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## Laying the Foundation

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## **Part 2**

### **THE PRACTICE OF DIGITAL HUMANITIES IN THE LIBRARY**



# 3 | Digital Public History in the Library: Developing the Lowcountry Digital History Initiative at the College of Charleston

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## INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the growing availability of user-friendly, open-source digital tools has generated unprecedented opportunities for a range of cultural heritage institutions and scholars to participate in developing online exhibition projects. For many library, archival, museum, and academic institutions, digital exhibitions built through open-source tools have the ability to significantly enhance public engagement with scholarly information and multimedia resources at relatively minimal costs in contrast to physical exhibitions. Virtual outreach strategies are particularly crucial for these institutions at a time when operating budgets are often stagnant or shrinking, despite increasing demands for accessing greater and more diverse audiences. Still, the staff time, project management skills, and resources for sustainability that are required for effectively developing and promoting digital projects for the public can be daunting, particularly at smaller institutions with limited staff availability and funding.

In this chapter, the founding developers of the Lowcountry Digital History Initiative (LDHI) describe how they customized open-source digital tools, organized a network of multi-institutional collaborators, and implemented a replicable project workflow and open peer review editorial process to establish an innovative digital public history project at a medium-sized academic library.<sup>1</sup> As a relatively new project that launched in March 2014, LDHI introduces strategies for sustainably and efficiently developing high-quality online exhibitions that could benefit a range of scholars and

cultural heritage institutions. Hosted by the Lowcountry Digital Library at the College of Charleston in Charleston, South Carolina, LDHI serves as a site for contributors to translate archival materials, historic landscapes and structures, and scholarly research into widely accessible digital exhibitions.<sup>2</sup> Rather than develop one isolated exhibition, LDHI features numerous online exhibitions, and will continue to produce new projects over time. In partnership with the College of Charleston's Avery Research Center for African American History and Culture and the Program in the Carolina Lowcountry and Atlantic World (CLAW), each LDHI exhibition also connects to the project's overall mission to highlight underrepresented race, class, gender, and labor histories within Charleston, the surrounding Lowcountry region, and the historically interconnected Atlantic World.<sup>3</sup> Finally, each LDHI exhibition reflects a collaborative network of scholars, librarians, and museum professionals from various local, national, and international institutions who support LDHI's inclusive public history mission, and who collectively benefit from the online promotion of their institutional resources and scholarship. LDHI will undoubtedly grow and change significantly in the future, but this overview of its early development provides insights into the project's initial challenges and opportunities, which could benefit various scholars and institutions seeking to expand their public impact through online exhibitions.

## **DEVELOPING A COLLABORATIVE ONLINE EXHIBITIONS PLATFORM**

The concept for LDHI grew out of the mission of the Lowcountry Digital Library (LCDL) at the College of Charleston. LCDL first launched in 2009 through funding support from the Gaylord and Dorothy Donnelley Foundation (the same organization that would later fund LDHI in 2013).<sup>4</sup> LCDL's mission is to make the Lowcountry region's unique cultural heritage materials from a range of large and small institutional partners more accessible to the public through digitization and the construction of a regional digital archives repository.<sup>5</sup> LCDL soon became part of the statewide South Carolina Digital Library, which was selected as one of the first service hubs of the Digital Public Library of America that launched in 2013.<sup>6</sup> As of 2015, the Lowcountry Digital Library hosted over 65,000 digitized archival records, and featured digitized archival collections from over seventeen partner institutions.

Although LCDL's digital collections offer wide access to numerous archival collections, in 2011, LCDL staff determined that online exhibitions could enhance this access by promoting public awareness of the historic contexts and significance of these archival materials and the Lowcountry region more broadly. These staff members, which included digital librarians and humanities scholars, began exploring strategies for developing online exhibitions that could be supported within the context of a medium-sized academic library. Rather than start from scratch, the staff initially tested these strategies by updating an existing digital project, entitled *African Passages*, which was developed by the College of Charleston's CLAW Program in partnership with UNESCO in the early 2000s.<sup>7</sup> The original version of this online exhibition features engaging visual materials and historic information about the history of slavery on rice plantations along the Ashley River Corridor in Charleston, but the site was built using HTML and Javascript, which is difficult to maintain and update over time. In 2012, the Lowcountry Digital Library successfully obtained a grant from the Humanities Council<sup>SC</sup> to support updating this site and expanding its historic focus and exhibition materials.<sup>8</sup>

LCDL staff began the exhibition update by changing the scope of *African Passages* to address the history of slavery and the trans-Atlantic slave trade from the Atlantic World to Charleston and the South Carolina Lowcountry. The staff also changed the title of the exhibition to *African Passages, Lowcountry Adaptations*, to emphasize how slavery and the experiences of Africans and African Americans in the Carolina Lowcountry evolved over time from the colonial to the antebellum periods. They also explored various digital tools for rebuilding the site and eventually chose Omeka and Omeka's *Exhibit Builder* plug-in.<sup>9</sup> Omeka is an open-source digital publishing platform that was released in 2008 by the Roy Rosenzweig Center for History and New Media at George Mason University. As described later in this chapter, this platform features numerous plug-ins that are strikingly user-friendly for contributors with a range of digital skills. Building the new *African Passages, Lowcountry Adaptations* site in Omeka ultimately made this online exhibition more stable and adaptable, as well as visually engaging and accessible.<sup>10</sup> While LCDL's digital librarians implemented Omeka, the humanities scholars developed new exhibition text and acquired archival materials from various institutions to feature in the project. These items

included digitized materials from LCDL's partner institutions, as well as various national and international archival repositories. Through extensive links within the text, *African Passages, Lowcountry Adaptations* became both a more expansive online exhibition and a gateway to various digital history resources on the subject of slavery and the slave trade in the South Carolina Lowcountry, North America, and the Atlantic World.

