

# White Paper Report

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## *Project: Re-Collecting the Depression and New Deal as a Civic Resource in Hard Times*

### Buffalo & Erie County Public Library, Buffalo, NY

Project Director: Anne Conable

Award Amount: \$25,000

### White Paper

Awarded in Summer 2009, the Buffalo & Erie County Public Library's Digital Humanities Start-Up Grant had several overarching goals:

- To inventory existing resources representing the Great Depression and New Deal in the WNY region, including primary source collections, artifacts, manuscripts, oral histories, photographs, music, art, and site-specific field documentation.
- To establish prototype digital indexing and software integration for management of these resources for a variety of interactive purposes in innovative public programs.
- To design and test programming models linking the community with these resources.
- To employ these programs and resources as a vehicle encouraging public reflection, discussion and problem-solving on similar contemporary community challenges with the Library as convener and crossroads for such discussion.

A goal has been to create an interactive digital capacity, but in a very special sense of that term somewhat unique in digital humanities projects: we have sought to develop digital resources that enrich public programs supporting interactive civic engagement and discussion, exploring the links between the historical legacy of the Depression and New Deal in our region, and the very resonant challenges our communities face in the present. Though locally focused, we believe our project, fully implemented, can provide a demonstration model of how digital humanities help a public library mobilize collections to address the civic purposes central to its mission.

Our strategy has been to work from both ends of the spectrum toward the middle. We first focused on assembling the historical and humanities resources that might be brought into public use, and we have mounted, with complementary support from a major New York Council for the Humanities programming grant, an innovative series of public events linking history and contemporary civic discourse. Informed by the need to mobilize resources and by the goals of the public programming, we have focused productively on how digital tools, capacities and

materials might best organize a rich documentary base, and best propel an exciting axis of civic engagement in the space of a public library.

This digital humanities approach to linking digital collection organization and civic engagement has been modeled in simple, start-up ways in our initial build-up and first public programs. A process of careful planning and experimenting on a modest scale has positioned us well to design and implement a far more ambitious program in each of its intersecting dimensions. We can now see a clearer path to a truly comprehensive, cross-collection digital resource; to a more sustained and expansive web of public programs throughout our public library system; and to linking these through the selection, development and deployment of more sophisticated digital tools and capacities, now that the potential of a public program-, documentary resource-, and community-grounded approach to digital humanities development has been demonstrated.

To achieve that further development and implementation, we are planning an application for a National Leadership Grant from the Institute of Museum and Library Resources (IMLS). This proposal, to be submitted by February 1, 2011, would be unimaginable without the prior support of both our NEH Digital Humanities Start-Up Grant and the New York Council for the Humanities programming grant.

Even more broadly, our initial NEH grant has given the Library the opportunity to explore new thinking about its role in the WNY community as a crossroads of civic engagement utilizing both currently held and collaboratively assembled resources for problem-solving on contemporary issues. We are confident that the model now created, with additional resources supporting full implementation, will provide a rich and vibrant forum for integration of a fully realized resource database, innovative content management indexing, publicly accessible search technology, and interactive community problem-solving on themes and challenges, all within the public arena of our libraries.

Inventory of WNY Depression era resources: The initial focus of our project was on the identification of historic resources related to the Depression and New Deal story in WNY, and the building of an initial digital capacity for cross-referencing and managing them. We began with the notion that there were numerous extant resources of the era that simply needed to be rediscovered. We knew that WNY's Depression era-initiated buildings and sites, photographs, books, documents, film footage and oral histories, music, artworks, and institutional and private collections had never before been comprehensively inventoried. It didn't take long for our two researchers, Tom Naples and Margaret Milliron, to discover that the quantity and quality of the resources far exceeded our expectations as well as our capacity to fully inventory everything within the grant period. Artifacts, people and connections continue to lead to other resources "below the surface." But we have been able to make enormous progress building a foundational inventory of the breadth and depth of these materials.

A major focus has necessarily been the exploration, for the specific needs of our project, of the incredibly rich resources in the collections in our own Buffalo and Erie County Public Library and the similarly substantial collections of the Buffalo and Erie County Historical Society. Among the treasures that beg for digital organization and access are newspaper articles organized by 100,000 handwritten catalog cards, with clippings organized in scrapbooks themselves created through the WPA Historical Records Survey, and with thousands of images, maps, and illustrations in loosely cataloged vertical files. Based on our preliminary mapping and assessment of these resources, it is much clearer how digitization and the provision of both nominal and thematic access to these materials can inform the interactive resources we will deploy for public engagement in the full implementation of our project.

