

BUILDING REPRESENTATIVE

# Community Archives

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Inclusive Strategies in Practice

EDITED BY **HANNAH LEAH CRUMMÉ**

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# Introduction

## Building, Reassessing, and Working Together

Hannah Leah Crummé

**L**ibraries and archives across the country are grappling with the problems created by collection practices of the past. Mary A. Caldera and Kathryn M. Neal explain that although institutional and governmental records typically document those in power, who, until recently, have been a relatively homogenous group, community and activist archives have preserved parallel histories documenting those excluded from a narrative provided by official sources. These archives offer evidence of a public history, preserved in ephemera, publications, and memory and reflecting the experiences of individuals and groups. They argue that “history is not what happened in the past, but rather what is communicated about the past. And what is communicated about the past is shaped by what survives and is deemed valuable enough to preserve.”<sup>1</sup> Caldera and Neal identify the need for both reflection on and documentation of communal experience and also for the use of these records. This volume examines continuing efforts in archives across the US to build inclusive records that better represent the disparate histories of this country. It first examines institutions’ recent collecting efforts and in so doing offers case studies of innovative approaches, new techniques, and the resilience and patience necessary to build collections. Next, the volume examines efforts by archivists to reassess and reprocess collections to bring the many and various stories they witness to the fore. Reexamining collections has shown that, although history is often written by those in power, records are kept by everyone. Contributing archivists ask: How can we find these stories, bring attention to them, and make them easy for researchers to discover? Finally, this volume

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includes chapters written by archivists in community organizations themselves, working within networks of trust to preserve and tell stories. This final section encourages us to consider the difference between community-created archives, community-centered archives, and archives that simply document various communities, made with little or no consultation of those whose histories are witnessed in the records. All are valuable, but they offer different levels of intimacy and give different perspectives on events, relationships, and power dynamics. Far from exhaustive, this collection seeks to examine some of the techniques archivists are deploying as we continue to work to accurately, thoroughly, and efficiently document, preserve, and create access to history. We offer the projects detailed here as models of how archivists can begin, fail, correct course, and succeed and to ask: Where do we go from here?

I am a child of the West. My grandparents told stories of their lives as Irish hoteliers in San Francisco, of growing up in the kitchens and Jewish orphanages of Los Angeles, and of the fields and farmhouses attended to by Swiss and Norse émigrés around the capitol of Oregon, Salem. In school, however, history was monolithic. Year after year, it seemed, we learned about the Oregon Trail and the gold rush West. A decade as an expatriate made me anxious to propagate an empathetic and nuanced worldview of history. My research abroad focused on recovering unstudied stories of women and Spanish speakers in English archives, and it was clear to me that more stories have been preserved than we expect when we return to the records of early modern bureaucracy. While studying the political networks that surrounded the poet and courtier Sir Philip Sidney, I began to study his cousin, Lady Jane Dormer, Duchess of Feria. Dormer worked to support English recusancy from abroad. I was struck by Dormer's diplomatic and advisory role during the height of the Anglo-Spanish conflict of the sixteenth century. A hagiographic account of the duchess's life was transcribed in the late nineteenth century, then disappeared. The copy elided many of the most controversial claims from its transcription, altering the original manuscript's report of contemporary events. I searched and years later located it and began to create a new transcription to fill in the holes left by the Victorian editors. At the same time, I was working at the National Archives in Kew. There, Amanda Bevans, head

of Legal Court Records, drew my attention to the Court of Requests. The Court of Requests was a minor equity court in England and Wales. It was instituted by King Richard III in his 1484 parliament and heard cases from the poor and from servants of the king. It quickly became popular for the low cost of bringing a case and rapid processing time. Here, I found countless cases brought by women, shopkeepers, pirates, and playwrights, all recorded in English. Accessed exclusively through paper finding aids located in the National Archives medieval and early modern reading room, the Court of Requests records are an essential source from which researchers can build a sense of everyday life in early modern England. In 2016 I returned home, to Lewis and Clark College in Portland, Oregon. The collection here reflected a particular enthusiasm, born out of the bicentennial of the Lewis and Clark expedition in 2004–2006, the college's name, and local collectors' interests. However, this focus on early explorer and settler history did not correspond to the curriculum or reflect the interests of our students. This led me to talk to my team and visit other local colleges and libraries to understand their processes and holdings, and the reparative work they were undertaking to make collections more complete, more accessible, and more accurate. The sense that I gathered throughout my career, that collections and communities have more stories to tell about our past than have been considered already, leads me to constantly interrogate the college's holdings, and my colleagues, and ask what we should add, what we should reconsider, and what we should be doing differently.

