

AUGUST 2020

THE INTERACTIVE EXPERIENCE OF AMERICAN JEWISH HISTORY

RUBY-LANKFORD GRANT REPORT



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PROJECT PERIOD: JUNE 2020 - AUGUST 2020

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I. INTRODUCTION



THANK YOU

We gratefully acknowledge support of the Ruby-Lankford Grant for Research in the Humanities for support of this summer project.

The Ruby-Lankford Grants are designed to promote research in the Humanities by Reed College faculty members and Reed students. During a summer of great uncertainty, funding from this organization allowed us to think about best practices for online experiences and how to make the most of digital resources.



PARTICIPANTS



Laura Arnold Leibman is a Professor of English & Humanities at Reed College. She is a member of the academic council of the American Jewish Historical Society and was a member of the historical society's Executive Committee from 2014-2016. Her books in American Jewish History have won a National Jewish Book Award in Jewish American Studies and Jordan Schnitzer Book Award in Cultural Studies and Media Studies. In addition to having taught courses at Reed College and Utrecht University that included digital humanities components, she is the chair of Digital Media for the Association of Jewish Studies.

Blaise Albis-Burdige (Class of 2022) is an Economics major at Reed College. His passions lie at the intersect of markets, programming, and storytelling. He is the President of the Reed Finance and Investment Club and facilitates database systems and web-design at Period.org, a global non-profit out of Portland fighting for menstrual justice.

OVERVIEW

During the spring of 2020, Blaise Albis-Burdige (Sophomore, Economics) and Laura Leibman (Dept. of English) obtained a Ruby-Lankford Collaborative Grant in the Humanities to answer the following question: what digital tools would best optimize the public's understanding of Jewish American history?

To answer this question, they researched multimodal learning to understand better how digital tools might align with scholars' learning goals. Then they created six interactive, multimodal resources that to help visitors of Jewish American Historical Society (AJHS) understand the archive and begin the process of higher-order thinking about the archived items.

These interactivities can be found on the website we created: Jews Across the Americas <http://jewsacrossamericas.com/> . Because many colleges and universities plan to be online in fall of 2020, and possibly even in the Spring of 2021, we hope that the interactivities we have developed will be used widely by faculty seeking to make the best use of online archives in their Jewish American Studies courses.

We also hope the website will continue to grow. As the book *Jews Across the Americas* heads to press in 2021, we plan to continue to populate the Omeka archive and expand the offerings.



II. PROJECT ACTIVITIES

Support from Ruby-Lankford allowed us to research proven methodologies in multimodal learning to understand how digital tools can align with scholars' learning goals for public history in American Jewish Studies. We created six different interactive, multimodal resources that help undergraduates using the online archive of Jewish American Historical Society (AJHS) engage in higher-order thinking about the archived items.

Here's what we accomplished together:



LITERATURE REVIEW

Researched how scholars believe digital platforms aid retention and which mediums promote enhanced learning.



INTERVIEWS

Used Zoom to interview key players in the field about their learning goals in Jewish American history and digital studies



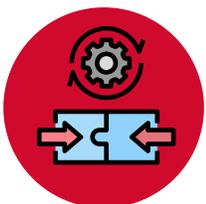
PLATFORM CONSTRUCTION

Designed a platform flexible enough to support a variety of sources accompanying analysis tools.



CREATE DIGITAL TOOLS

Created six digital tools that students can use to enhance their understanding of the AJHS online archive.



TOOLBOX INTEGRATION

Integrated the interactive tools into a user interface using WordPress and GitHub



LITERATURE REVIEW

During weeks 1-2 we conducted a literature review into how digital platforms are believed to aid retention and which mediums promote enhanced learning. This allowed us to think about what made multimodal learning environments desirable and what digital formats have proven to be the most useful and practical for specific learning objectives.