Once the *African Passages, Lowcountry Adaptations* exhibition update was under way, the LCDL staff decided to maintain this regional and interconnected Atlantic World theme as they searched for new digital projects. One challenge, however, was that the project workflow for *African Passages, Lowcountry Adaptations* was time consuming. It was a slow process for individual staff members to write and edit the exhibition text, acquire exhibition materials, and lay out the exhibition in Omeka. They needed more help. LCDL staff initially addressed this issue by recruiting various scholars to serve as editorial contributors for the exhibition text of *African Passages, Lowcountry Adaptations*. For new projects, they began considering ways to expand on this collaborative approach. Rather than relying on curators from their staff, they determined that a network of project authors, editorial contributors, and archivists could help strengthen the research, writing, editorial review, and digitized materials featured in their exhibitions. Significantly, this collaborative approach also made the workflow faster.

Graduate student assistants played a key role in making LCDL's online exhibition-building workflow more efficient and sustainable. The College of Charleston does not currently include humanities PhD programs, but it does feature a Master of Arts (MA) degree in the Department of History, in partnership with The Citadel, The Military College of South Carolina.<sup>11</sup> This two-year program offers paid graduate assistantships to a select number of its students to work in various campus positions.<sup>12</sup> Starting in 2012, the College of Charleston's Department of History generously began funding graduate assistantships to work part-time (ten to twenty hours a week) on LCDL digital projects. This support proved crucial to establishing a feasible project workflow for building online exhibitions. Though MA students at the College of Charleston are only available to hone their digital humanities skills for one to two years before they graduate, due to the ease of learning how to use Omeka's *Exhibit Builder*, the time constraints for these students

are not prohibitive. Students can learn to lay out an exhibition project in Omeka with only a few days of training, and can use other similarly user-friendly open-source tools such as Timeline JS and Neatline to develop additional exhibition features such as interactive maps and timelines.<sup>13</sup> These tools require minimal technological expertise, so students are able to dedicate significant time during their work hours to acquiring multimedia exhibition materials from various archives and assisting with text edits, as well as leading exhibition layout tasks.

To enable long-term viability and audience interest in their online exhibitions, LCDL staff also decided that they would focus on creating a single, unified online exhibitions platform hosted by the Lowcountry Digital Library, rather than build multiple, stand-alone exhibitions. This platform would feature exhibition content created by multiple project authors and collaborators, which then underwent outside editorial review to ensure high-quality scholarship. LCDL staff wanted this exhibitions platform to sustainably grow and change over time, much like an academic journal or dynamic virtual museum space. This required significant project management support. Even with the help of graduate student assistants, LCDL still needed a full-time digital exhibitions coordinator to not only train and manage students, but also to develop lasting relationships with scholars, archivists, and museum professionals to recruit online exhibition projects and facilitate editorial review.

In 2012, LCDL staff translated these goals into a successful grant application for a major award from the Gaylord and Dorothy Donnelley Foundation to fund a full-time project coordinator for the newly designated Lowcountry Digital History Initiative, hosted by the Lowcountry Digital Library. They filled this position starting in January 2013, and in addition to *African Passages, Lowcountry Adaptations*, the project coordinator began working with graduate student assistants to update other existing digital projects hosted by the College of Charleston, such as *After Slavery: Race, Labor, and Politics in the Post-Emancipation Carolinas* (originally published in 2006 and redesigned for LDHI in 2013) and *Voyage of the Echo: The Trials of an Illegal Trans-Atlantic Slave Ship* (originally published in 2010 and redesigned and expanded for LDHI in 2014).<sup>14</sup> In partnership with CLAW and the Avery Research Center, LCDL staff also began recruiting new exhibition projects. Meanwhile, LCDL's digital librarians



began customizing Omeka for the purpose of developing LDHI as a permanent online exhibitions platform that would be featured on the home page of the Lowcountry Digital Library.

## **PROMOTING INCLUSIVE PUBLIC HISTORY**

To effectively launch LDHI, LCDL staff had to shift from developing or upgrading individual digital projects in the short term to conceptualizing a large-scale, long-term digital initiative. Ultimately, the founding developers of LDHI required five key components to sustainably implement a project of this scale: (1) dedicated institutional support for hosting and preserving digital exhibition projects; (2) access to open-source, user-friendly digital project building software; (3) a network of collaborative partners with a range of humanities and technological skill sets; (4) funding support for a project coordinator; and (5) a mission that addresses local, but also wide-reaching public history needs. For the first four components, the LDHI project team relied on preservation support from the Lowcountry Digital Library and the College of Charleston, generous collaborators, fortunate timing with open-source software developments, and start-up funding support from the Humanities Council of South Carolina and the Gaylord and Dorothy Donnelley Foundation.<sup>15</sup> The last component—LDHI’s mission to focus on underrepresented histories—grew from long-term issues with public history narratives in Charleston and the surrounding Lowcountry region. Although marginalized histories are not unique to this area, they stand out in an influential historic tourism destination like Charleston that attracts millions of visitors each year. In recent years, numerous historic sites and tours in Charleston and the surrounding Lowcountry region have begun to develop more inclusive interpretation strategies, particularly connected to the historic experiences of African Americans and the history of slavery and its race and class legacies in the area. LDHI sought to contribute to these efforts through a cost-effective, widely accessible online exhibitions platform.