This volume examines real collections and the experiences of the archivists who created them to present a practical guide to building community archives. The essays in this volume expose errors and pitfalls, with the aim of helping special collections librarians as they design projects in the future. The techniques libraries are using to do this work are innovative and, often, based on trial and error. Rather than collecting records contemporaneously with their creation, many collections are working to reconstruct the past, conducting oral histories or scanning the personal records of communities never organizationally gathered together until now. This volume springs from the need for archivists in the field to share what works, what does not, and what cultural or historical sensitivities create barriers to documentation. At the same time, archivists are reviewing their extant holdings and

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identifying processing errors and how changes in description detail or terminology can bring new stories to the foreground. In many of the stories here we see how humility, curiosity, and energy are essential tools helping archivists work with communities of trust to find and preserve a shared history.

Chapter authors have a range of different relationships with the communities they document. These differences can create challenges, but it is our responsibility, as librarians and archivists, to interrogate how to make collections better, more thorough, and more representative. One of the projects described in this volume seeks to better represent the wide range of experiences within a city by improving controlled vocabulary in governmental archives. In many ways, this undertaking would not usually constitute a community archives project, but it is included here because many of the changes that the chapter documents were driven by inquiries from citizens of the city that the collection represents. Some of the chapters are written by college or university archivists who identify strongly with the community their projects document. Others are written by library professionals very much outside of the community whose story they are trying to collect, working to gain cultural competency and establish trust. The final section of the book considers archives that were built by communities themselves. These, perhaps, go the furthest to considering how collections and community build and support each other.

Collection management and development in special collections is high stakes. It has implications for how history is documented, written, and taught. The authors who have contributed to this volume all are interested in shaping the records so that this history is more representative of the communities in which they live. In so doing, they are making it possible for a broader cross-section of the people to see their stories represented in historical collections. They foster belonging and make libraries more welcoming for the community as a whole. We will consider how to best use the resources available to librarians, including the equipment, time, people, and funding. We will also discuss the challenges of completing this work: how to manage space, how to seek institutional and grant support, and how to support morale. Many chapters conclude with suggestions of plans for the future. Thus, we begin by asking the following questions: Who



should undertake this work? What kinds of projects are underway? When is our work finished? What do we do next? This volume may not completely answer all of these questions, but we hope that the case studies it offers, along with their many idiosyncratic shortcomings, encourage creative design and development of projects aimed at more robustly documenting history.

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### **Who Should Undertake This Work?**

Librarians, archivists, and museum professionals are in a privileged position—not only do we have the time, training, and resources to create and preserve records, but we also mediate how records are accessed and interpreted. The documents we look after are endowed with importance because they have been selected to be kept by an institution with finite space and perceived authority. The answers they provide and the narratives they endorse are received as “official history.” The idea of “official history” is often contrasted with the idea of “public memory,” or the recollecting of history, among both members of a community and a larger society. Public memory is created through shared experience, by the records that witness events, and in creation of the monuments that memorialize a moment. It is not accurate, but rather is shaped by what is remembered, what is forgotten, and what is intentionally or unintentionally elided. Public memory differs from official history in that it is mutable, is driven by a range of perspectives, and does not necessarily claim impartiality. It may lack stability, but rather is focused on broad engagement with the past. New information with previously unheard perspectives changes public memory over time, as does the constant reassessment of history by scholars, by the media, and by communities. A broader variety of evidence is used to create public memory, including newscasts, speeches, statues, exhibitions, memorials, holidays, films, artwork and murals, oral histories, recipes, and artifacts (including a wide variety of cultural items ranging from concert programs to clothing to automobiles). Public memory has the effect of narrating individuals’ and communities’ relationship with each other and with institutions (including

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universities, law enforcement, and nonprofit organizations) and the state, and can impact civil engagement. It fosters connections but can also create barriers to a sense of trust or inclusion. Both libraries' and museums' access to resources and the weight their collections carry make it imperative that we scrutinize our holdings and assess how they were built and what is missing. This book considers how to include public memory collections in the items we hold.

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### **What Kind of Projects Are People Doing?**

This volume, broadly, looks at three of the most common types of projects that are being undertaken now: oral history projects, community collecting and curation projects, and reassessments of existing collections and relationships to see what new insights they might produce. Each chapter examines a particular project or collection to assess its strengths and weaknesses. We consider how each project might be improved and how each improves our sense of history. Chapters consider how to build connections with constituents, how to record and preserve information, and how to make collections more accessible.