Some of the key questions we asked were What type of digital teaching tools exist? Who are they most accessible to? What fields are digital learning used the most in? How do we do inclusive digital teaching? How do we do inclusive digital teaching? How can a humanities analysis itself become an artifact? What are central skills of historians and humanities majors? What are the most natural digital tools for these fields to use? What are the shortcomings of the way digital humanities is currently implemented? Does age change method effectiveness? What are the benefits of active vs passive activities? How I decide what tools to use? Why is interactivity a good idea? What free resources that students use to create digital media projects? Why and how should we be using technology to teach history? What in particular has been used already in Jewish Digital Humanities?

Some of the key takeaways that influenced our design were:

1. There is a lot of very expensive shiny technology that does not serve a clear purpose. Hence we wanted to make sure users understood the reasons why we were encouraging them to use tools. This led to an emphasis on learning objectives in our interviews and for activities.

2. Tools aid higher order learning best when they help build skills versus just allow people to acquire content or knowledge. This led to us making sure that we were creating scaffolding for our interactivities so that students first gained the information they needed but then had space to gain skills and reflect on what they had learned.

3. In "The Scandal of Digital Humanities," Brian Greenspan notes that much digital humanities work involves building open-access archives, databases, and platforms that resist the pressure to commercialize. He notes that unfortunately this leads many DH projects to become broken, nonworking, or unfinished. This concern about short term projects that don't continue to grow encouraged us to think about a platform for our interactivities that would be part of an evolving project (in this case the *Jews Across the Americas* book/website) that would ensure Laura would to continue to work on the project after summer of 2020.

4. Klein, McPherson, and Conway note in "Humanities Infrastructure" that all DH projects require an infrastructure and that it is important to relate new projects to existing infrastructures (such as libraries, digital publishing platforms, and humanities centers). This finding supports our desire to link our interactivities to a well-known and popular online and physical archive (AJHS).

5. Klein, McPherson, and Conway note in "Big Digital Humanities" that the design process should consists of three interrelated components: (1) needs analysis, (2) implementation, and (3) formative evaluation. This insight not only helped us design our project but also think about the afterlife of the project (see the "Looking Forward" section of this report).

6. Cook and other remind us that pedagogical literature "highlights the value and impact of learning through doing (experiential, problem-based and constructivist literature)" (118). Digital tools can allow us to engage more diverse audiences by emphasizing students as learning partners and increasing "access and participation" (118). This value was echoed in several of the interviews we did, most particularly with Francesco Spagnolo. To this end, we designed several of our interactivities as problem-based events in which students are asked to create something like a museum professional might. This allows students to see themselves as developing "transferrable and professional skills" (Cook 118).

7. Travis and DeSpain note that one of the barriers to inclusion is that digital projects sometimes neglect information on "how to represent artifacts and narratives ethically and respectfully." To this end, we included videos in which archivists talked about these issues, and added steps regarding these issues to our interactivities.

The complete list of items we read for this project are listed at the end of this report in the Bibliography.



INTERVIEWS

During weeks 3-4 we interviewed scholars across the field of Jewish American studies, the staff at AJHS, and scholars who worked at the intersection of Jewish studies and digital humanities. We deliberately choose scholars from a range of stages in their career and with a range of geographical and temporal specializations. In the language of Klein, McPherson, and Conway these interviews played a crucial role in our "needs assessment" ("Big Digital Humanities").

Video excerpts from of these interviews appear on some of the pages of the interactivities. In addition, the interviews were crucial for the "Learning Objectives" portion of our website. While these were by no means monolithic, we did discover patterns of objectives that people tended to favor. These patterns, in turn, helped us write the learning objectives for the individual tools and to sharpen what we hoped students would get out of each tool. Over the next year, Laura will continue to edit these videos and add them to Omeka archive on the website (see "Timeline" and "Next Steps" in this report and link them to the relevant author bios.

