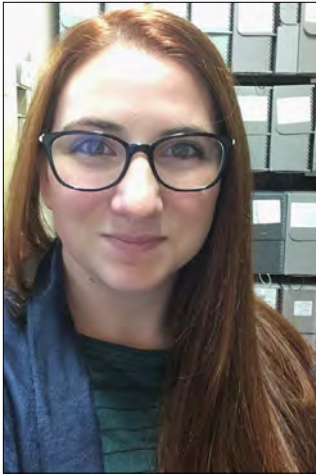


Up-and-Comers: News for Student and New Archivists

*Assistant Editor: Meredith Lowe, the iSchool at the University of Wisconsin–Madison.
Contact Meredith at mcloew@wisc.edu if you would like to guest author a column or have an idea to share.*

Meet Ayla Toussaint, Archivist at the Loretto Heritage Center, Nerinx, Kentucky



Telling history through the stories of individual people and communities instead of through government actions, dates, and numbers takes a typically one-dimensional depiction of the past and creates a more faceted understanding. Recounting the lives of individuals brings depth, and these unique experiences make that once-static history into a compelling

story that engages with people on a deeply personal level. I decided to pursue a career in archives because of the ability of primary sources to elicit this response and redefine how we understand and interact with the past.

I graduated from the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, in December of 2018 with a master of science in library science with a concentration in archives and records management. When I was hired straight out of graduate school as the archivist for the Loretto Community, I was ecstatic. Working alongside members of this order of women religious to preserve and share their complex and diverse stories fit in perfectly with my intention of using archives to make history more compelling to the general public. Their materials focus on capturing the 200-year history of their community through both administrative papers and the personal papers of individual Sisters. In the past, women's history has been a neglected field and is often absent from archival holdings. Finding a collection that not only holds these items, but is entirely focused on them, excited me. I was eager to begin working through the backlog of materials awaiting processing and to share the collections with others.

Although I had always known I wanted to support communities by preserving and sharing their stories, it never occurred to me just how long it would take to learn the stories before I could start working! It came as a bit of a shock when I began looking through materials and realized I did not have the background knowledge to fully process them justly. Taking this realization in stride, for

the past eight months I have slowly been broadening my understanding of the Loretto Community. Because the Loretto Community is still active, learning the history is not as easy as reading history books, answering research requests, and sampling the collections. While these methods have certainly been successful, I have an amazing resource at my fingertips: the community members themselves.



Heritage Center Staff explore the crawlspace. From left to right: Executive Director Eleanor Craig, SL; Curator Susanna Pyatt; Archivist Ayla Toussaint.

The Sisters of Loretto was founded in 1812 on the Kentucky frontier. Since then, the order has organized schools and missions across the western United States and has also been present in several international locations. Although most of the schools are no longer connected to Loretto, the Sisters are still quite engaged with the communities. The Motherhouse is located in rural Loretto, Kentucky, but many of the Sisters and Co-Members live elsewhere. Overall, there are approximately 120 living Sisters and 250 living Co-Members, making this a large, if dispersed, community. Although I had been making connections with the Sisters at the Motherhouse, I had not been able to meet the large number of community members still living in other parts of the country.

In July of this year, the Heritage Center staff decided to take a research trip along the Santa Fe Trail, which our Sisters traveled in the mid-nineteenth century. To make this a more meaningful experience, the Heritage Center invited eight community members to make the trek with us. The 12 of us loaded into three cars and made a two-week cross-country road trip, with stops in locations significant to Loretto along the way. While this was a research trip, the curator and I, both new employees, took it as an opportunity to learn more about both the past and present of Loretto through reading relevant texts, listening to the stories told by members during the long car rides, and trying to connect the places we were experiencing with what past Sisters might have experienced. Ever conscious of sharing with the public, the Heritage Center brought along a model Dearborn wagon to post updates to our Facebook page along the way.



At each stop, more of the story was revealed through the people we met and the sites we explored. Although I could

have learned the history in my office through books and academic research, experiencing parts of the history helped me retain the information and make connections in a way I otherwise would not have been able to. By taking this trip, I experienced more than just the nineteenth-century story. Meeting other archivists, historians, and caretakers of the past gave us valuable contacts. We have already set up one research group to visit later this year and plan on making research trips ourselves in the coming year.

While learning the long past history of the order is important, I would not be able to successfully perform my role as archivist without also learning about the more recent history and the current affairs of the community. The events of today will shape our understanding of history tomorrow, and gathering memories from the aging community members is a time-sensitive task. During the trip, I got to know several of the Sisters and Co-Members personally. Building a rapport with members of the community is indispensable, as it not only strengthens the trust of potential donors, it also creates contacts within the community with whom I can discuss my questions without fear of accidentally alienating people. Religious communities are inherently private and have only recently begun to open their materials to lay professionals and researchers. Continuing to foster a relationship of trust and mutual respect between the lay archival staff and the community is an ongoing responsibility that I work on every day. This trip to Santa Fe certainly strengthened the relationships we are building.



Loretto Community members stand in wagon ruts along the Santa Fe Trail.

(Continued on page 34)

UP-AND-COMERS—Continued
Meredith Lowe, Assistant Editor

(Continued from page 33)

After a few months catching up on other archival duties, it was decided that I should make a trip out to Denver, Colorado, another western pocket of Loretto history. Up until 2014, the Loretto Community had a Center in Colorado where many Sisters lived and worked. When the Center closed, many of the Sisters moved to the Motherhouse in Kentucky, but the members still involved with the local Denver community remained in Colorado. The purpose of this trip was multifaceted, including taking an inventory of the materials at the Denver Staff Office, meeting with archives that hold Loretto materials, and, of course, getting to know the community members still living in Colorado. Though similar to the Santa Fe trip, this time I was on my own.

My week-long trip was a blur of activity. I was graciously hosted in the home of three Sisters, who made sure to host dinner parties with members of the community for me to meet. I was taken on tours of past Loretto schools by Sisters who had personal connections to the grounds and who told me wonderful stories I would not have been able to find in the administrative papers housed in the collections. Recognizing the importance of capturing these vignettes of past days, we have begun asking community members to write up short pieces relaying memories that have shaped their experience of Loretto.



Billboard located at the entrance to the Loretto Motherhouse Campus

Entering into the Loretto Community as a stranger, I never guessed how quickly I would be welcomed into the story of Loretto. Reflecting on my first eight months working alongside the community, I can see the progress I have made. Though the processing backlog is still present, I am slowly learning the history and what makes this community unique. Will I ever know everything about Loretto and what the collections may contain? No. But that is not the job of the archivist. I just strive to know enough to contextualize the collections for outsiders curious about the community and looking for an opening for research and understanding.

Request a free demo—see our unrivaled capabilities for yourself! sales@lucidea.com

lucidea.com/archivera