In chapter 1, Alissa Rae Funderburk begins our investigation of oral histories with a call to consider standards of interview, transcription, and standardization—questions that underpin all the subsequent chapters on this method of archival documentation. Funderburk grapples with problems of transcription and digital archiving of oral histories to fully portray the recollections of marginalized Mississippians to future readers. How do we accurately transcribe and edit the narratives of Black people while balancing the perceived importance of standardized English? She argues that, because the English language, particularly in academia, is inextricably linked to colonial practices and has been used to delegitimize the voices and agency of Black people, archivists must be transparent in their efforts to construct more inclusive records representing the disparate histories of the nation.

In chapter 2, the McCall Library at the University of South Alabama has turned to oral history as a way to overcome documentary silences and include voices that are not frequently represented in its

manuscript collections. Deborah Gurt and Kathy J. Cooke focus on interviews from inhabitants of the environmentally and culturally diverse Mobile-Tensaw River Delta. They explore the oral traditions that reflect the significance of the land to peoples who have lived there for generations. Gurt and Cooke consider inhabitants of the delta's multiple cultures and communities, including Apalachee, Creole, Northern European, and African. They explore how to place different perspectives in conversation with each other through exhibits and curation. In so doing, they offer an example of producing exhibitions from oral histories, helping patrons see themselves represented in collections. Gurt and Cooke grapple with the ways in which local knowledge and sources disagree with each other and with academic interpretation. They see some interviewees tell the story they believe the interviewer wants to hear, while others wish primarily to disrupt the dominant narrative. They also discuss the technical challenges of providing robust access to the collection with a minimum of digital infrastructure in place, including tools to develop a digital portal using purpose-built tools.

In chapter 3, the Special Collections at Lewis and Clark College, known for signature collections that witness Oregon history, are particularly associated with books that pertain to nineteenth-century westward exploration and expansion in North America. However, a few years ago the staff in special collections noticed that this myopic focus did not inspire the students, correspond with the curriculum, or reflect the real diversity of Oregon's past. Our third chapter examines efforts to build collections that more accurately document the diverse history of Oregon. After about a year of conversation with various stakeholders, the Special Collections team at Lewis and Clark found two partners in the Vietnamese Community of Oregon (VNCO) and the Asian and Pacific American Network of Oregon (APANO). Hannah Crummé, Zoë Maughan, and Vân Truong's chapter explores how the Special Collections team began to conduct oral histories. This effort was slow—it took a long time to build cultural competencies, to establish mutual respect with members of the VNCO and APANO, and to gather the resources so that the Lewis & Clark library could genuinely commit to creating and sustaining a collection. This chapter explores initial stages of the project—building the collection, partnerships with public

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libraries and local education service districts, and finally plans for growth and sustainability. Crummé, Maughan, and Truong consider their own success seeking grant support for this project and also how to undertake such a project without the same resources.

The LGBTQ+ community has long been underrepresented in archives, and publicly accessible LGBTQ+ collections in East Tennessee archives are almost nonexistent. The Voices Out Loud project discussed in chapter 4 uncovers and documents this history in the form of publications, images, and artifacts and, crucially, through recording firsthand experiences in the form of oral histories. Founded in 2016 by University of Tennessee, Knoxville (UTK), librarians as an LGBTQ+ community archive, the Voices Out Loud project has encountered challenges specific to archiving in a hostile environment or climate. In 2019, the Voices Out Loud codirectors met with UTK archivists and digital production librarians to discuss collaborating with the University Libraries' Special Collections to preserve the physical material and provide access. Chapter 4 examines the intersections of community and institutional archives and considers how information professionals can mindfully navigate the needs of their donors while accurately documenting the donors' stories. By sharing the project's efforts to develop sustainable collecting strategies, cultivate institutional and community buy-in, and ensure access, security, and long-term preservation, the authors offer guidance for approaching LGBTQ+ community outreach. By understanding the impetus for creating and maintaining LGBTQ+ collections, archivists can foster more inclusive and reflective practices in their own institutions.

Although oral history is a prevalent corrective by which to expand representation, it is far from the only tool for building community archives. It is limited by the need for participants to be alive and to be willing to tell their own stories. It also typically focuses on building one-on-one relationships between the interviewer and the subject of the interview, building a collection that, although it will hopefully be a resource for the community, does not itself bring the community together. This volume also considers collections that are the product of community-based efforts to collect artifacts and documents in museums and repositories. These efforts, driven by communities themselves, often begin outside higher education, instead of beginning in local,

easily accessible settings. They reflect various collecting values and practices and offer a model of flexibility in collection creation.