Charleston first emerged as a major tourism destination in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. As historian Stephanie Yuhl explains, popular narratives about the history of this city and the surrounding Lowcountry region developed through a locally crafted “golden haze of memory,” where white elites “translated their personal and small group memories into easily consumable forms that fixed a public idea of

Charleston—genteel, ordered, historic, romantic—in the American imagination.”<sup>16</sup> White elite nostalgia for the region’s colonial and antebellum past ultimately became the overarching theme for Charleston’s burgeoning tourism industry. Throughout the twentieth and into the twenty-first centuries, these narrow representations persisted and specifically served to minimize or romanticize the significance of African Americans, the institution of slavery, and the race and class legacies of slavery in the Lowcountry area.<sup>17</sup>

For this reason, although LDHI seeks to address a range of historic topics, in partnership with the Avery Research Center, the project team particularly encourages exhibitions that highlight African American history and culture. Despite a long history of marginalization, Africans and their descendants played a central role in Lowcountry history. From the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries, more enslaved Africans arrived in Charleston through the trans-Atlantic slave trade than any other North American port.<sup>18</sup> Many were then transported to other towns, colonies, and later states through the domestic slave trade, but a significant number were sold as chattel property to nearby plantations in the surrounding Lowcountry region, particularly to work in rice agriculture.<sup>19</sup> This resulted in the Carolina colony and later state of South Carolina featuring a black population majority that lasted, with some temporary fluctuations, from the early eighteenth century into the mid-twentieth century.<sup>20</sup> Both during and after slavery, large black populations in urban contexts such as Charleston, and in surrounding rural areas, carved out social structures, resistance strategies, and cultural identities that still resonate in the present. Major black political activists and community leaders emerged from both the rural and urban areas of this region, and they proved influential in local and national struggles for social and political equality during and after slavery, the twentieth-century civil rights movement, and into the present.<sup>21</sup>

By the twenty-first century, Charleston’s public history narratives had the potential to influence vast numbers of local, national, and international visitors.<sup>22</sup> The downtown peninsula of *Historic Charleston* particularly overflows with museums, mansion tours, and guided walking, driving, and carriage tours, while surrounding suburban areas feature numerous former forts and plantations that now function as tourist sites. Until recently, however, few of these historic attractions addressed the significance of Africans and their African American descendants, or the central role of slavery and

its race, class, and labor legacies in the history of the area.<sup>23</sup> In this setting, the benefits of digital public history interpretation are numerous. Collaborative online exhibitions can expand public awareness and appreciation for the diverse complexity of Charleston and the Lowcountry's history at relatively minimal costs, and within a fuller range of the region's historic structures and landscapes. Digital tools offer dynamic interpretation of historic sites without requiring the costs of a new physical exhibition or museum building, or facilities to accommodate significant visitor traffic. Existing historic sites and guided tours, as well as school programs, can enhance or transform their current interpretation or teaching strategies by presenting archival images, oral history recordings, interactive maps and timelines, or video clips organized through online exhibitions to help users visualize and connect to more diverse histories. In addition, online exhibitions can offer site-specific interpretation with minimal impacts on the communities or natural environments currently living within these spaces. Digital projects also offer distinct opportunities for multi-institutional collaboration across academic, archival, library, and museum contexts to organize rich historic information and multimedia materials from shared resources. In a destination city like Charleston with a long history of race, class, and labor struggles, these collaborative, cost-effective, and widely accessible strategies for generating inclusive interpretation have the potential to be transformative.

Digital public history projects also offer opportunities for multi-institutional collaborations across international as well as regional contexts. Fully comprehending Charleston's history requires looking beyond the city, region, and even North America, to include the trans-Atlantic exchanges and influences of a complex multicultural and multinational network.<sup>24</sup> For these reasons, LDHI's mission goes beyond Charleston and the Lowcountry to engage the interconnected histories of the Atlantic World. Through this approach, Charleston and the surrounding Lowcountry can be understood as one of many historic areas in the Atlantic World where African, Native American, and European populations encountered one another in colonial contexts of oppression, resistance, and conflict, as well as creative adaptation, influence, and exchange.<sup>25</sup> These populations ultimately generated new multicultural societies that often grew to include populations from around the world. Like Charleston, many Atlantic World societies reflect this complex web of cultural influences today—and still struggle with legacies of

social, political, and economic inequalities that began with this early history. To include these international connections, the LDHI project team established a mission to recruit exhibitions that address underrepresented histories throughout Charleston and the interconnected Atlantic World.<sup>26</sup>

## DIGITAL PUBLIC HISTORY TOOLS

While digital public history offers many benefits for highlighting underrepresented histories, until recently, the tools needed to build visually engaging and content-rich online exhibitions often required significant technological and graphic design experience. Many museums, archives, and academic institutions with constrained budgets and limited staff time could not afford to dedicate a significant amount of resources to building a digital project, much less multiple projects at a time. These limitations began to change as new open-source, user-friendly resources started to become available, particularly the Omeka digital publishing platform, and significantly for LDHI, the Omeka *Exhibit Builder* plug-in. In addition, the Scholars' Lab at the University of Virginia released Neatline in 2010, which offers open-source tools for building interactive maps and timelines that are compatible with Omeka exhibitions.<sup>27</sup> Once these tools are installed, humanities scholars with minimal technological training can use Omeka and Neatline to conceptualize and build online exhibition projects.<sup>28</sup> In particular, humanities students can learn to use these tools in a short period of time, so that they can effectively contribute to the often time-consuming effort of developing digital projects. LDHI ultimately would not have been feasible without user-friendly, open-source tools that allow individuals with a range of skill sets to become digital content builders.

Still, when LDHI officially received grant funding and began development in 2013, the site's function as an online exhibitions platform, rather than an archival repository for individual digital items, meant that it required significant customization beyond an out-of-the-box installation of Omeka. For this reason, the project team customized Omeka to focus on enhancing the presentation of digital exhibitions for LDHI, while hiding other core components like individual item records and digital collections. This type of customization required a self-hosted instance of Omeka, which the team installed on one of the library's internal Ubuntu Linux virtual machines.<sup>29</sup> A basic installation of Omeka is simple to run thanks to

well-maintained documentation and an intuitive initial configuration. Like many web-publishing platforms, Omeka relies on PHP and MySQL, so for a digital librarian, the application's structure follows familiar design conventions. This familiarity in an already flexible, open-source platform makes Omeka inherently friendly to an intermediate developer. For the customization that came next, the project team did not have to spend significant time learning application-specific quirks and conventions, and instead could focus directly on the necessary code adjustments.

