

## Electronic Currents

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### **Digital Projects on Gender, Race, and the Environment**

*By Heather Cooper, University of Iowa; Shu Wan, University of Iowa;  
and Heather S. Sonntag, University of Wisconsin–Madison*

#### **Making Digital, Making Visible: Early African American History in Iowa**

Heather Cooper is a coorganizer of the Iowa Colored Conventions Project (CCP), a collaborative digital humanities (DH) project that is working to recover and make accessible the history of nineteenth-century Black activism and community-building in the Hawkeye State. The Iowa CCP is the first state satellite of the Mellon-funded national CCP cofounded by Gabrielle Foreman and Jim Casey and currently based at the Center for Digital Black Research at Penn State (<https://coloredconventions.org>). The Iowa CCP brings a regional focus to the study of the colored conventions movement, a series of social and political meetings organized by African Americans on a state, regional, and national level from the 1830s to the 1890s.

Conventions were a site for men and women to discuss and organize around issues like citizenship, suffrage, and equal access to education. Over 15 meetings took place in the state of Iowa.

Much of the Iowa CCP's early work has focused on researching three of the better-documented conventions held in 1857, 1865, and 1868. While official records are virtually silent about African American women's participation in these events, examining the conventions in the larger context of the Black communities where they took place allows the project to consider how women supported and participated in these efforts to claim the rights and privileges of citizenship through their work in the church, education, and social and political organizations. Iowa CCP's research is contributing to two primary efforts: building an accessible digital archive that documents the convention movement and creating digital exhibits that help to interpret and contextualize this activism in Iowa.

The national CCP's Digital Records database, powered by Omeka, provides free access and text-searchability to hundreds of primary sources related to the movement (<https://omeka.coloredconventions.org>). Iowa CCP has contributed proceedings and newspaper coverage of the conventions to the database and hopes that other

materials documenting activism in these communities more broadly will also be added to make Black women's contributions a more visible part of the archive. The Iowa CCP is also using these sources in a digital exhibit that will appear on the national project's website. Centered on the 1857 convention held in Muscatine, the exhibit provides context for the convention movement in Iowa by exploring the background of delegates and their families, many of whom had personal ties to slavery and continued to feel its threat. Built with Divi Wordpress, the exhibit will make this little-known Iowa history more accessible, especially for use in the classroom. One of the project's goals is to develop educational resources that can help deepen the state curriculum's engagement with early African American history in Iowa.

This project brings together students and scholars of history, education, and literature; librarians and archivists; and DH specialists from the UI's Digital Scholarship and Publishing Studio. Current and past members include Aiden Bettine, Heather Cooper, Dwain Coleman, Dellyssa Edinboro, Mila Kaut, Thomas Keegan, Leah Morlan, Janalyn Moss, Pamela Nosek, Katrina Sanders, Leslie Schwalm (University of Iowa); Petrina Jackson (Syracuse University); Stephanie Jones (Grinnell College); Robert Shepard (University of Nebraska–Lincoln); and Miriam Thaggert (University of Buffalo).

#### **Preserving a Midwestern Chinese American Experience in Oral Histories**

Also pertaining to racial gaps in regional Iowa archives, Shu Wan's community-based oral history project seeks to collect and digitally preserve first-generation Chinese immigrant stories with the intent to create an online gallery. Wan started interviewing subjects in spring 2019 to raise awareness of decades-long Chinese contributions to the state's cultural diversity and economic prosperity. Focusing on businessmen who came to Iowa in the 1980s, his engagement with Chinese immigrant communities reveals

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underrepresented transnational experiences, encounters, and challenges of migrating to the United States, settling in the Midwest, and opening professional establishments as a minority in one of the most racially homogeneous states in the country. In 1980, the Census reported “Asians” making up only 0.4% of Iowa’s population, approximately 11,580 people; within that group, Chinese represented 2,110 compared to the 2.8 million “Whites.” By 2018, Asians comprised 2.7% of the total population with Chinese being 16.3% within that group. Wan aims to boost self-awareness among Chinese in these Iowan communities about their successful and persevering paths in the United States.

Additionally, in light of the two pandemics—COVID-19 and racism in American society that became particularly conflated for Chinese (and Chinese-looking people) who experienced increased racial hostility because of coronavirus beginning in early 2020—Wan feels it imperative to display Chinese Americans’ enduring accomplishment of acculturation to the majority white audience in Iowa. The oral histories collected thus far demonstrate how Chinese immigrants realized the American dream and adopted American values.

Prior to the Covid-19 disruption, Wan conducted eight interviews with restaurant owners and employees in Iowa City, Cedar Rapids, and Des Moines. (He expects to complete another dozen in different cities when physical-distancing measures permit.) When meeting with subjects, Wan simultaneously took handwritten notes while collecting information with a Zoom H1n Portable Recorder, which creates output files in .mp3 format. He then transcribed the interview recordings by hand and digitized all notes and transcriptions by photocopying original physical copies and typing contents. To translate transcripts from Chinese to English, he used the software DeepL, which is “smarter” than Google Translator. The next project steps include analyzing information in the transcripts with ALTAS, a software for qualitative research. Final goals are to present the oral histories online for both groups of stakeholders—the Chinese community of Iowa and their non-Chinese neighbors. Wan’s project on digitally creating, preserving, and exhibiting Chinese American oral histories enhances their transparency and enables all audiences to access materials anytime, anywhere.

