From Archives to Data: Creating a Research Database to Document the Black Women of the WCTU

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Abstract:
This presentation reports on the Frances Willard House Museum and WCTU Archives' current, ongoing project, "Black Women of the WCTU," to create an online research database documenting the understudied but significant involvement of Black women in the Woman's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU). The goal of the project is to produce a searchable, freely accessible database to benefit researchers: scholars in many fields, students of all ages, local history/genealogists, and more. The project is important and timely, filling in a gap in the history of Black women's activism in the United States. It will add a significant new body of information to expand research on social networks, intersectionality, and the role of local women on the ground. Although we will include some contextualization, we see this project as a research resource, fulfilling the archivist's role as the provider of the tools for research, rather than to engage in storytelling and analysis ourselves. By turning archives into data, the lives of formerly anonymous individuals can be highlighted and incorporated into a larger history.

The data comes from the extensive holdings of the WCTU Archives in Evanston, IL, along with other resources, and compiles names of individual women, and the locations of local WCTU unions (branches), state by state, throughout the U.S. In presenting the progress of our project at the Research Forum, we hope to make our colleagues aware of the project, which is still in its early stages after a series of pilot programs; and we wish to encourage feedback, inquiries, comments, and advice on the project—especially on the challenges we face in completing it. Challenges include lack of staff, funding needs, undigitized source material, and incomplete sets of records to work from. We will benefit from the opportunity to find collaborators as well as to help inform our peers about the project—which we believe is of interest both by its content and by its use of data-mining and other aspects of digital humanities.

About the author:
Janet Olson was the Assistant University Archivist at Northwestern University, Evanston, Illinois, from 1998 until her retirement with emerita status in 2020. Meanwhile, she has been the part-time Archivist for the Frances Willard House Museum & WCTU Archives in Evanston since 2007, and continues in that role. A Certified Archivist, she has held leadership positions in local, regional, and national archival organizations, and has served on the Illinois State Historical Records Advisory Board. She holds a master's degree in U.S. history from Loyola University Chicago, with a research focus on 19th-century social reform movements. Olson has written and co-written chapters, encyclopedia articles, and exhibition catalogs.