We are grateful to the following scholars who gave their time and allowed us to interview them:

Chelsea Bracci

Hasia Diner

Tamara Gleason Friedberg

Ken Koltun-Fromm

Michel Cherman
Susannah Heschel
Michael Hoberman
Misha Klein
Sophia Leven
Justin Jaron Lewis
Jason Lustig
Melanie Meyers
Valeria Navarro-Rosenblatt
Annie Polland
Ira Robinson
Yosef Dov Robinson
Jonathan Sarna
Jeffrey Shandler
Francesco Spagnolo
Barry Stiefel
Hilit Surowitz-Israel
Michael Waas
Matthew Warshawsky



PLATFORM CONSTRUCTION

During weeks 5-6 we began to start construction on the platform for our digital tools. Instead of packaging all of the interactivities as a standalone web application or program, we decided to upload the tools used to perform the activities to the Python Package Index (PyPi) and then build these tools into IPython notebooks that can render dynamic HTML. PyPi is a fantastic framework because it reduces complexity for the end-users by allowing them to install the tools into any digital environment with python compatibility in just one line of code. Furthermore, all code published to PyPi is public and viewable, so there is a level of transparency which is vital in humanities analysis especially since one needs to be conscious about how their lens, approach, and tools are artifacts in themselves giving them the potential to harbor bias or skew narratives.

This format is also optimal for future extensions, preserving modularity, and promoting accessibility. We paid particular attention to the medium and presentation throughout the design process to encourage formative self-evaluation. An approach that stresses judgments of self-efficacy and understanding as opposed to more quantitative outcome-based targets found in summative evaluations. Our teaching approach also employs a narrative method for interactive walkthroughs, which works to avoid a plug-and-play approach to digital humanities. An overwhelming amount of research and scholars stressed the avoidance of pedagogy that solely teaches the platform or program, so we wanted to make sure the student got to focus on the learning goals and the underlying themes, not trying to figure out what to click in what order to make the experience successful. Furthermore, rendered HTML notebooks reinforce this method by forcing an iterative approach to the experience and allowing users to follow along or break from the plan wherever they please or feel creatively inclined to do so.



CREATE DIGITAL TOOLS

In weeks 5-10, we created six interactivities to help students use the AJHS online archive more effectively and encourage higher-level thinking

Interactivity 1: What is an Archive?

The first interactivity is designed to help students understand what an archive in general is and to learn more about AJHS's archive in particular. In this interactivity students decide which of two "shoeboxes" they will accept into the archive, sort the objects, and create a finding aid. This interactivity was inspired by discussions with Jeffrey Shandler (Rutgers University). Digital tools used in this interactivity include H5P, iMovie, and Google Drive.

Interactivity 2: Create a Digital Exhibit

The second interactivity builds off of the work that students did in interactivity one. Having chosen a collection and built a finding aid for it, students now learn what makes a good collection, and how to put together an exhibit brief. They create a digital exhibit using a software called ArtSteps. In the course of this exhibit, students learn how to create a narrative for their exhibit and labels.



Interactivity 3: Image Analysis

The Image Analysis interactivity offers two ways to explore the images in the Loeb Jewish Portrait Database. This database is "The world's most extensive online gallery of portraits made of American Jews in the Colonial and Antebellum Periods" and features three main kinds of images: Paintings, Silhouettes, and Photographs. This interactivity introduces students to these genres and gives them ideas about making arguments regarding individual portraits (beginning) or the collection as a whole (advanced).

In the advanced portion of this interactivity, Blaise created a Python script to batch download subsets or all images in the archive along with their accompanying metadata. There is also a guide for creating a machine learning generated exhibit and visual experience that will batch similar images in clusters allowing students to visualize patterns and styles across large sets of images giving them a launchpad for contextualizing and analyzing the sources from the appropriate scholarly lens for the sample. Students will also analyze this metadata in further interactivities.

Interactivity 4: Archive Scraping

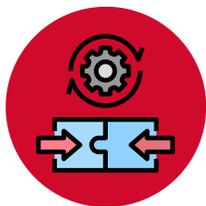
The Archive Scraping interactivity offers a way to get a bird's eye view of the archive, by allowing visitors to scrape the CJH online repository archives. The tutorial shows how the CJH module scrapes large portions of collections and records meta-data. We provide a walk through the process of program design, looking through live HTML and extracting data points of interest. Throughout the experience, students are encouraged to think about the form and structure of an online archive, and there is an opportunity to create a custom CJH web scraper with minimal code for anyone looking for a challenge. The CJH web scraper created the dataset that is used in interactivities five and six.