Omeka, like other content management systems such as WordPress and Drupal, allows developers to compartmentalize and package certain functions into plug-ins (or modules with Drupal). The plug-ins expand on the core functionality of the system, allowing Omeka developers and site administrators to tailor an Omeka installation to their specific needs through individual plug-in selection. In this case, LDHI would serve as a digital exhibitions platform, and many of these exhibitions would feature specific items held in the Lowcountry Digital Library's Fedora Commons repository. The Omeka development community had already created both an *Exhibit Builder* and *FedoraConnector* plug-in, which LDHI could then rely on for its distinct focus on exhibitions.<sup>30</sup>

*Exhibit Builder* is a core plug-in included with every installation of Omeka, while the *FedoraConnector* plug-in for Omeka was created by the Scholars' Lab at the University of Virginia and requires separate installation. The LDHI project team modified both of these plug-ins for LDHI's Omeka installation so it would connect efficiently with LCDL collections, while hiding certain Omeka elements from the public that are unnecessary for LDHI. Specifically, the LDHI team modified the *Exhibit Builder* plug-in to allow the selection and presentation of Fedora Commons objects, as well as other exhibition materials uploaded into Omeka, within exhibition layout pages. They also modified the *FedoraConnector* plug-in to add theme-specific code for *jQuery* lightbox functionality that would override item page links. As a result, when users click on images of exhibition materials in LDHI, they open into a larger lightbox, rather than a separate item page. Other plug-ins have been added or created over time as needed for the project. For example, for LDHI's front page and exhibition browse pages, LDHI's digital librarians drafted an *Exhibit Grid* shortcode plug-in to allow a shortcode on an Omeka Simple Page that generates a grid of exhibit thumbnails and titles

to enable visually engaging search options for the exhibitions.<sup>31</sup> The ease of Omeka plug-in development and modification also allows the LDHI project to effectively and sustainably grow and change over time.

Theme customization began once the project team determined the core structure of LDHI and selected or modified all necessary plug-ins. The *Exhibit Builder* plug-in allows users to select different themes for each exhibition within one installation, which means administrators can give individual themes their own unique identities. However, all exhibitions in this installation fell under the umbrella of the LDHI project, so the project team decided to develop custom theme options that were visually cohesive while also remaining flexible enough to allow for interchangeable logo and thumbnail images. They also ensured that the final theme tied in cohesively with Lowcountry Digital Library branding efforts. The resulting theme provided a distinct visual identity for all LDHI exhibits while retaining flexibility for exhibit-specific needs like custom logos and thumbnails. To expedite the development process, the web developer used the *Foundation* front-end framework by ZURB.<sup>32</sup> *Foundation* and similar frameworks, like the *Bootstrap* package core layout and component code, work across a variety of devices.<sup>33</sup> For the LDHI theme, *Foundation CSS* provided the logic for the site's overall grid structure.<sup>34</sup> In *Exhibit Builder's* digital exhibitions, for example, the project team could use *Foundation's* row and column classes to manage the alternating text and image layouts on exhibition pages without having to manually write CSS each time that would account for available viewport space as the site scaled between mobile devices and desktops. Additionally, *Foundation Panels* added convenient styling for exhibition and home page navigation.<sup>35</sup> By relying on a framework rather than entirely custom code, the project team was able to rapidly develop LDHI's base theme and respond to changing needs for exhibitions as LDHI grew over time. Development on the LDHI Omeka site continued through the summer of 2013, and LDHI's project team continues to provide updates as needed.

In March 2014, LDHI publicly launched with nine online exhibitions. Many of these exhibitions feature materials or collections that are digitized in the Lowcountry Digital Library, but they also feature archival materials that have not yet been formally digitized or that are from a range of local, national, and international archives. For many exhibitions, graduate student assistants also developed maps and timelines, so that users can explore

historic information and materials on LDHI through a range of interactive features. Currently, academic scholars interested in increasing public engagement with their work have authored most of LDHI's exhibitions. Their contributions are significant and in many ways generous, considering that the professional or publication credit for digital public history work is still unclear in terms of the academic job market and academic tenure and promotion.<sup>36</sup> But the LDHI team also recognizes that various large and small museum institutions in the Lowcountry, as well as Atlantic World partners, include physical exhibitions with rich historic information and materials that could greatly benefit from greater public access through an online platform. Although many of these institutions feature websites, they do not necessarily have the staff or editorial resources for developing in-depth online exhibitions. LDHI currently features one adaptation of a physical exhibition from a museum institution, *Keeper of the Gate: Philip Simmons Ironwork in Charleston, South Carolina* developed with the Philip Simmons Foundation.<sup>37</sup> The site also hosts a few exhibitions, such as *The James Poyas Daybook: An Account of a Charles Town Merchant, 1760–1765* by Neal Polhemus, that focus primarily on one major collection from an archival repository or museum partner.<sup>38</sup> Currently, LDHI is in the process of expanding its partnerships with a range of cultural heritage institutions that could benefit from increasing digital access to their institutional resources.

## **LDHI PROJECT WORKFLOW**

This section outlines LDHI's general project workflow for recruiting, developing, reviewing, and publishing LDHI exhibitions. As noted, establishing this collaborative, multi-institutional exhibition development process with scholars, graduate students, archivists, librarians, and museum professionals has been crucial to making LDHI feasible at a medium-sized academic institution like the College of Charleston. This overview also demonstrates how LDHI's workflow can be adapted to a range of project collaborations as the LDHI team expands its institutional and scholarly partnerships in the future.

