

CASE #11

Constructing History: A Student-Created Public History Exhibit Using Omeka

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LEARNING OBJECTIVES ENGAGED FROM [GUIDELINES FOR PRIMARY SOURCE LITERACY](#) BY THIS CASE STUDY

- 2.D. Understand that historical records may never have existed, may not have survived, or may not be collected and/or publicly accessible. Existing records may have been shaped by the selectivity and mediation of individuals such as collectors, archivists, librarians, donors, and/or publishers, potentially limiting the sources available for research.
- 3.B. Identify and communicate information found in primary sources, including summarizing the content of the source and identifying and reporting key components such as how it was created, by whom, when, and what it is.
- 4.C. Situate a primary source in context by applying knowledge about the time and culture in which it was created; the author or creator; its format, genre, publication history; or related materials in a collection.

CASE STUDY LOCATION

Special Collections and Archives
Elizabeth Huth Coates Library
Trinity University
San Antonio, Texas
<https://lib.trinity.edu/library-collections/>

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Introduction and Institutional Context

This case study examines the final project assigned to an upper-level history elective course, “Public History, Memory, and Interpretation” (hereafter referred to by its course number, HIST 3468). Students used Omeka, an open-source web publishing platform, to create a digital exhibit using archival materials. Students were responsible for all aspects of curating the exhibit, including selecting materials, creating metadata for digital objects, writing the didactic text, and creating the final website. When completed successfully, these tasks fulfilled learning objectives 2.D. (Understand that historical records may never have existed . . .), 3.B. (Identify and communicate information found in primary sources . . .), and 4.C. (Situate a primary source in context . . .) from the [Guidelines for Primary Source Literacy](#).

Students in HIST 3468 were all history majors, many of whom were considering careers in museum studies, archives, library science, or other fields related to public history. The course description defines public history as “the work historians do to interpret the past and share their interpretations with the public.” The course fulfills the “Oral and Visual Communication” core capacity requirement that is part of Trinity University’s liberal arts curriculum by including substantial instruction in oral and visual communication. This project was assigned in lieu of a final paper or examination, and accounted for 30% of students’ final grades.

The faculty member teaching HIST 3468 listed three primary learning objectives in her syllabus for the course:

- 1) Identify and use the elements of effective oral and visual communication;
- 2) Understand the principles and complexity of creating historical exhibitions in a public context and develop an awareness of the methods public historians use to plan and construct these exhibitions; and
- 3) Understand how local, regional, and national values constrain and/or shape how public historians interpret the past and share those interpretations with the public.

The assigned readings and lectures leading up to this final project laid the foundation to give the students critical understanding of the constructed nature of historical exhibits.

Trinity University is a highly selective private liberal arts college in San Antonio, Texas, with an undergraduate enrollment of 2,600 students. Between 2008 and 2013, the college’s Quality Enhancement Plan addressed improving information literacy across the curriculum. A result of this initiative was the establishment of a successful library instruction program that provides support to courses in every department. While general library instruction is widespread across the curriculum, instruction sessions using materials in Special Collections and Archives remain less common. In previous iterations of HIST 3468, students visited Special Collections for a behind the scenes tour and show-and-tell session. The new assignment described in this case study provided students with the opportunity to actually perform public history, rather than simply observe one example of a memory institution.

Narrative

For this project, students worked with the papers of Reverend Claude W. Black and his wife, ZerNona Stewart Black. Reverend Black was a minister in San Antonio, a city council member, and a leader in the local civil rights movement. ZerNona Black was an organizer for the YWCA and USO prior to their marriage; as the “first lady” of Mt. Zion Baptist Church, she led ministries that helped the poor, needy,

and elderly members of their San Antonio community. The Black papers include more than 100 cubic feet of materials—photographs, videos, audiotapes, scrapbooks, correspondence, sermons and other writings, and ephemera.

Because this project comprised such a large portion of the students' grades, it was broken up into stages over the course of the semester. First, students conducted background research into the life of Reverend Black and the history of the civil rights movement in San Antonio in preparation for their first visit to Special Collections.

