preserving and providing access to black narratives is only achievable by engaging black communities at multiple levels. The Community Curation Program works with individuals to provide digital preservation services to ensure that family history is safeguarded for generations to come. The Freedmen's Bureau Transcription Project opens the public to lives of the recently emancipated. Lastly, the Family History Center allows museum attendees to excavate their own family histories by offering access to databases such as Ancestry.com.

Revealing the Digital Narrative: Explore Your Family History Center

The Robert F. Smith Explore Your Family History Center (FHC) opened in September 2016. Full time genealogy reference assistants began staffing the FHC, immediately implementing research policies, conducting 30 minute database sessions, and offering daily programming. During the sessions, the genealogy reference assistants describe the genealogy research process and offer attendees an overview of the databases they will use during their session. The available databases include Ancestry, FamilySearch, and Fold3. Visitors are taught what is included in the databases, noting which ones to use for different aspects of their research. Ancestry and FamilySearch are the most used databases because of their wide array of digitized documents from around the world. Visitors conclude their searches with general knowledge about how to use these databases and how to interpret the documents they may find. Due to the limitations of the documentation available in Ancestry or FamilySearch, most visitors are unable to find records prior to the 1870 Census. Prior to the Civil War, 90% of African Americans were not recorded on government documentation as free people. In the coming year, there will be additional databases available to visitors including, Historic Black Newspapers, History Vault: Southern Life & African American History, and Newspapers.com. The additional databases will be useful to visitors who have made strides in their family research and require information beyond government records. The new programmatic and participatory structure implemented in the FHC help ensure that visitors have meaningful, productive and safe experiences during their visit.

The FHC tracks the number of people attending research sessions, the attendee's place of residence and the state or country the visitor will research. Close to 22,000 visitors registered for genealogy research sessions during 2018. Weekends in the FHC are marked by large crowds, but have a variable number of participants in the sessions. During the busiest months, most sessions are filled within minutes after opening. Throughout the year and particularly in the summer, it is common to have groups sitting together for a research session including school groups and family reunions. The FHC has served session attendees visiting from all 50 US states. The FHC served visitors from all over the world, covering all continents except Antarctica. Every nation does not make their government records available for research which places constraints on who the FHC can serve. Despite these research limitations, 7% of all attendees conducted research in foreign countries. Nearly 66% of all international research is conducted in the Caribbean. Most international attendees live in the following countries: Canada (8%), Jamaica (8%), China (4%), Abu Dhabi (4%), England (4%), South Africa (4%), Trinidad and Tobago (4%), Bahamas (3%). The most researched countries are: Jamaica (31%), Haiti (6%), Bahamas (5%), US Virgin Islands (5%), Trinidad and Tobago (4%), Mexico (3%), Barbados (3%), and Panama (3%).

Public Programs

The FHC hosts monthly informational lectures for the public. The lectures cover descendant communities, DNA research and science, regional genealogy, archival material and photographic preservation. Visitors include genealogists, research and cultural heritage professionals and museum volunteers. The lectures give attendees new ways to think about their research by exposing them to new databases, sources and collections such as oral histories, family archives and papers, and plantation records. The programs also create a relationship between the presenter and the FHC, opening doors for future collaborations and partnerships.

Research

Research is a regular part of staff duties. In addition to assisting others with their research, FHC genealogists stay engaged with new collections or databases being digitized and released. FHC staff is involved with the Freedmen's Bureau Transcription project, and research about "descendant communities" – people and families that have identified their ancestors to have been enslaved on or associated with certain plantations. This research requires coordination and partnership of other institutions working with descendants in the same capacity to create scholarship and awareness of the archival (digital or otherwise) collections and systems other historic sites may have. This research is tied to helping visitors have a better understanding of their family history and providing research tools to the public.

Digitized Black Narratives of the Past: Freedmen's Bureau Transcription Project

Until 2016, the Freedmen's Bureau records were only available on microfilm at the National Archives in Washington, D.C. The Freedmen's Bureau Transcription Project and the upcoming database give family historians, genealogists, students and scholars from around the world online access to these records. These records provide a detailed look into the lives of African Americans after the Civil War that cannot be found elsewhere. The records provide not only names, but information regarding former enslavers, plantation locations, and personal testimonies that are of great importance to those researching their family history and the Reconstruction Era. The Freedmen's Bureau Transcription Project aims to transcribe the records of the Freedmen's Bureau word for word and is the largest crowdsourcing initiative ever sponsored by the Smithsonian. Congress established the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen and Abandoned Lands in 1865 to assist in the reconstruction of the South and to aid formerly enslaved individuals transition to freedom and citizenship. The Freedmen's Bureau was also tasked with aiding the hundreds of thousands of impoverished and displaced Southern whites. The Freedmen's Bureau provided food and clothing rations, medical care, negotiated labor contracts, established schools, legalized marriages and much more. The records created from this work provide a unique view into the lives of newly freed African Americans and the social conditions of the South after the Civil War.

The Freedmen's Bureau Project initially began as an indexing project when the Museum partnered with FamilySearch International to create a searchable name index of the Freedmen's Bureau records. The original Bureau records and the microfilm reproductions are housed at the National Archives and Records Administration in Washington, D.C. FamilySearch digitized the microfilm and launched the indexing project with the Museum in 2015. In just over a year, the two organizations, in partnership with the Afro-American Historical and Genealogy Society and the California African American Museum, brought together 18,940 volunteers who indexed more than 1 million names. In an effort to make these records more useful to researchers and genealogists the Museum moved forward with the transcription project. To get the files ready for transcription the Museum consulted with Dev Technology (DevTech), a firm that specializes in data management, and created a plan to organize the image files, add metadata to each file, create finding aids on the Smithsonian's Online Virtual Archives (SOVA), upload the files to the Smithsonian's secure Digital Asset Management System (DAMS) and sync them to the SOVA finding aids.

