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TABLE OF CONTENTS

- Guest Editors' Introduction
 VERNON BURTON, JOSHUA CATALANO, AND JOZEFIEN DE BOCK 5

RESEARCH ARTICLES

- Mapping the New Gay South: Queer Space and Southern
 Life, 1965-1980
 ERIC GONZABA AND AMANDA REGAN 11

- Zones of Occupation, Zones of Access: Digital History and
 the Spatial World of Emancipation
 SCOTT NESBIT AND GREGORY P. DOWNS 26

- Toward Standardized Digital Documentation of Historic
 Architecture: Process, Subjectivity, and Repurposing Data
 Using Historic Lowcountry Sites
 CHAD KELLER 41

RESEARCH PROJECTS

- The Spatial Geographies of Skilled Black Labor: The Creation
 of the Black Craftspeople Digital Archive
 TIFFANY MOMON AND TORREN GATSON 62

- Mapping the Imagined South in Contemporary Southern
 Cookbooks
 CARRIE HELMS TIPPEN 68

- The Web, the Archive, and the Morgue
 STEPHEN BERRY 75

People Not Property: Slave Deeds of North Carolina CLAIRE HECKEL AND BRIAN ROBINSON	84
Southern History Dialogues: The First Twenty Years of H-South DAVID HERR	90
Nashville Behind Bars: Creating a Service-Learning Digital Project about Mass Incarceration ANDREA RINGER	96
The Textile Mill in the Digital South ELIJAH GADDIS	101
Movable: Narratives of Recovery and Place STEFAN SCHOEBERLEIN AND KRISTEN LILLVIS	107
The Integration of the Textile Industry – A History of Discrimination, Civil Rights and Affirmative Action JOZEFIEN DE BOCK	115
ESSAYS AND MEMOIRS	
Digital History Memories VERNON BURTON AND SIMON APPLEFORD	120
Predicting the Past EDWARD L. AYERS	147
Getting Started in the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning MILLS KELLY	154
NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS	160

The Spatial Geographies of Skilled Black Labor: The Creation of the Black Craftspeople Digital Archive

TIFFANY MOMON AND TORREN GATSON

The valued decorative arts, architecture, and handcrafts of the early American South depended on African American hands, a truth highlighted by folklorist John Michael Vlach in the seminal exhibit, *The Afro-American Tradition in Decorative Arts*, at the Cleveland Museum of Art in 1978. Yet, some forty years later, too few historians, museum curators, and certainly visitors to the public history institutions of the United States are presented with that truth. Scholars and curators may acknowledge that the labor of African Americans generated the wealth that powered the elites' pretentious displays of fine furniture, ceramics, and Georgian-styled mansions. However, the historical truth that enslaved and freed African Americans were master artisans in their own right is much more difficult to find in the nation's historic sites and museums.

The act of presenting these truths is currently driving the creation of the *Black Craftspeople Digital Archive* (BCDA). The BCDA seeks to augment what we know about black craftspeople by telling both a spatial story and a historically informed story. Throughout the years, scholars and historians have worked to bring attention to the contributions of African American craftspeople; however, these works often exist separately of one another. The goal of the BCDA is to bring together what we know about African American craftspeople into a centralized publicly accessible digital humanities website that not only provides biographical sketches of known craftspeople, but that also connects them to the objects they created and the landscapes in which they lived. To this end, the project requires that we use a host of digital platforms including Omeka, an open-source content

management system to organize and display the archival entries, ArcGIS to create and host the digital map of craftsperson locations, and WordPress to serve as the project's hub and homepage connecting users to both the ArcGIS map and the Omeka archive. The creation of the digital archive offers users an alternative to visiting traditional museum decorative art and archival collections that are often lacking in their interpretations of black craftspeople.

The Black Craftspeople Digital Archive

As historians with specialties in public history and material culture, the idea of not only locating African American craftspeople, but also of documenting the objects they made, some of which still exist, is compelling and necessary. The impetus behind the creation of the BCDA was numerous visits to museums and historic sites across the South that limited their interpretations of objects strictly to those who purchased or owned the objects and not to those who built and cared for the objects. Further experiences revealed that often interpretations were quick to mention that the material output of African American craftspeople fell outside of the decades-old definition of the decorative arts and therefore was not worthy of being designated as art. The BCDA works to challenge that narrative and the fixed definition of the decorative arts and argues that there is art in even the most obscure objects, such as bricks, made by enslaved craftspeople.