Several weeks into the semester, class was held in the Special Collections reading room during its normal meeting time. The first half of the 90-minute class session included a general orientation to visiting Special Collections, accessing and interpreting the finding aid for an archival collection, and handling archival materials. The Special Collections Librarian discussed the provenance of the Black Papers, including what materials had not been included when the collection was donated to the library. Time was spent discussing the role the archivist plays in crafting the story that visitors encounter in an exhibit—determining what material is included, what material is left out, situating it in context, and the responsibility to minimize bias when doing so.

The second half of class provided time for students to explore preselected boxes from the collection, including materials on a variety of topics and in a range of formats. The goal for this exploratory time was to ignite excitement for the project and overcome the nervousness students might feel about coming in on their own to conduct research. It also gave the class an opportunity to identify recurring themes in the material and brainstorm different topics that the exhibit might cover.

Over the course of the next six weeks, students were expected to visit Special Collections independently to work on content development. The course instructor formed them into five groups based on the themes that the class had identified (faith, family, activism, community, and legacy); within each theme, students worked individually on their own topics. During these independent visits students replicated the work done by professional archivists curating a digital exhibit: they examined the collection, identifying items that would provide examples of Reverend Black's activism in the church, community, and civil rights movement. Scanning was done by Special Collections staff and student workers. The professor did not require a specific amount of time spent in the archives, but most students found it necessary to visit three or more times to complete their research. Though increased reading room traffic is always welcomed, it did create a burden on the staff to meet the demand for appointments, as well as the unusually high number of scan requests.

The Special Collections Librarian conducted a second instruction session three weeks before their final deadline, in order to provide an introduction to the Omeka exhibit. In addition to demonstrating the functionality of Omeka, the librarian discussed Dublin Core metadata, design aesthetics and navigation for virtual exhibits, and accessibility for differently-abled users.

Students spent the next three weeks constructing their exhibit. Using the "Simple Vocab" plugin in Omeka, the Special Collections Librarian created standardized vocabularies for several Dublin Core metadata fields: format, type, publisher, source, and rights. This streamlined the metadata creation process for students, while ensuring consistency with other digital exhibits created by the library.

The completed exhibit "went live" during the final exam period. The course professor organized an exhibit opening where students presented their exhibit sections to members of the history department,

library staff, and university administrators. Students were expected to reflect upon their curation process as a part of this presentation. In addition, the students wrote short reflection papers about the exhibit-building process, identifying their individual contributions and discussing how they conducted their research.

One of the goals for this project was that the exhibit created by students in HIST 3468 would be a lasting contribution to the library. Students were expected to meet the same metadata and design standards that the Special Collections staff are held to when creating digital projects. Some minor metadata cleanup was necessary following the end of the semester, but for the most part the students' contributions came close to or met the professional standards.

Over the course of the semester, students engaged with three of the learning objectives from the Guidelines for Primary Source Literacy. First, they identified archival material to use in their exhibit and created metadata that identified items, their dates of creation, and creators (learning objective 3B). Students then conducted research to provide contextual information in their exhibit, situating the work documented in these archival sources within the broader landscape of San Antonio history and the civil rights movement (learning objective 4.C.).

Finally, students became intimately familiar with the process through which history is mediated by archivists, librarians, and historians who present primary sources to the public. They came to understand that an archival collection contains material of scholarly value that may not be described in the finding aid. One student discovered a letter to Reverend Black from then-Vice President Lyndon B. Johnson, praising a speech Black gave. The letter, which had been framed by Reverend Black, was arranged in a series of plaques and framed awards, and was unmentioned in the finding aid's list of correspondents. Other students discovered the challenge in deciding which material to include in an exhibit; this was particularly difficult for the students documenting Reverend Black's faith, who selected just a few sermons to scan from the four boxes that composed the subseries. The student curators also encountered gaps where material they expected to find (for example, any documentation of Reverend Black's involvement in lunch counter sit-ins at the downtown department store in San Antonio) could not be found in the collection (learning objective 2.D.).

Results

Students were asked to reflect upon the exhibit-making experience during their final presentations; this feedback showed how successful the project was at achieving the course objectives. One student said that the project "gave them a sense for what it's like to be a public historian," and that "it feels valuable to be contributing to something that will continue for years." Another student said "It helped me understand how history is made," succinctly demonstrating the achievement of learning objective 2.D.