The Labor Archives of Washington (LAW), founded in 2010 and part of the University of Washington Libraries, Seattle, is a community-centered collection documenting the history of unions and working people in the Pacific Northwest. In chapter 5, Conor M. Casey details the collaborative curatorial and archival administration model of the LAW, which aims to place the stories of stakeholder communities at the center of archival activities. To do this, archivists create sustained programmatic relationships with community partners. LAW archivists solicit stakeholders' opinions to identify omissions in the corpus of the overall archives. This approach rejects the proposition that neutrality is possible and instead aims to self-consciously correct omissions in the archive. Casey argues that as long as the focus of LAW's efforts is relationship building, rather than simply documenting, the archive may become a nexus of the community itself.

Melissa E. Marinaro continues the theme of building community relationships in their work at the Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania. In chapter 6, Marinaro explores how an Italian American collection was established at the history center in 1990 at the insistence of the local community of immigrants and second-generation residents. As a result, the museum's artifact collection now houses over a thousand textiles, tools, housewares, decorative objects, and other three-dimensional items reflecting the Italian American experience, and the Detre Library and Archives contains thousands of primary sources including manuscripts, correspondence, photographs, immigration documents, records from clubs and fraternal societies, and oral history interviews. It is one of the most comprehensive collections of its kind in the United States and documents the pivotal role Italian Americans played in shaping Western Pennsylvania's political, economic, religious, and cultural landscapes.

This volume also considers ways existing collections are reassessed. These collections, often created by and for those in power, document more than just the stories that they were intended to capture. A reassessment of collections found in municipal archives, university libraries, and local history societies can raise important questions about the terminology used in finding aids, how librarians answer inquiries, and what outreach efforts encourage community engagement.

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In chapter 7, Christine M. Angel and Mary Elizabeth Brown consider Marymount Manhattan College (MMC), which was founded by and for women, and the Center for Migration Studies, which was founded by Italian Americans. Both archives participate as academic service-learning community partners with the Division of Library and Information Science master's program at St. John's University, located in Queens, New York. By virtue of its educational role, St. John's addresses an important concern in archival representation: recruiting students from diverse populations to information centers such as libraries, archives, and museums. As part of their training, students work with technology to make archival material accessible to the public. Their work making material digitally accessible has led to new donations of collections to the archives in which they work, increasing the diversity of the holdings.

In chapter 8, Mary B. Hansen explains that, although there are always exceptions, the Portland (Oregon) City Archives does not actively solicit material that does not relate in some way to the municipal government. Although white culture dominated much of Portland's bureaucratic history, local government tends to be more accessible to a broad range of members of the community. Whether testifying at city council about homelessness or writing remonstrations to the Bureau of Transportation regarding road improvements, people have their daily lives affected by city government, and those interactions are part of its record. Archivists are in a position to locate and elevate stories within the bureaucratic records and make them accessible to the communities they document. This chapter focuses on how institutional archives identify and promote records that reflect traditionally underrepresented communities. Hansen explains the importance for a municipal archivist of learning the history of the city, including names of local civil rights organizations, organizers, and rallying incidents. She explains how to use this knowledge to reassess records, making them more accessible via item-level processing, the creation of in-depth metadata, and digitization. Finally, she explains how to create events, presentations, and even reference interviews that promote these records as witnesses to a range of complicated and diverse histories. Hansen's chapter uses examples from the Portland City Archives to demonstrate how reassessment can foster new engagement with existing archives and help all members of the community see their stories reflected in the history of the city.

For many communities, history lives as much in their celebrations, special events, and memorial displays as it does in the original objects sought by the archives for historical documentation. In chapter 9, Michelle McCoy explains how the Rev. Clay Evans Archive came to the Chicago Public Library. A legendary Black Baptist minister, an award-winning gospel performer, a civil rights leader, and a charitable organizer, Evans was the founder and leader of the Fellowship Missionary Baptist Church in Chicago. He created a community that joined him in religious and civic actions. When discussions arose about placing the records of his achievements in an institution, this community was anxious to safeguard the story of their beloved leader, to personally contribute to the story, and to showcase his living legacy to the larger audience that a public facility offered through exhibit halls, programming spaces, and the reading room. This chapter examines archival best practices alongside the expectations of stakeholders as a means to share the different, but not necessarily incompatible, visions that are in play when an institution begins to work with a community. In so doing, McCoy examines how public institutions can work with local community groups to document the lives that shaped the city.