A related dimension of resource inventoring involves the mapping of material across collections scattered throughout our city and region. We have surveyed a great many smaller collections, ranging from the archives of the Albright Knox Art Gallery to the Lower Lakes Marine Historical Society to the Monroe Fordham Regional History Center at Buffalo State College, the holdings of which include collections from a wide range of small community and ethnic organizations, business records, and cultural institutions, many of them very rich in materials documenting the period and issues of concern to our project. We have also surveyed resources outside of the immediate region that relate to local Depression history including those at the Library of Congress and the Roosevelt Library at New Hyde Park, NY. We are integrating catalog references in our comprehensive inventory. Digitization and integration of substantive material will require active collaboration by many partnering institutions, hopefully made possible within the frame of the larger implementation project we are developing.

Oral history material from the Depression period has been of special interest and poses special challenges. Working with initial identified oral history tapes and footage (some conducted recently, and some decades ago and buried among scattered collections), we have a good initial base of such interviews and have identified a number of critical (and quite elderly) oral history subjects still able to be interviewed; examples emerging during our research include original participants in regional Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) camps. The additional audio and video oral histories identified in our survey or conducted anew will, during the next phases of implementation, be drawn together in a comprehensive period-focused indexed oral history media collection. As discussed below, we have begun prototype audio and video indexing of some of these oral histories, with an eye to organizing this media content within and across interviews so it can be thematically reached, on demand, through the comprehensive multi-media text/image/sound/video interactive digital databases we are developing.

Test prototype interactive programming models that illuminate these resources: As the inventory work proceeded, we came to see that our intent to link collections to public and civic engagement, and vice versa, made it advisable for our start-up planning work to draw on and speak to the needs and opportunities in each of these dimensions. Accordingly, in March 2010, the Library applied to the New York Council for the Humanities (NYCH) for a \$20,000 grant to support a free, open to the public, three-program series of community discussions

called “The PastForward Discussion Series,” to be held at the downtown Buffalo Library between October 2010 and May 2011. This grant application was successful.

The funded program involves three Depression-era themed programs – on role of the arts, organized labor and public housing policy/segregation – to help us identify a motivated participant constituency interested in deeper community discussion as well as previously unknown and unidentified collections, historic resources, and interview subjects. Each program includes:

- An expert panel comprised of scholars, community figures, and practitioners to present and discuss both the historic and contemporary issues relating to the central theme, and their relation to each other.
- Open discussion on the resonance and/or contrasts, for each topic, of the historical experience and contemporary community realities, facilitated by a knowledgeable community member.
- Contextual historical displays and interactive activities in the lobby, drawing on our research and materials.
- Attendee “intake” registration and post-event evaluation, plus the opportunity to tell us about potential oral history interviewees and Depression era artifacts or collections that may not otherwise have come to our attention.

The first of these PastForward Discussion Series programs, entitled “Arts for the People,” was held on October 21, 2010, initially conceived to spotlight the Fall 2010 75<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the establishment of the Buffalo Philharmonic Orchestra – itself a product of the WPA. As it happened, two weeks before the date a community furor erupted with the announcement of a proposed 2011 Erie County budget that would completely eliminate public funding for 40 cultural institutions, a diverse array of programming critical to both the local economy and quality of life. (Suddenly, we could not have been more relevant in providing a community forum on the topic of public funding for arts and culture.) Our panelists included JoAnn Falletta, Music Director of the Buffalo Philharmonic Orchestra and Advisory Council member, National Endowment for the Arts; Dr. David Herzberg, Associate Professor of History, University at Buffalo; Dr. Mark Goldman, historian, author of several books on Buffalo history, community activist, and entrepreneur; Paul Hogan, Vice President, John R. Oishei Foundation (largest private foundation in WNY); and Mark Sommer, Buffalo News reporter, who moderated the panel and facilitated the public discussion.

Our research team put together a powerpoint “backdrop” for the panel utilizing hundreds of images of Depression era artifacts and headlines with a particular cast toward the founding of the Buffalo Philharmonic Orchestra and the WPA-assisted construction of Kleinhans Music Hall, the Philharmonic’s home ever since its completion in 1940.