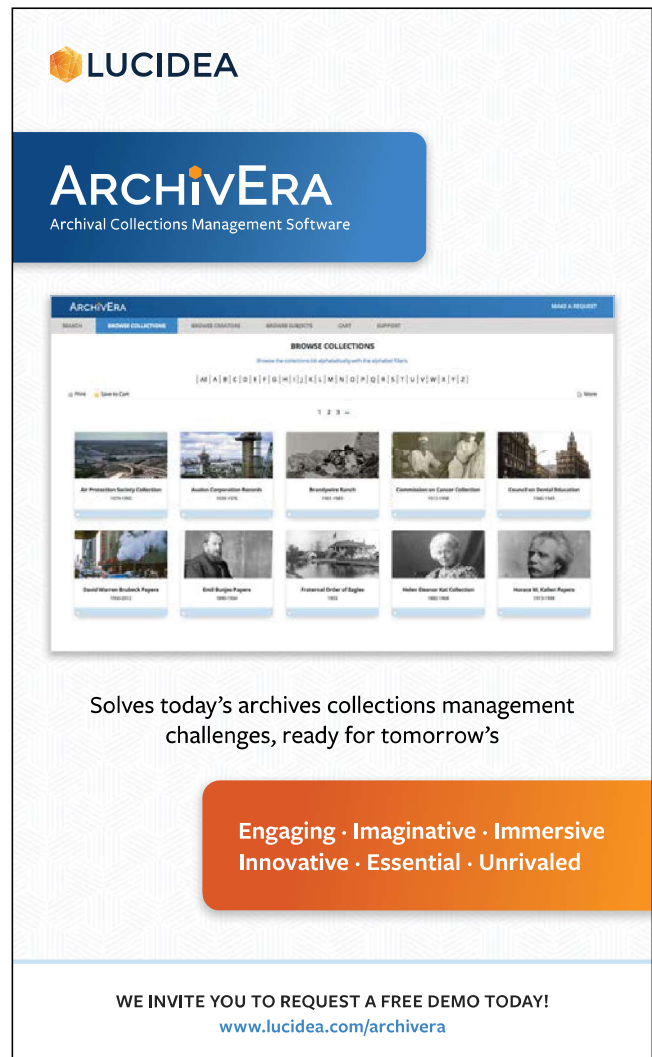
### **Digital Preservation of At-Risk Materials in Environmental Community Archives**

Embracing postcustodial praxis, Heather Sonntag’s project with the Wisconsin-based Sauk Prairie Conservation Alliance (hereafter, the Alliance) combines community archives and environmental activism with the implementation of a digital rescue plan. Conducted as a practicum in 2019, Sonntag chose the Alliance based on prior knowledge of the organization’s work to return a highly contaminated 7,400-acre military industrial complex—the Badger Army Ammunition Plant opened in World War II—to grassland prairie and oak savannah. The ecological effort led by 50 community representatives and volunteers from wildlife biologists and conservationists to water activists and neighboring residents began in 1997. During the subsequent 20 years of recorded meetings, public education panels, land tours, and local newspaper coverage, the Alliance amassed an invaluable mixed-materials collection: records on the steadfast work of a community-led prairie restoration amount to an unprecedented national model of conservation history that converted a Superfund site to a carbon-sink green space. Today, the property is co-managed by tribal, state, and federal governments with portions open to the public in the Sauk Prairie Recreation Area.

Sonntag also chose the Alliance community archive because it provided her new opportunities in digitization, specifically of rescuing at-risk audiovisual materials. Because the collection series of VHS and audio-cassette tapes wholly lacked long-term preservation and access, the immediate project goal was to draft and simultaneously implement a digital rescue plan. The plan and continued digital asset management had to accommodate the small nonprofit organization’s limited digital readiness in technical equipment, trained staff, and funding.

Sonntag took an action-research approach, consulting local online sources about best practices and services to meet the Alliance’s needs and to outline a workflow for digitization. She used open-source tutorials and guidelines by POWRR (Preserving Objects with Restricted Resources), Recollection Wisconsin’s Curating Community Digital Collections “Resources,” and the Wisconsin Historical Society. Additionally, the National Digital Stewardship Alliance “Levels of Digital Preservation” helped determine realistic project

goals and prioritize first steps. Reformatting tools were provided through the Recovering Analog and Digital Data (RADD) stations located in the UW–Madison iSchool Library. RADD is equipped with playback machines that are connected to computers with the software needed to create sustainable digital files with formats like Roxio (.mp4) and Audacity (.wav) used to convert video and audio. Once reformatted, Sonntag transferred files to two external hard drives (2TB WD Passports), which would be kept in separate locations to serve as the Alliance’s offline storage and digital management system. Technical metadata was added to a spreadsheet and finding aid for ongoing digital curation and access. Although devising a digital rescue plan is technically complex, Sonntag learned that it is manageable as an incremental process important to saving endangered records before they are unrecoverable.



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