Interactivity 4: Data Visualization

The Data Visualization interactivity consists of two parts: 1) an introduction to data visualization for beginners and 2) an advanced visualization interactivity. In the beginning section, students learn what data visualization is and why scholars rely on it. They then practice creating charts in google sheets using a small data set. The Advanced Data Visualization uses the much larger data set created in the Archive Scraping Interactivity. This section guides users through the data cleaning, preparation, and summarizing process ultimately to arrive at datasets that are renderable to charts or graphs on a platform of the user's choice. The data cleaning process investigates designing a data pipeline that formats scraped AJHS into a CSV prepared for Palladio. Since most of the fields have excess whitespace, HTML, or unparsed tokens upon the first extraction, these exercises walk the user through the steps and logic behind extracting the necessary data for each field. There are also some examples of interactive HTML charts in Python for those who might want to explore custom chart rendering further.

Interactivity 6: Textual Analysis

This interactivity takes the data created in the Archive Scraping Interactivity and explores parsing and analyzing large sums of text. We review the parts of speech to analyze digital archives at the aggregate by observing trends in biographies or other metadata fields that contain text. The lesson covers what a corpus is, the parts of speech, stemming and lemmatizing words, and plotting trends in text. We explore the use of this technique on data frames like the one produced in the AJHS scraper and cover uploading and parsing pdf texts and scholarly journals. There is also the framework to build and generate text using a machine learning model. This model works better with sets of texts by the same writer or on the same topic but usually spews comedic material more than it extrapolates information.



TOOLBOX INTEGRATION

During Weeks 6-10, Laura created a frame for the interactivities using WordPress. WordPress was chosen for several reasons. In addition to ensuring the afterlife of the project (because of it is familiar to Laura), it allowed us to integrate several plugins that increased the interactivity of the website for both students and teachers. The most important of these plugins are H5P, ZotPress (a bibliographic plugin), and Crowdsignal (a polling plugin). As more content gets added to the website, WordPress plugs for glossaries and timelines will also enhance the project's utility. We decided to host the project outside of the Reed firewall in order to give us more flexibility regarding plugins. Since this meant we didn't have ongoing access to Reed staff to help with trouble shooting, we decided to host the website on iPage because of their technical support.

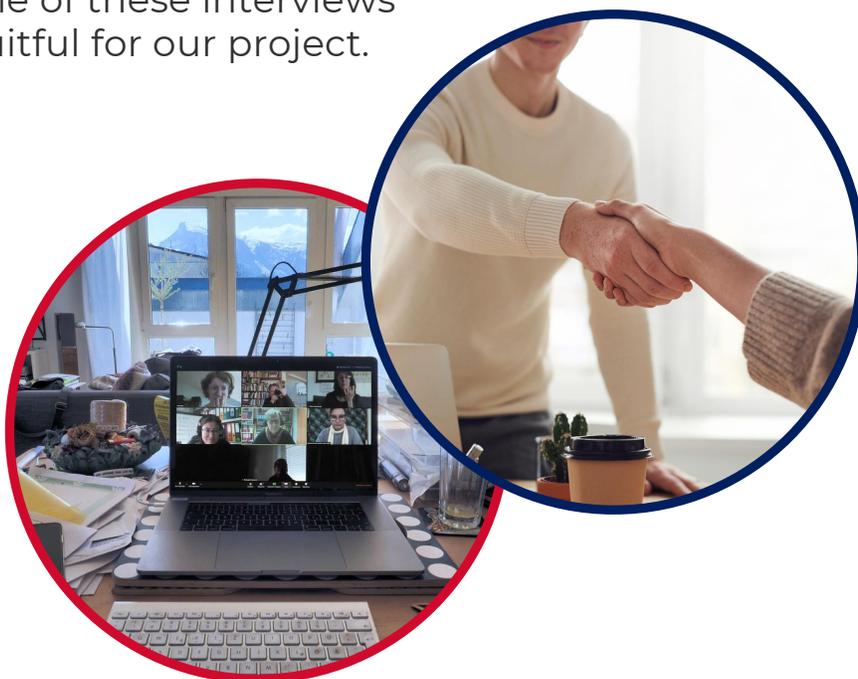
The interactivities are optimized to run in Google Colab, a python IDE in the cloud that allows users to run code on virtual machines that are developed for computationally intensive processes. The source code for all tools utilizes several industry-standard open-source packages like Pandas, Natural Language Toolkit (NLKT), TensorFlow, Keras, and many more (See Requirements.txt on the JATA-TOOLS GitHub for full list). The modules are written to reduce the amount of code the end-user sees while enabling students to perform non-trivial programming tasks using articulate, concise, and cohesive python functions. The digital exhibit program PixPlot in the image analysis interactivity is a fork of an earlier Yale DH-Lab Pix-Plot package that has been revamped for dynamic package handling and the most recent version of TensorFlow.