A very mixed audience of 75 attended, including arts leaders, interested citizens, college students, and several remarkable elderly community members who spontaneously testified to

the impact on their lives of exposure to arts and culture through WPA programs in which they participated as children in the 1930s.

Reaction to the program was extremely positive based on a brief evaluation form collected from virtually every attendee at the end. 80% indicated their intention to participate in the additional programs in the PastForward series.

The second program will be held in late February, 2011; its focus will be organized labor in Buffalo/WNY in the 1930s and in the very different structural context today. The final program in May, 2011, will look at the history of public housing in the context of the 1930s, and its complex relation to the ongoing dilemma of race and segregation in our city's and region's housing and neighborhood policy over time.

Digital Tools and Approaches: A critical aim from the beginning has been as to establish a comprehensive database for organizing the varied resources we were identifying and beginning substantively to digitize and collect, so that they could be flexibly accessible for a range of intended uses in our programming. This work was led by our technology partner, The Randforce Associates, LLC, a unit in the University at Buffalo's Technology Incubator led by Professor Michael Frisch, a national figure in oral and public history. Randforce brought its own work with digital indexing systems for audio and video files, especially oral history, and explored more general modes of multi-media content management and interactive uses with our outside consultant, Professor Mark Tebeau, director of the Center for Digital Humanities and Public History at Cleveland State University, who has in turn worked extensively with the Center for History and New Media at George Mason University, and particularly with public history applications of its Zotero and Omeka tools.

After some experimentation, we determined that Zotero provided the flexibility, capacity, and a range of other qualities we needed, including the web-based platform that could be accessed from any location. We began by uploading citations and references, and creating an organizational structure for them. As our first public program neared, along with the need to provide resources to support and be engaged through it, we shifted emphasis to exploring Zotero's capacity to organize and provide access to uploaded digital content as such—text and images initially, and for the next program on labor where we have rich resources ready for use, oral history media. For this, we will be making good use of the Vertov plug-in developed via CHNM at Concordia University in Montreal to support media incorporation in Zotero.

Our indexing of digitized oral history interview recordings has begun through the InterClipper software that Randforce has refined for oral history applications. Though based in a somewhat limiting proprietary format, InterClipper is unparalleled in its capacity to provide rich thematic cross-referencing within and across interviews at the specific passage level, a capacity especially relevant to focused, instrumental access we know will be crucial for the targeted civic engagement access we are aiming for. Randforce has had considerable success using InterClipper for organizing back-end media content management, from where both media data and meta-data aspects can be migrated to more flexible open-source platforms for access and

dissemination; that is a route we are beginning to refine for this project, and will be deploying, via Zotero/Vertov, for our next public program. Additional experiments are also underway with emerging open-source oral history software, such as Annotators Workbench from Indiana University and Stories Matter from Concordia, and these may well play a role in our work down the road. But for the moment, the more immediately useful route, especially for prototype work on access and delivery modalities, seems to be using InterClipper for maximally developed back-end content mapping, and migration into open formats capable of leveraging this mapping for on-demand access and use of selected oral history materials.

The public programs presented distinct digital opportunities and challenges. The approach had several defining dimensions:

- Context-framing lobby display, which the audience could explore before the panel discussion and in the intermission between the panel and the facilitated public discussion. The display, drawn easily from our rich and accessible digital resource inventory, offered varied content, from broad overviews of the WPA in Buffalo to maps grounding murals and other public artworks in the region, biographical profiles of some of the remarkable artists producing these still-visible public works, to profiles of particular arts institutions touched by the remarkable climate of cultural creativity in the period. The displays generated great interest and enthusiasm, and led people directly to the “interactive” side of the lobby. The display panels continue on public display at the downtown Library and have also traveled to be part of conference presentations on the project.

- Opportunities for audience members to select and design customized materials we would produce and deliver following the program. These opportunities, in turn, took two forms: a choice of one of four commemorative posters, each presented in a template form with menus for audience selection of specific images and content for customized production, and a customized walking/driving tour, in which audience members could select thematic focus, specific content, and geographic frame, and then be delivered a personalized tour brochure with map, directions, and illustrations/historical background information on designated tour “stops.”

This “Interactive Zone” also featured laptop demonstrations of our resource database and initial indexed oral histories, adjacent to an “intake” table where individuals could volunteer artifacts, site information, or potential oral history subjects for incorporation in our resource inventory. We anticipate that the interactive tools we offer on these occasions will become increasingly rich and sophisticated with each successive event in this three-program prototype series.