### **Step One: Project Planning Meeting**

The first step to developing an LDHI online exhibition is an initial planning meeting. LDHI team members will meet with an interested project author or institutional partner to discuss ways to develop a project based



on a specific topic that fits LDHI's inclusive public history mission. In some cases, a scholar has academic research that he or she would like to make more accessible through digital public history tools. In other cases, a cultural heritage institution such as a museum or library has a physical exhibition that it would like to adapt to an online context. At the meeting, participants will consult with the LDHI team to discuss ways to organize their research or project for a digital public history context. They will also identify potential archival materials and multimedia resources to feature with the exhibition, and consider possibilities for developing features such as interactive maps and timelines to accompany the text and exhibition materials.

### **Step Two: Internal Editorial Review**

Once the project author or institutional partner submits an exhibition text draft, LDHI team members will begin an internal editorial review. Their goal in the first round of editorial input is to make sure that the exhibition text is well organized and features clear, accessible writing for a public history context. The standards for accessible public history writing can range widely, but LDHI generally requires exhibition texts that are more concise than academic articles, but not as brief as physical exhibition texts. In a physical exhibition, visitors are temporarily walking through an exhibition space and their attention span is often short. In contrast, online exhibition viewers are generally exploring the project while sitting with a laptop or mobile device, and they can return multiple times to continue reading the text. For this reason, LDHI regularly offers more in-depth exhibition narratives, though the project team is also exploring options for more concise mobile-friendly features in the future. To prevent overly dense academic discussions, the LDHI review process specifically limits any scholarly jargon and features a list of sources at the end of each project rather than footnotes within the exhibition text. Once the author completes this first round of edits, LDHI staff send the text to outside editorial contributors who provide input on the text based on their relevant expertise.

### **Step Three: External Open Peer Review**

In the early stages of developing LDHI, the project team decided to implement an open peer review editorial process, rather than use the closed review approach typically found with academic journals. More than



anything, this was a practical choice. As a new digital project with temporary grant funding, establishing a formal editorial board for closed review did not seem feasible. LDHI also does not have enough staff to guarantee a regular publication schedule like an academic journal. For these reasons, the project team decided to implement an open review editorial process, where project authors work with LDHI staff to recruit editorial contributors to review individual projects, rather than making a commitment to an editorial board. Through this approach, LDHI can reach out to editorial contributors who offer specialized expertise on individual exhibition topics, either as scholars, archivists, museum professionals, or in some cases, as first-hand witnesses.<sup>39</sup> Each editorial contributor then receives credit in the Sources section of that exhibition for his or her input.

#### **Step Four: Acquiring Exhibition Materials**

Throughout the development of the exhibition text, LDHI graduate student assistants work on acquiring digitized materials to feature with the exhibition, and create interactive maps and timelines using open-source tools. Visual materials can range from images of archival materials such as historic documents, photographs, and artifacts, to present-day images of historic landscapes. The LDHI team is also currently working to include more multimedia materials such as audio and video oral histories in the exhibitions.<sup>40</sup> Graduate assistants often begin by targeting specific archival materials requested by the project author, which may be located in a range of local, national, or international archival repositories. If the materials are not yet digitized, students will work with archivists to locate them in different repositories and request scans and caption information. If collections are already digitized, students will search for exhibition materials in the Lowcountry Digital Library (if they are from an LCDL partner institution) or in other online repositories with credible rights and permissions information, such as the Library of Congress or the Digital Public Library of America.<sup>41</sup> Though the Lowcountry Digital Library hosts LDHI, exhibition items often come from a range of archival repositories. Still, LDHI exhibitions regularly prioritize materials from LCDL partners and link to their institutional websites and collections. Students and LDHI staff also work with project authors to negotiate rights and permissions with different institutions for featuring their materials in an online context. With a limited

budget, LDHI staff often target materials that are in the public domain, or in archival institutions that are willing to waive the rights and permission fees because the exhibitions are intended for educational use and are made freely available to the public through a Creative Commons license.<sup>42</sup>

In some cases, LDHI graduate assistants also help with digitizing and providing preliminary metadata for archival materials that are eligible for inclusion in the Lowcountry Digital Library. For example, students may identify items for an LDHI exhibition from a relevant collection that belongs to one of the Lowcountry Digital Library's partner institutions. Rather than just scan those materials for the LDHI exhibition, the students may formally digitize a representative sample from the collection to expand LCDL's holdings. The exhibition can then link to further collection examples beyond the featured exhibition item.<sup>43</sup> For this reason, all LDHI graduate assistants undergo digitization and metadata creation training through sessions hosted by LCDL's project director. As a result, the digitization, description, and ingestion of collections that include items featured in LDHI exhibitions are often fast-tracked for completion in LCDL. Prior to engaging LDHI graduate assistants in the digitization process, much like exhibitions, these select digitization projects were often overly time consuming for LCDL staff. By making digitization and description part of the project workflow, LDHI graduate assistants can also contribute to LCDL and receive a more cohesive digital library training experience.

### **Step Five: Online Exhibition Layout**

Once the exhibition text has been vetted through an internal and external review process, the final draft is ready for layout in Omeka. The project coordinator assigns one of the graduate assistants to take the lead, and that student will upload all of the acquired exhibition materials (with approved rights and permissions) into Omeka with the correct caption information, and then begin selecting images to accompany different sections of the reviewed exhibition text. If the exhibition features items from LCDL, students can use the *FedoraConnector* plug-in for a more efficient uploading process. In some cases, authors provide guidance on which materials they would like to feature in each exhibition section. Otherwise, under the supervision of the LDHI project coordinator, graduate assistants guide the layout process and insert relevant hyperlinks throughout the text. Once a layout

draft is ready, other graduate assistants will provide editorial input on the exhibition before they send it to the LDHI project coordinator and codirector for review. Once approved internally, the project coordinator sends a password-protected link to the project author or partner institution to review the exhibition and provide final editorial input. After final approval, the online exhibition is ready to publish.