Metadata is added to each image file in two batches. This metadata includes subject terms specific to the project and the title and date of the series and subseries. A finding aid has to be created for the public to view the images. The finding aids are created using the original National Archives microfilm descriptive pamphlets that were created in the 1970s. To create the finding aids, the staff add all of the information from the descriptive pamphlet into a spreadsheet then upload the information into the internal archival system. Each level in the hierarchy is given a reference identification number (RefID). Staff will then assign these RefID's to each image so that the image in the DAMS knows where to sync in the finding aid. All of this had to take place before a single image could be transcribed.

The Freedmen's Bureau Transcription Project launched to the public on the Smithsonian's Transcription Center in August 2016, one month before the Museum's grand opening. The Transcription Center is an online platform where people from around the world can transcribe documents, photograph captions, field books, and other materials in Smithsonian collections. Once transcribed and reviewed these records are searchable in the Transcription Center, the Smithsonian's Collection Search and Google. The Transcription Center provides a high resolution image of the record and an open text box for transcription. The transcription process is as easy or difficult as the record. The most common types of records

are letters, tables, and correspondence. The goal is that more people will join in transcribing the Freedmen's Bureau, and perhaps, discover some of their ancestors along the way.

Collecting Black Narratives with the People: The Technical Challenges for the Community Curation Program

The Community Curation Program (CCP) works with individuals and families to provide digital preservation services to ensure that family history is safeguarded for generations to come. The CCP seeks to bridge the generational divide in African American communities by enabling participants to preserve and share their stories by digitizing audio and video recordings, photographs and other flat materials. The first program was held in Baltimore, Maryland in the fall of 2018. While there were many variables to consider in the pilot program, the first concern was how the team would interact with attendees as well as provide digital services. Working with a wide variety of individuals led the team to be mindful of how to best serve a broad group of people. From elders to millennials, the range of technical know-how was at the forefront of our minds. Before the digitization, each client received a consultation. Most of the attendees understood how to access the material stored on the provided flash drives. Clients were excited to have digital records that they could share with family and friends.

For the two-week Baltimore project, three people worked in tandem during each of the six sessions that were an hour long. The cameraperson's job was to ensure the camera was parallel to the copy stand using a laser leveler and photograph a color target at the start of each session for color corrections. Using the tethering method to control the camera, the photographer also had the responsibility of making sure all items were correctly oriented. The second person was the handler who remained in contact with the client and the objects. Being that each session was only an hour long, the team had to create a rapid capture environment and having materials in order helped them process more material. The handler arranged all of the flat materials in the correct orientation on the copy stand. He or she would also be the one to readjust the camera up and down the column when the sizes of the flat items changed. With the camera height change, there may be a change of the camera lens, if necessary. The third person became the editor. At the editing station, the editor person was in charge of color correcting, cropping, renaming and processing the files out to a flash drive. The handler reassured clients that their items were in good hands and would be handled with care as they wait for them to be digitized.

For the flat items, the process began by selecting the equipment. The digi-team used the Canon 5DS R, a full frame 50.6-megapixel camera that suited the needs of the program. However, in keeping access and distribution at the front of our minds, the decision was made to capture images using the full resolution of the camera processing out lesser resolution files so that clients could quickly open the files. The team used the Canon 100mm macro, the Canon 50mm lens, and the Zeiss 50mm lens. At the end of the Baltimore Community Curation Program, the team had created 5,189 images. Each part of the digitization process became extremely is essential and the team sought to give clients the best archival files for their needs.

As the team prepared for the Denver CCP in 2018 and is now planning for Chicago CCP in the fall of 2019, the challenge is to create a new digital archiving system and file sharing process. The team intends to create a dynamic multi-faceted repository. Having a storage space that is "alive," the team and other institutions can do more with the files they are digitizing, throughout the all areas of the project. With it, the team will work with institutions large and small that need help scanning and archiving portions of their collections. Digitization, as most know, can be a time consuming and an expensive affair, especially when partnering with other like-minded institutions because the challenges of multiple points of accessibility factor into the development of software, online platforms and ownership. For example, this project must take into consideration collaborating institutions' existing file naming structures, the metadata they may or may not have associated with the images. Also, the team will have to figure out what standards the institutions have set in place for the creation of Born Digital files for items such as an oral history interviews. The team also has to take into consideration how they plan to store the data. As always, the team must be concerned with the costs and need of acquiring new equipment to align the standards of the Smith Fund projects.

The human connections, emotional references and history lessons coincided with the team's challenge to identify media formats, install equipment and provide digitized material to the clients. What developed was an ebb and flow of information and communication allowing the team to create relationships with CCP attendees, become flexible in digitizing requests and learn a tremendous amount of community history.

Conclusion

The beauty of the Community Curation project and Family History Center through the Robert F. Smith Fund is the connections with the public who desire to either search for their long-past relatives or preserver the memories of the ones they know. The constant challenge becomes how to access historical information and to capture digitized material. The challenge for this project is to establish ways to capture the material and access the history. As a whole, the Smith Fund projects serves to

connect communities through archival research and exposure, public programming and digital preservation.

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