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Review: Black Craftspeople Digital Archive

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Project

Black Craftspeople Digital Archive

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Project URL

<http://www.blackcraftspeople.org/>

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Project Overview**Torren L. Gatson**

The Black Craftspeople Digital Archive (BCDA) is a digital humanities project that centers the lives and experiences of Black craftspeople involved in a host of trades, from their forced migration to the Americas through 1900. Founded in the fall of 2019, this digital archive and digital map documents and interprets the lives and experiences of Black craftspeople on the southern landscape. The experiences of both Tiffany Momon and Torren Gatson in the decorative arts field uncovered that many museums significantly undercount Black craftspeople by not addressing the realities of Black life during the U.S.'s tumultuous history. Our goal is not just to collect and catalog the names of Black craftspeople, but also to share their lives, experiences, and artistry with the public.

The BCDA consists of two sections, the digital archive and digital map, with a third biographical section soon to come. This project is nestled within the digital humanities because of its ability to showcase the lives and significance of African American craftspeople in a myriad of ways that allow viewers to, in essence, “drive the vehicle,” journeying through the website and interactive map. The strength of the digital map is that it not only connects craftspeople to place, but that it also connects what is often the only primary source documentation of craftpersons’ lives to place. The ArcGIS map provides users with several different ways of examining and comparing the lives of craftspeople, including pie charts, bar graphs, and other data visualizations. The digital archive, created through the Omeka content management system, allows users

to search by keyword or collections, and even to contribute their own information on Black craftspeople whom they have researched.

The BCDA is currently home to records connected to the lives of 960 Black craftspeople who lived and labored in the 18th-century South Carolina Lowcountry and 19th-century Tennessee, both men and women, both free and enslaved, and involved in 45 total trades — from wheelwrights and tanners to cabinetmakers and goldsmiths. To date, no other digital project has been created to focus exclusively on the lives and skilled artistry of Black craftspeople, thus making this a flagship project for the study of Black craftspeople and Black material culture. The first two phases of the project focus on Black craftspeople in South Carolina and Tennessee. The BCDA's upcoming phases include adding Black craftspeople biographies through the People and Places initiative; building an objects catalog featuring objects created by Black craftspeople; archival expansions into Jamaica, Virginia, and Maryland, as well as partnerships with museums and community engagement.

The BCDA's audience includes those interested in Black history, Southern history, the history of enslavement, digital humanities, material culture, and genealogy. BCDA team members have engaged with the public through public museum lectures, classroom lectures at a host of universities, and participation in public events centered on Black craftspeople. The BCDA has been used in classrooms at Middle Tennessee State University, Warren Wilson College, Memorial University (Canada), Princeton University, the College of William and Mary, and Mercer University. From the BCDA's beginnings until November 2020, the BCDA was a fully self-funded project with no larger support from any organization. In November 2020, the BCDA was awarded grant funding from the Tennessee Civil War National Heritage area to support expanding the archive into Tennessee.

Project Review

Julian C. Chambliss

We continue to wrestle with the foundational impact of slavery on U.S. life. Broadening our understanding of the “Peculiar Institution” through a reconsideration of the archival record has been one pathway offered by digital humanities. The need to prioritize humanity in any digital assessment of Black life has spurred a diverse [list](#) of digital humanities projects and a recent groundbreaking [conference](#). Nonetheless, numerous opportunities remain to expand our understanding of the Black experience.

Founded in 2019, the Black Craftspeople Digital Archive (BCDA) is a digital humanities project that centers the lives and experiences of Black craftspeople involved in a host of trades. Developed by Tiffany Momon and Torren L. Gatson, the project emphasizes discovery, interpretation, and digitization as central to the recovery that allows digital humanities to speak to the Black experience.

Built using WordPress and Omeka, the website allows users to view Black craftspeople, both free and enslaved, living and laboring in the South Carolina Lowcountry and Tennessee from the late 1700s to 1900. The site offers easy viewing of the primary sources and provides an interactive map linking each craftsperson to a geographic location. The website navigation is logically laid out, with crucial contextual information, such as the definition of craftsperson and the project's guiding principles, provided in the "About" menu. In addition, a syllabus inspired by the project provides the necessary secondary literature to allow users to gain additional information on the historical context this project seeks to reshape. This information firmly indicates the project's goals and establishes a pedagogical and research value for the website. An interactive map enhances these goals. Built using ArcGIS, the map has an easy-to-understand [dashboard](#) to search by trade or place. The visualization tool allows the user to situate each craftsperson in place and adds depth to the story of Black craftspersons. Notably, establishing a location in itself is an interpretative exercise, and the project wisely makes clear the primary and secondary sources used to make the map. This effort immediately addresses crucial questions for the users while also highlighting the project's complexity to multiple audiences that may utilize the site.

BCDA expands our understanding of Black labor and expertise in the South. By bringing these documents together and providing geographic information, this project uses argumentation and archival practice to enhance our understanding of the impact of Black craftsperson on the U.S. experience. No longer hidden, this project offers both pedagogical and research benefits for researchers, students, and the public interested in Black contributions to U.S. culture. As a project of digital recovery, this site is burdened by the limitation of the records. The vision of the Black craftspeople relies on slave ads and other newspaper material. Despite this limitation, this project has the potential for generative pathways that can define craftspeople beyond the sources' limitations. The team behind BCDA has already included interpretative materials, documentation, and structure to understand further how and where Black craftspeople contributed to the United States.

Project directors may wish to consider ways to broaden the focus beyond South Carolina and Tennessee in the future. The creators have demonstrated an ability to generate insights from primary documents about the impact of Black craft culture. This project might do more to engage with publicly available records to make similar connections in Georgia, Alabama, and Mississippi. Expanding the map and highlighting other forms of cultural materials that intersect with the Black experience would further enhance the impact of this project. They might do this by taking advantage of digitized books, journals, and other print material in digital repositories such as the HathiTrust Digital Library. Similarly, leveraging anthropological and archeological perspectives to broaden the scope of what can be said could further aid this project. In a similar way, placing more emphasis on the ability for community members to submit artifacts using the Contribute plugin will open the door to a hidden community narrative about craft culture. This could be achieved by creating partnerships with local cultural institutions and supporting organized events to submit material. These events could take advantage of local networks to identify the material the project values. Ultimately, this project's public facing work is transformative, and thinking through how that can be made scalable will ensure this project continues providing an effective means to examine the foundational legacy of Black people in the United States for years to come.