### **Step Six: Publication and Promotion**

After publication, the LDHI staff promotes the exhibition through social media outlets, as well as presentations at conferences and public venues. They also encourage educators to use the exhibitions in the classroom, and encourage project authors and partners to promote their projects through presentations, workshops, and institutional or academic websites. In the future, the LDHI team will explore further institutional collaborations to expand LDHI's promotional outreach.

## **CONCLUSION**

As of 2015, LDHI had published fifteen online exhibitions (with many more in progress), and experienced strong user interest based on Google Analytics.<sup>44</sup> Though the LDHI team has not conducted a formal assessment of the project's audiences, they have received informal positive feedback from educators who use LDHI projects in their teaching as well as cultural heritage professionals, and the project has received recognition from professional organizations such as the American Library Association and the Organization of American Historians.<sup>45</sup> In addition, LDHI staff members have presented on the project at numerous regional, national, and international academic, library, and museum conferences, as well as to local community groups and educators. Graduate student assistants have also increased LDHI's social media presence through LCDL's Twitter and Facebook accounts. Although the project team is pleased with LDHI's outreach and engagement, they hope that the initiative will continue to grow in the future, both in overall site organization and by developing new projects with a greater range of scholarly and institutional partners. They also hope to engage a wider range of users by providing mobile-friendly features as well as in-depth online exhibitions, and by developing more accessible educational resources and activities targeting a range of grade levels. Finally,

the LDHI team will continue to develop strategies for cost effectively sustaining the LDHI platform within the resources currently available at the College of Charleston and also through additional grant funding.

The LDHI team ultimately believes that innovative and rapidly increasing digital public history tools can significantly help expand, redefine, and greatly enrich how individuals engage with historic and cultural information and sites in landscapes and communities throughout Charleston, the Lowcountry region, and beyond. Libraries in small to medium-sized academic institutions like the College of Charleston often have limited resources, but through multi-institutional collaboration they can still develop sustainable strategies for engaging digital resources, while also connecting to the public history needs of their partners and stakeholder communities. As LDHI continues to grow in the future, the project team hopes that this initiative will prove to be an engaging and sustainable example of innovative and inclusive digital public history work in academic libraries.

## NOTES

- 1 Lowcountry Digital History Initiative, <http://ldhi.library.cofc.edu>.
- 2 Lowcountry Digital Library, <http://lcdl.library.cofc.edu>.
- 3 Avery Research Center for African American History and Culture, <http://avery.cofc.edu>; Program in the Carolina Lowcountry and Atlantic World, <http://claw.cofc.edu/about.html>.
- 4 Gaylord and Dorothy Donnelley Foundation, <http://gddf.org>.
- 5 “About,” Lowcountry Digital Library, <http://lcdl.library.cofc.edu/about>; “Contributing Institutions,” Lowcountry Digital Library, <http://lcdl.library.cofc.edu/institutions>.
- 6 South Carolina Digital Library, <http://scmemory.org>; Digital Public Library of America, <http://dp.la>.
- 7 For more information about the original *African Passages* online exhibition and this update, see “Project History” in “African Passages, Lowcountry Adaptations,” *Lowcountry Digital History Initiative* (March 25, 2015), <http://ldhi.library.cofc.edu/exhibits/show/africanpassageslowcountryadapt/overview/projecthistory>; also “Education: Sites of Memory,” United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization, [www.unesco.org/new/en/education/networks/global-networks/aspnet/flagship-projects/transatlantic-slave-trade/activity-proposals/sites-of-memory](http://www.unesco.org/new/en/education/networks/global-networks/aspnet/flagship-projects/transatlantic-slave-trade/activity-proposals/sites-of-memory).

- 8 Humanities Council<sup>sc</sup>, <http://schumanities.org>.
- 9 Omeka, <http://omeka.org/>; Omeka, “Exhibit Builder,” <http://omeka.org/add-ons/plugins/exhibit-builder>.
- 10 Mary Battle, lead curator, “African Passages, Lowcountry Adaptations,” *Lowcountry Digital History Initiative* (2013), <http://ldhi.library.cofc.edu/exhibits/show/africanpassageslowcountryadapt>.
- 11 “Graduate Program: Master of Arts in History,” College of Charleston, <http://history.cofc.edu/graduate-program/index.php>.
- 12 As an academic institution with typically small class sizes, the College of Charleston generally does not have humanities graduate students work as teaching assistants, which means their assistantships can be located in a range of academic contexts, including libraries. This point is crucial, because graduate assistants at many larger academic institutions often focus on teaching, so they are not as available to assist with library projects.
- 13 Timeline JS, <http://timeline.knightlab.com>; Neatline, <http://neatline.org>.
- 14 Brian Kelly et al., “After Slavery: Race, Labor, and Citizenship in the Post-Emancipation Carolinas,” *Lowcountry Digital History Initiative* (2014), [http://ldhi.library.cofc.edu/exhibits/show/after\\_slavery](http://ldhi.library.cofc.edu/exhibits/show/after_slavery); John Harris, “Voyage of the *Echo*: The Trials of an Illegal Trans-Atlantic Slave Ship,” *Lowcountry Digital History Initiative* (2014), <http://ldhi.library.cofc.edu/exhibits/show/voyage-of-the-echo-the-trials>.
- 15 Digital collections and digital projects that promote scholarship are explicitly identified as a key priority in the College of Charleston Libraries’ strategic plan, which indicates that the college will continue to offer resources for long-term digital preservation and maintenance for LDHI.
- 16 Stephanie Yuhl, *A Golden Haze of Memory: The Making of Historic Charleston* (Chapel Hill; London: University of North Carolina Press, 2005): 187–88.
- 17 Yuhl, *A Golden Haze of Memory*, 11.
- 18 “Estimates,” *Voyages: The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database*, [www.slavevoyages.org/tast/database/search.faces](http://www.slavevoyages.org/tast/database/search.faces); Ira Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone: The First Two Centuries of Slavery in North America* (Cambridge, MA; London: Harvard University Press, 1998); James McMillin, *The Final Victims: The Foreign Slave Trade to North America, 1783–1810* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2004).
- 19 Steven Deyle, *Carry Me Back: The Domestic Slave Trade in American Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006); William Dusinberre, *Them Dark*