Following the conclusion of the project, the Special Collections Librarian examined the online exhibit to check for factual inaccuracies, inappropriate use of materials (primarily looking for violations of third party copyrights), and incorrect citations or metadata. This process revealed a few minor problems with metadata or the didactic content, but overall the students were extremely successful at identifying appropriate primary sources for inclusion (learning objective 3.B.) and properly situating them in context (learning objective 4.C.).

The Special Collections Librarian solicited additional feedback from the students using a Qualtrics survey; this survey was optional and was not completed by all class participants. The survey provided

more granular feedback about flaws in the course design, particularly students' frustration with working in groups and with Special Collections' limited hours. In future iterations of the course, staff will arrange for Special Collections to be open a few evenings and Saturdays over the course of the semester to better meet students' needs. The Special Collections Librarian also plans to conduct surveys at regular intervals during the semester, rather than waiting until the conclusion, in order to allow staff to adjust practices (such as the reading room hours) as needed.

Following the conclusion of the semester, the digital exhibit was migrated to the library's Omeka instance (due to permissions limitations in the Omeka platform, a separate site was created for the class to use during the construction phase).¹ The library uses Google Analytics to track ongoing traffic to the exhibit. In the six months after the exhibit went live, it had over 1600 page views from over 206 unique visitors. More than 70% of those page views had a session duration of over three minutes; only 9% of page views lasted fewer than ten seconds. These trends demonstrate that students succeeded in creating an engaging piece of digital scholarship. The library intends to continue to track Google Analytics to identify long-term traffic patterns for this and other Omeka exhibits; this information could be used to inform the selection of collections for future exhibits.

Lessons Learned

Although the final digital exhibit exceeded the librarian and professor's expectations for the assignment, there are still areas where this project can be improved in future iterations. In the future, the Special Collections Librarian plans to place more emphasis on reading and interpreting the finding aid during the class visit at the beginning of the semester. This might have been less of an issue if the class were working with a smaller collection, but some students were overwhelmed by the size of the collection and struggled to identify relevant boxes when conducting their individual research visits. Some students assumed that the papers of an individual, such as this collection of Reverend Black's papers, would include documentation of all aspects of the individual's life. More time should be spent explaining how archival materials are collected, donated, and processed, to demonstrate how gaps can exist as a result of this process.

In addition, future students will be required to make individual research appointments during the first two weeks of the curation period of the assignment. The students who procrastinated until the end of the semester struggled to complete their research; this in turn led to a large workload of research visits and scan requests that burdened special collections staff at the end of the semester. Providing additional scaffolding will not only space out the workload for library staff, but also help students better understand the time that professional archivists and historians invest in creating exhibits.

Curating a digital exhibit engaged undergraduate students in a non-traditional way to create lasting scholarship. Over the course of the semester, students identified appropriate primary source materials to use in an online exhibit, performed the necessary research to contextualize these sources, and were responsible for all areas of creating a professional archival exhibit, including the creation of Dublin Core metadata. These students left the course with a deeper understanding of the mediating role historians and archivists play in presenting archival materials to the general public, while also giving the library an enduring resource for future patrons.

¹ The final exhibit is available at <https://coateslibrary.omeka.net/exhibits/show/claudeblack/home>.

Appendix

Claude and ZerNona Black Exhibit


<https://coateslibrary.omeka.net/exhibits/show/claudeblack/home>



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Claude and ZerNona Black

Claude and ZerNona Black



Reverend Claude William Black and his wife ZerNona were tireless advocates for civil rights and social justice. They dedicated their lives to serving the San Antonio community and the Mt. Zion Baptist Church, where Rev. Black preached for nearly five decades. Reverend Black's contributions are legion: he led state-wide civil rights marches in the 1950s, offered his church as a base for civil rights organizing and community programming in the 1960s and 1970s, and served four terms as a member of the San Antonio city council. ZerNona marched alongside Rev. Black in the civil rights movement and founded several critical programs to support senior citizens.

In 2011, the Trinity University Coates Library acquired the Claude and ZerNona Black Papers. The collection documents the civil rights activism, civic engagement, and Baptist ministry of Reverend Black (1916-2009) and ZerNona Stewart Black (1906-2005). This exhibit explores these aspects of the collection, highlighting documents, images, and artifacts of particular significance to Reverend Black and his family while also illuminating the history of the African American community in San Antonio and its place in the national civil rights movement.



Claude and ZerNona Black Faith →