

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.

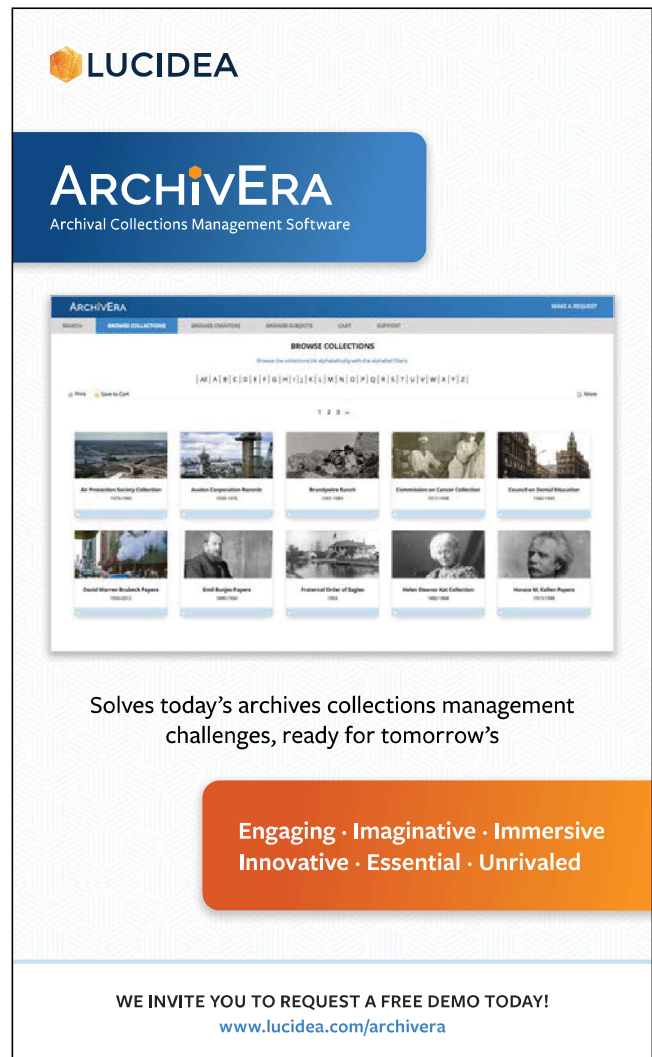
Digital Preservation of At-Risk Materials in Environmental Community Archives

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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Assistant Editor: Danielle Nowak, The Morton Arboretum. Contact Danielle at dnowak@mortonarb.org if you would like to guest author a column or have a good idea to share.

Creating a Bibliography in the Digital Age

By Joseph Coates, Reference Librarian Manager and University Archivist at Purdue University Northwest, and Danielle Nowak, Digital Assets Librarian at The Morton Arboretum

The Calumet Region

Northwest Indiana, nicknamed “The Region” (after “Calumet Region” so-called because the area was inhabited by multiple Native American tribes, predominantly the Illinois, Miami, and Potawatomi tribes) comprises Lake, Porter, LaPorte, Newton, Jasper, and Starke Counties in Indiana. This region neighbors Lake Michigan and is part of the Chicago metropolitan area. The Calumet Region is the geographic area drained by the Grand Calumet and the Little Calumet Rivers of northeastern Illinois and northwestern Indiana in the United States. It is part of the Great Lakes Basin and a subregion of the greater Northwest Indiana region. Since much of this region is on the south shore of Lake Michigan, it is sometimes referred to as the “South Shore.” Because it was initially cut off from the rest of the state due to natural geographic barriers like the Kankakee Marsh to the south, the Calumet Region was the last settled portion of Indiana.



Railroad map of Indiana. Courtesy of Library of Congress, Geography and Map Division

This area of the state has its own unique personality and history. This was the last part of the state to be settled due to it being primarily a swamp. While this may not be appealing today, in the late 1800s, its proximity to Chicago, multiple waterways, and cheap real estate were enticing. Indiana Harbor became a fantastic site for Standard Oil, and when John Rockefeller opened his Whiting, Indiana, refinery, business started in the Region. Next came Elbert Gary, owner of US Steel and founder of “The City of the Century,” Gary, Indiana. Once the first industrial hubs were established, in came other industries. Railroads and stockyards, steel mills and refineries, all heavy industry thrived in the region. Once the area was established with industry, in came the workers. Many workers were of Eastern European descent, leaving the coal mines and farms to work in an area where home ownership and a decent life was possible. Many of these ethnic groups settled around a church, which brought ethnic diversity to the area, however, in much more of a “mixing bowl” than a “melting pot.” Segregation was intentional, and each city in Northwest Indiana still reflects that to a certain degree even to this day.

This made the Region rather unique. The Calumet Region is too industrial to be part of Indiana and too much like Indiana to necessarily fit in with Chicago. Even the daily news is different. Because of its proximity to Chicago, folks in Northwest Indiana are more likely to know about Chicago politics than they do their own state politics. Of course, over the years, much of this has changed, and many places in Northwest Indiana became bedroom communities of Chicago.