- Days: Slavery in the American Rice Swamps* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996); Daniel Littlefield, *Rice and Slaves: Ethnicity and the Slave Trade in Colonial South Carolina* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1991); Philip Morgan, *Slave Counterpoint: Black Culture in the Eighteenth-Century Chesapeake and Lowcountry* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998); Judith Carney, *Black Rice: The African Origins of Rice Cultivation in the Americas* (Cambridge, MA; London: Harvard University Press, 2001); Max S. Edelson, *Plantation Enterprise in Colonial South Carolina* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011).
- 20 Peter Wood, *Black Majority: Negroes in Colonial South Carolina from 1670 through the Stono Rebellion* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1974); Walter Edgar, *South Carolina: A History* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1998): 64–81, 485–87. Today, African Americans continue to be a significant minority in South Carolina. As of the 2010 census, African Americans made up nearly 28 percent of South Carolina’s overall population. “State and County Quick Facts: South Carolina,” U.S. Census Bureau.
- 21 Bernard E. Powers, Jr., *Black Charlestonians: A Social History, 1822–1885* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1994); Charles Joyner, *Down by the Riverside: A South Carolina Slave Community* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1984); Mark M. Smith, *Stono: Documenting and Interpreting a Southern Slave Revolt* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2005); Douglas R. Egerton, *He Shall Go Out Free: The Lives of Denmark Vesey* (Madison, WI: Madison House, 1999); Katherine Mellen Charron, *Freedom’s Teacher: The Life of Septima Clark* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009); Peter F. Lau, *Democracy Rising: South Carolina and the Fight for Black Equality since 1865* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2006); Edward A. Miller, Jr., *Gullah Statesman: Robert Smalls from Slavery to Congress, 1839–1915* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2008); *Toward the Meeting of the Waters: Currents in the Civil Rights Movement of South Carolina during the Twentieth Century*, ed. Winfred B. Moore and Orville Vernon Burton (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2008).
- 22 In 2014 alone, the South Carolina Department of Parks, Recreation, and Tourism estimates that 5,600,000 visitors came to Charleston County, with the city of Charleston serving as the central attraction. “Estimated Visitation to South Carolina by County,” South Carolina Department of Parks, Recreation, and Tourism.

- 23 Ethan J. Kytte and Blain Roberts, “‘Is It Okay to Talk about Slaves?’ Segregating the Past in Historic Charleston,” *Destination Dixie: Tourism & Southern History*, ed., Karen L. Cox (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2012). Notably, a few independent guides, exhibitions, organizations, and sites stand as exceptions to Charleston’s traditionally exclusive interpretive focus. For example, institutions such as the College of Charleston’s Avery Research Center for African American History and Culture and the City of Charleston’s Old Slave Mart Museum both explicitly focus on black history and culture and the Lowcountry region’s history of slavery. In the future, the developing Gullah Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor and International African American Museum in Charleston will also greatly expand public awareness of these histories. In addition, long-standing historic institutions in the area are beginning to demonstrate new interpretive priorities. For example, the Preservation Society of Charleston recently launched a campaign to erect a series of markers dedicated to Charleston’s twentieth-century civil rights history, and various historic plantation sites now feature tours that address African American experiences during and after slavery. Despite these promising developments, however, inclusive change continues to be a challenge. Even when they are willing to reconsider traditional tourism narratives, many of the city’s public history producers face limited institutional budgets and staff time to research and develop new historic resources, interpretation strategies, or physical exhibitions.
- 24 Carney, *Black Rice*; Edelson, *Plantation Enterprise*; Littlefield, *Rice and Slaves*; Wood, *Black Majority*; *South Carolina and Barbados Connections: Selections from South Carolina Historical Magazine*, ed. Stephen Hoffius, (Charleston, SC: Home House Press, 2011).
- 25 Thomas Benjamin, *The Atlantic World: Europeans, Africans, Indians and Their Shared History, 1400–1900* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2009); David Eltis, *The Rise of African Slavery in the Atlantic World* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2000); David Brion Davis, *Inhuman Bondage: The Rise and Fall of Slavery in the New World* (Oxford, UK; New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).
- 26 Current examples of LDHI exhibitions that highlight Atlantic World connections include Mary Battle, lead curator, “African Passages, Lowcountry Adaptations,” *Lowcountry Digital History Initiative* (2013), <http://ldhi.library.cofc.edu/exhibits/show/africanpassageslowcountryadapt>; Carl Wise



and David Wheat, "African Laborers for a New Empire: Iberia, Slavery, and the Atlantic World," *Lowcountry Digital History Initiative* (2014), [http://ldhi.library.cofc.edu/exhibits/show/african\\_laborers\\_for\\_a\\_new\\_emp](http://ldhi.library.cofc.edu/exhibits/show/african_laborers_for_a_new_emp); and John Harris, "Voyage of the Echo: The Trails of an Illegal Trans-Atlantic Slave Ship," *Lowcountry Digital History Initiative* (2014), <http://ldhi.library.cofc.edu/exhibits/show/voyage-of-the-echo-the-trials>.