III. RESULTS

CHANGES TO ORIGINAL PLANS

COVID

Our original plan for this project included interviewing Jewish Studies scholars at the Latin American Jewish Studies Association Conference (LAJSA) in Curaçao and the Bi-annual Scholars Conference at AJHS in New York. Then COVID hit and LAJSA was delayed for a year and AJHS moved online. So, we decided instead to interview scholars using zoom. Interviews completed using Zoom will be available in the [Omeka Archive](#). While at times this meant poor internet connections damaged the quality of the recordings, it also encouraged us to interview scholars who were attending either conference, and some of these interviews proved extremely fruitful for our project.



IMPACT ON JEWISH AMERICAN STUDIES

COVID has forced many classes online, and the need for resources aimed at undergraduates has never been more pressing. Yet, the current AJHS archive interface is aimed at scholars who already know how to use archives and are merely searching for materials for their research. Our toolbox allows undergraduates an entry point into the archives and allows them to see how it could be used for student research papers and projects. Likewise, it provides resources for helping scholars integrate digital projects into their classrooms. The interactivities encourage students to *become* historians not just read about history.



this type of learning challenges our assumptions of hierarchy and ... and how we conceive knowledge



NEXT STEPS

In order to give the interactivities a longer shelf life, we have built a website that includes space to connect the interactivities created in Summer 2020 to the forthcoming volume *Jews Across the Americas: 1492-present*.

Book

Many of the entries in *Jews Across the Americas* are completed, though Laura and Adriana are continuing to secure outstanding entries. The introductions to each of the sections are largely written, and in fall of 2020, Laura Leibman and Adriana Brodsky will send out a sample section of the book to publishers.

Website

In fall of 2020 the Omeka archive will be built. This archive will contain the interviews collected this summer as well as the originals of translated sources included in the book *Jews Across the Americas*. Supplementary items will be added to the archive for entries where more primary sources were gathered than could be included in the print version.

In addition, the authors section of "Our Team" will be built so as to include a brief bio of each author and links to their social media.

Teaching

Laura Leibman will be using both the website and the book in her Jewish American studies class in Spring of 2021. This will allow us to assess whether any activities need updating or revision. Other authors in the collection have also volunteered to use some of the materials this coming year.

TIMELINE

JUNE-AUGUST, 2020

Research completed, scholars interviewed, website and interactivities created

SEPTEMBER 2020

Interactivities completed & website goes live. Ruby-Lankford Presentation via Zoom. Invites to be sent to AJHS list-serve

OCTOBER-NOVEMBER, 2020

Laura to take part in discussion conversation about digital humanities at CJH. Abstracts for WJSA due

MARCH 14-15, 2021

WJSA Conference. Zoom or Los Vegas, NV. Possible presentation if accepted to conference.



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THANK YOU

To the Ruby-Lankford Foundation and Reed College for their dedication to promoting hands-on, high-order learning for undergraduates. Our hope that the tools we created will provide a new generation of scholars with some of the resources they need to better understand the complexity of life in the past, present, and future.