Anne LeVent Prah and Alisha Babbstein argue in chapter 10 that a community archive is most effective when its members shape its collecting policy. They examine how the Oregon Jewish Museum and Center for Holocaust Education (OJMCHE) developed out of personal and community collections in Portland. The initial collecting effort grew out of an oral history project that began in the early 1970s, two decades before the founding of the museum. The project documented life in the historically Jewish immigrant neighborhood of South Portland from the turn of the twentieth century until its demise under urban renewal in the 1960s. As interviewers met with the former residents of the neighborhood, they collected papers, artifacts, and photographs. When the Oregon Jewish Museum was founded in 1990, these materials formed the nucleus of the collection and the basis for a collecting policy. A merger with the Oregon Holocaust Resource Center in 2014 expanded the new museum's mission to include collecting materials from survivors of the Holocaust. From the beginning, OJMCHE understood that the archives must be representative of everyday Jewish Oregonians and not simply reflective of celebration and achievement. This chapter addresses the challenges of achieving full representation and how

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collection policies and priorities adapted over time. It addresses how a community-based archive can serve flexibly the ever-changing needs of its community.

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### **When Is Our Work Finished, and What Do We Do Next?**

As we enter the mid-2020s, higher education institutions and libraries are focused on accessibility, representation, equity, and diversity in collections, staff, and patrons. Conversations and projects like those detailed in this volume are happening across the discipline. We hope this volume encourages documentation, reflection, and dissemination of projects and techniques so this work can grow and develop. After all, the need to do this work now is the result of earlier failures to examine our own approaches with a critical eye. As we continue the work of documenting history, we must actively interrogate what we are missing, eliding, or silencing, and one of the best ways to do this is to involve our communities—archivists elsewhere whose work is more advanced than our own, readers who are seeking information that does not seem to have been preserved, and communities that would like to participate in the conversation. By continuing to share information about the work we are undertaking, we help others advance, and we invite feedback on our own techniques, paving the way for improvement.

Community groups have been preserving the stories, traditions, and documents that witness their histories all along. Sometimes these efforts have been organized and have become community archives. At other times, collections built within individual communities are transferred to universities or larger local organizations where they can benefit from greater resources and are more easily accessed by researchers. This volume concludes that there is tremendous value in communities, libraries, and other heritage institutions working together. Although it is our duty to work to preserve a complete history, these stories will be even more honest and thorough when created within communities of trust. A future innovation might be to develop freestanding trainings, resources, and tools that could be made available to organizations that



want to preserve their own collections. This will allow record creators to shape their own stories. Because libraries and archives have the facilities to maintain records and make them available, we can work with communities to house their archives once they are created, or we can help communities attain the resources they need to preserve the records where they are. After all, taking a collection out of its community harms the relationship between the material and its creators, even if it provides greater access and may help with preservation. Housing this type of collection at an institution of higher education, at a state or local historical society, or in a museum setting alters the white supremacist narrative of American history, correcting disparities in existing collections to better represent a more complete story of the country. It clearly conveys the importance of these collections to the fabric of our society. However, it places them outside the control of their creators and characterizes the collections as relatively final and complete. Furthermore, although it may make them more accessible to researchers at large, it almost certainly introduces barriers for those to whom these stories may be most important: the neighborhoods, communities, and individuals who are documented in them. Training material distributed to communities could also be used to help students—both undergraduate and K-12—understand how history is preserved and by extension what might be missing. This type of initiative could alleviate some of the work of archives to seek records, could empower communities, and could help preserve fascinating stories. It could even help address the ever-growing storage problem faced by already-full repositories. In short, this volume concludes that everyone should be involved in the work of recording history: those who live and witness it, those in larger communities shaped by significant events, and those who have the resources to preserve records and create access to them. We should continuously ask ourselves how to manage best the relationships between these contributors.

We must approach this work with cultural humility. The projects described here require empathy and careful collecting practices that seek to preserve history without creating or perpetuating harm. However, information professionals must be willing to risk error, embarrassment, and insufficiency in order to help make change and move forward. We must continue to assess and improve our efforts

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to create better collections. The chapters here are part of a long conversation about record-keeping practices and how to preserve more thorough witnesses to history—a conversation that began long ago and must continue to grow, develop, and change. It is my ardent hope that it becomes quickly outdated.

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### NOTE

1. Mary A. Caldera and Kathryn M. Neal, “Introduction,” in *Through the Archival Looking Glass: A Reader on Diversity and Inclusion*, ed. Mary A. Caldera and Kathryn M. Neal (Chicago: SAA, 2014), x–xi.

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