- 27 The partnership between the Center for History and New Media (CHNM) and the Scholars' Lab launched in 2011. Their goal was to "enable scholars, students, and library and museum professionals to create geospatial and temporal visualizations of archival collections using a Neatline tool-set within CHNM's popular, open source Omeka exhibition platform." For more information see Tom Scheinfeldt, "CHNM and Scholars' Lab Partner on 'Omeka + Neatline,'" *Omeka* (blog), <http://omeka.org/blog/2011/02/15/chnm-and-scholars-lab-partner-on-omeka-neatline>.
- 28 LDHI's project team considered several other free and/or open-source options for building online exhibitions before they decided on Omeka. They determined that Omeka offered the most user-friendly interface for humanities scholars with minimal technical training. Other options included WordPress, [www.wordpress.org](http://www.wordpress.org); Drupal, [www.drupal.org](http://www.drupal.org); and Simile Exhibit, [www.simile-widgets.org/exhibit](http://www.simile-widgets.org/exhibit).
- 29 Virtualmachines, <https://help.ubuntu.com/community/VirtualMachines>.
- 30 "Exhibit Builder," *Omeka*; "FedoraConnector by Scholars' Lab," *Omeka*, <http://omeka.org/add-ons/plugins/fedoraconnector>.
- 31 "Exhibitions," *Lowcountry Digital History Initiative*, <http://ldhi.library.cofc.edu/allexhibits>.
- 32 Foundation, <http://foundation.zurb.com>.
- 33 Bootstrap, <http://getbootstrap.com>.
- 34 Grid, <http://foundation.zurb.com/docs/components/grid.html>.
- 35 Panels, <http://foundation.zurb.com/docs/components/panels.html>.
- 36 Fortunately, major academic organizations such as the American Historical Association are beginning to propose strategies for evaluating digital humanities projects as credible scholarly work for consideration in hiring, tenure, and promotion in academic institutions. For more information, see Seth Denbo, "Draft Guidelines on the Evaluation of Digital Scholarship," *AHA Today: A Blog of the American Historical Association*, <http://blog.historians.org/2015/04/draft-guidelines-evaluation-digital-scholarship>.



- 37 Philip Simmons Foundation, “Keeper of the Gate: Philip Simmons Ironwork in Charleston, South Carolina,” *Lowcountry Digital History Initiative* (2014), [http://ldhi.library.cofc.edu/exhibits/show/philip\\_simmons](http://ldhi.library.cofc.edu/exhibits/show/philip_simmons).
- 38 Polhemus’s exhibition revolves around the James Poyas Daybook, which is held in the archives of the Charleston Museum and digitized through LCDL. Neal D. Polhemus, “The James Poyas Daybook: An Account of a Charles Town Merchant,” *Lowcountry Digital History Initiative* (2014), [http://ldhi.library.cofc.edu/exhibits/show/james\\_poyas\\_daybook\\_eighteenth](http://ldhi.library.cofc.edu/exhibits/show/james_poyas_daybook_eighteenth). Other LDHI exhibitions that highlight specific archival collections from a LCDL partner institution include “Keeper of the Gate: Philip Simmons Ironwork in Charleston, South Carolina” (Avery Research Center’s Philip Simmons Collection) and “The Pollitzer Family of South Carolina” (South Carolina Historical Society’s Pollitzer Family Papers). Philip Simmons Foundation, “Keeper of the Gate”; Jessica Short and Katherine Purcell, “The Pollitzer Family of South Carolina,” *Lowcountry Digital History Initiative* (2013), [http://ldhi.library.cofc.edu/exhibits/show/pollitzer\\_family\\_sc](http://ldhi.library.cofc.edu/exhibits/show/pollitzer_family_sc).
- 39 For example, for Kerry Taylor’s *The Charleston Hospital Workers’ Movement, 1968–1969*, one of the strike leaders, Mary Moultrie, served as an editorial contributor. Kerry Taylor, “Sources: The Charleston Hospital Workers’ Movement, 1968–1969,” *Lowcountry Digital History Initiative* (2013), [http://ldhi.library.cofc.edu/exhibits/show/charleston\\_hospital\\_workers\\_mo/sources\\_3](http://ldhi.library.cofc.edu/exhibits/show/charleston_hospital_workers_mo/sources_3).
- 40 For examples, see Millicent Brown, Jon Hale, and Clerc Cooper, “Somebody Had to Do It: First Children in School Desegregation,” *Lowcountry Digital History Initiative* (2015), [http://ldhi.library.cofc.edu/exhibits/show/somebody\\_had\\_to\\_do\\_it](http://ldhi.library.cofc.edu/exhibits/show/somebody_had_to_do_it); and Taylor, “The Charleston Hospital Workers’ Movement, 1968–1969.”
- 41 Digital Public Library of America, <http://dp.la>. Library of Congress: American Memory.
- 42 “Contribute,” *Lowcountry Digital History Initiative*, <http://ldhi.library.cofc.edu/contribute>.
- 43 For example, in 2013, LDHI graduate assistant Beth Gniewek was in charge of acquiring exhibition materials for “The Orangeburg Massacre” by Jack Schuler. In the process, Gniewek identified numerous materials from the Cleveland L. Sellers Papers at the Avery Research Center for the exhibition, and worked with Avery Research Center archivist Aaron Spelbring and digital scholarship librarian Heather Gilbert to digitize a sampling from this collection to go in

LCDL. While only a few collection items appear in the exhibition, through Gniewek's digitization work, users can follow links to see the digitized materials from this collection in LCDL. Jack Shuler, "The Orangeburg Massacre," *Lowcountry Digital History Initiative* (2013), <http://ldhi.library.cofc.edu/exhibits/show/orangeburg-massacre>.

- 44 According to Google Analytics, as of December 2015, nearly two years since the project's initial launch in February 2014, LDHI has received over 82,000 individual users, over 103,000 sessions, and over 252,000 page views. Google Analytics (December 2, 2015), <http://www.google.com/analytics>.
- 45 "Annual List of Best Historical Materials Selected by RUSA's History Section," *American Library Association*, [www.ala.org/news/press-releases/2015/02/annual-list-best-historical-materials-selected-rusa-s-history-section](http://www.ala.org/news/press-releases/2015/02/annual-list-best-historical-materials-selected-rusa-s-history-section); Bradford J. Wood, "Lowcountry Digital Library; and Lowcountry Digital History Initiative," *Digital History Review in The Journal of American History* 102, No. 1 (June 2015): 330.