Due to the Region’s island-like geography, many places overlook it and think of it as a place in decline, part of flyover country in the Rust Belt. Various archives and historical societies have combated this through the years doing the work to make sure the history of this ethnically and geographically unique area is not forgotten. One such contributor to this effort was Dr. Lance Trusty. Although very much a Virginian, he was a transplant in the area and looked upon the Region

as his home and had a great interest in it. Although he never considered himself a “Region Rat,” the nickname and badge of honor to many of the natives of Northwest Indiana, he did the Region a great service during his tenure at Purdue University Northwest, located in Hammond, Indiana.



N. Lance Trusty (left) and Geoffrey R. Barrow at Borders Bookstore. Courtesy of Purdue University Northwest.

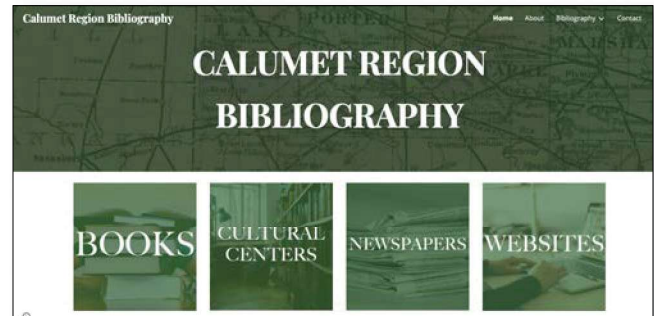
The Calumet Region Bibliography Project

Our project was inspired by *The Calumet Region, a Master Bibliography* published by Lance Trusty of Purdue University Northwest in 1985. Back then, print bibliographies were much more prevalent, and this work was a years-long labor for him. This has been the “bible” for researchers looking at the Calumet Region for a long time. As his work is approaching 40 years old, we decided not only to update it, but to make it web based. The idea of creating an addendum to his work was appealing; however, books are out of date as soon as they are published. In a web format, we can continually add to it and make this work organic, always growing and changing, community driven, and serving as an important tool for those who want to study the Calumet Region. We also wanted to make it more inclusive.

The definition of what makes up the Calumet Region has always been flexible. When Dr. Trusty completed his bibliography, it only covered Lake and Porter Counties, which is what the Region has been culturally, but geographically, it includes the six most northwestern counties in Indiana. This website quite simply is trying to highlight the history of this area to assist researchers. This is not just a bibliography for serious historians, but for everyone. The idea is to make this information easy

to access for people of all skill levels to learn more about where they live and why it’s important.

The Contents



The Calumet Region Bibliography homepage. Courtesy of The Calumet Region Bibliography.

The idea was to break the contents down by county, but that proved to be a bit too difficult due to sheer mass of information available. We decided to break each section down by category, subcategory, and so on. Overlap may eventually become an issue; however, that is to be expected. We started with a general section that covers some of the most popular and easy-to-find items about each county. In this general section, we added to some already existing works from the Indiana State Library, then we split all other monographs into two other sections: subject guide and cities and towns. The base for the subject guide is the original bibliography and some newer general works. This breakdown allowed us to keep sections brief and manageable for readers. The monograph section will be by far the most time consuming to complete. There are an estimated 2,500–3,000 items that need to be added, so this section is a work in progress.

The next section is newspaper collections. No newspapers were included in the Trusty bibliography, so we were able to add holdings from *Chronicling of America*, Indiana State Library, and other universities throughout the state. We also added a section for current newspapers in the area. This invites traffic and subscriptions to our local papers. We hope to add journals and other items, such as community newsletters, business newsletters, and journals to this area.

We also cover cultural centers, but trying to list all of the holdings of all the archives, libraries, and historical societies just wasn’t practical. As we know, archivists,

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librarians, and curators have a much better handle on their collections, so the goal was to list all of those places. Making these small institutions visible may help to unlock forgotten treasures that may tell someone a significant and forgotten story. Finally, websites didn't exist at the time of the first bibliography. Many organizations that helped to build and maintain the Region have a rich history and caretakers who love to share it. Including their websites makes them findable to the general public.

The Calumet Bibliography Website

The site (<https://www.calumetregionbibliography.org>) was created using Google Sites, which so far has been a great fit for this project for a variety of reasons. Because this project is run solely during the volunteer hours of two library professionals, keeping the cost low was imperative. As Google Sites is free, it was one of the obvious first choices for building out the site. The project creators' comfort with Google products also made Google Sites a logical choice. Finally, Google Sites is relatively user friendly. A convenient feature is the option to drag and drop content. Additionally, documents, photographs, forms, and any other medium

stored in a Google Drive account can easily be input. Not only that, but Google Suite is really helpful, not just for email, but for Docs, Forms, and Meet. It is simple enough for people to work on and versatile enough for projects like this.

Conclusion

Frankly, we are not sure where this project will end up. We do not know how useful it will be or if anything similar exists elsewhere. As two people who grew up in a unique area of the Rust Belt—seemingly dying, often ignored, and usually looked down upon—the goal is to keep the history of that area available for all who want to know more about the Region Rats who live in the shadows of Chicago, on a polluted island in the midst farmland, a mixing bowl of hardscrabble immigrants who did their best to fuel the industry of our nation.



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