This “intake” direction also informed the culminating facilitated public discussion linking historical themes to contemporary civic issues: this was professionally videotaped, as was the panel presentation itself, and is being incorporated in our indexed media database so that public observations, anecdotes, and arguments can be directly linked to resonant historical content, and vice versa. This capacity to integrate historical resources and contemporary discussion offers exciting ongoing cumulative capacity to make public discourse itself a lasting

historical and civic resource, rather than value being grounded only in the participatory “moment.”

On the content management side, Zotero is proving an exceptionally helpful choice, and fit naturally with our evolving direction. Of particular value is one of the program’s straight-forward, though not always widely appreciated features: what can seem to be an organizational structure built around hierarchical folders and files is really a deployable set of filtered “views” drawing on a project’s one, integrated digital library. This has meant that once uploaded, sources can very flexibly be linked to as many potential “output” folders as needed, and hence instantly referenced for construction of displays, tour packet menu selection, and other uses.

In our prototype work, there has been a considerable “proof of concept” in seeing how Zotero organization facilitates the kind of variable, selective outputs our public interfaces call for. For display and production of these outputs, we had initially expected that this would be linked to the CHNM sister program, Omeka, as our platform of choice. But we discovered that Omeka was not optimal for our purposes, at least not presently. Omeka’s strength lies in its value in integrating resources with web-page production, but it proved less helpful for the kind of poster displays and customized outputs we needed. Its current limits in terms of handling multi-media material are also significant. Customization may be possible, but at this point that demanded a far greater learning curve and investment of time, energy, and user-community mobilization than we could afford.

An improvisatory approach proved more successful, as we were able to quickly find ways to develop output choices that connected easily to our resources, and to the needs of producing both effective display production and individually customized output choices. We ended up producing the posters in Adobe Photoshop, from where templates can quickly be populated with digital resources drawn from the Zotero database. For the map and tours, we used Google Map to develop an overall regional inventory of relevant artwork and related destinations, for which descriptive information has been uploaded and location-linked. Audience members were invited to request a direct link to this comprehensive resource, which we provided. In addition, we are producing customized Google maps and itineraries built on the choices individuals had made on the menus. Because it is not possible to print entire descriptive tours easily or satisfactorily from Google, we found it better to bring the tour information, maps, and directions back into Adobe Photoshop, where these could be combined with images and information from our Zotero database in order to print fully illustrated and descriptive maps and tour itineraries, with directions. We also are providing links to the customized Google Map so that individuals can work with their customized tour online and via Smartphone as well.

Ultimately we will be interested in developing more automatic ways of linking Zotero-organized content to all such user-driven library output stations, or field-access capacities, so that customized materials could be accessed, generated, and produced flexibly and on-demand. There are many such clearly marked paths that emerge from our prototype work which we will develop in subsequent stages, drawing on the current hothouse of development in GPS-based and Smartphone app access, among other modes of two-directional links to rich multimedia



database resources, through which uploaded library discussion responses, field observations and sparked memories, crowd-sourced caption inform, and the like can become a fully deployed dimension of our process. These, in turn, can propel in-place and in-event access to digital resources and accessible memories and commentary as an interactive dimension of richly informed face-to-face discussion and interaction in the public space of our public libraries, the main goal and orientation of our overall project.

Conclusion: We are very pleased with the progress we have made, and the innovative directions in which NEH support has helped us to develop our project. Combined with the NYCH grant, it has already had a significant and highly visible public impact. In addition, we recently presented the work in progress to the annual “Researching New York” conference in Albany in November, 2010, where our approach was very enthusiastically received. We are also honored to have been invited by NEH’s Karen Mittelman to be part of a panel showcasing innovative NEH-sponsored place-based public history efforts at the National Council on Public History Annual meeting in Pensacola, Florida in April, 2011.

All in all, we feel our NEH Digital Humanities start-up grant has been highly successful, giving us both direction and momentum. We sincerely thank NEH for its support of and belief in this project. Together with the already-received NYCH grant, which matched the original NEH award in scale, we believe NEH support will prove instrumental in permitting us to be competitive in the IMLS National Leadership Grant application we plan on submitting in February. This will aim at full implementation of the project, so that it can further the Library’s overall goal of serving as a regional crossroads for digital resources, ideas and civic engagement. We are also currently exploring local foundation funding opportunities to continue ongoing project development.