The historical record often portrays African American craftspeople as merely mimicking the trained work of others while enslaved. But, this narrow view has voided remarkable stories of triumph, economic prosperity, and ingenuity and stripped the true identities of skilled black craftspeople of their truths and depth. The BCDA allows scholars, students, and the general public alike the opportunity to identify, research, and interpret these stories through primary sources and acknowledges that this is a necessary first step toward sketching a new portrait of early American Southern decorative arts, life, labor, and economics.

Our core sources include legal records such as wills and estate records, land deeds, and recorded bills of sale; newspapers; and account ledgers and books, which document tools purchased for the use of enslaved craftspeople. Material culture—such as a brick featuring the signature of its African American maker Charlie Fremont, found during renovations of Bellamy Mansion in Wilmington, North Carolina—also have a place in the digital archive (Fig. 1.).



Fig. 1. Brick found during renovations of Bellamy Mansion that includes the name of its African American maker Charlie Fremont. Photograph by Tiffany Momon. Bellamy Mansion Museum collection.

The first phase of this project focuses on African American craftspeople in eighteenth-century Charleston, SC, involved in several trades, including blacksmithing, carpentry, joinery, and cabinetmaking among others. Eighteenth-century Charleston was a city on the rise to the peak of its prominence with no shortage of cabinetmaking shops producing fine furniture and master builders leading construction projects across the city. For example, in 1746, Charles Pinckney hired enslaved man John Williams, formerly known as Quash, to complete the carpentry work on his mansion located at the corner of East Bay and Guignard Streets in Charleston. The Pinckney Mansion was arguably the best example of Colonial architecture in Charleston, drawing influences from James Gibbs' *A Book of Architecture* and Andrea Palladio's *Palladio Londonesis*. While Williams has been the subject of scholarly inquiry a few times, the enslaved men working alongside him have not. Those men—Archer, Patrick, Charles, Pompey (who was also Williams's designated apprentice), Peter, Caesar and Prince—all aided in the construction of the Pinckney Mansion with Williams scripting a detailed account of their work. Williams also noted the architectural work that these men completed on other Pinckney owned properties around Charleston and the Lowcountry (Williams).

Sadly, none of these properties, including the Pinckney Mansion, still

stand. More disappointing, the contributions of Archer, Patrick, Charles, Pompey, Peter, Caesar, and Prince have been ignored, even though the Pinckney Mansion and its prominent owners are found in almost every narrative about Charleston and early Southern architecture. Together, enslaved craftspeople like these literally built the Lowcountry, and their legacies and contributions can be found by looking anew at the primary sources and historic landscapes that document the history of early life in Charleston.

Visualizations

Williams's thorough documentation of the work completed by black craftspeople on the Pinckney Mansion formed the foundation of data used for test maps, created with Google Maps, for this project. Our goal for the test mapping portion of the project was to depict the spatial experiences of Af-

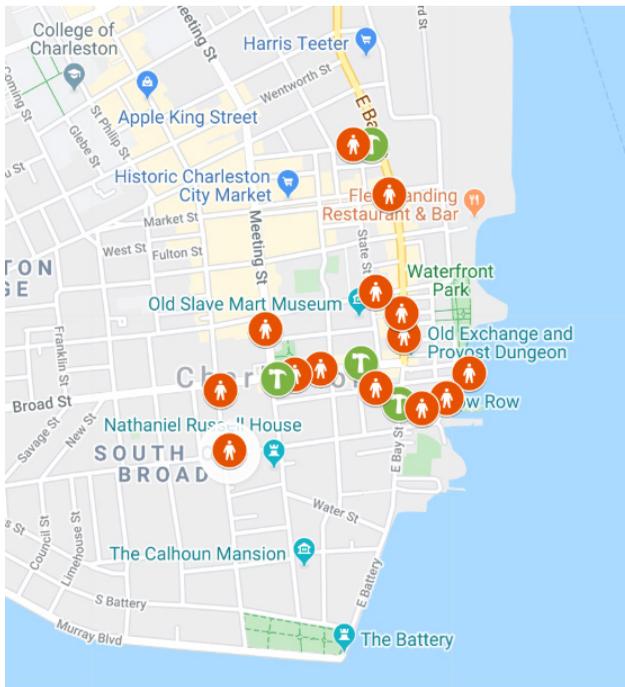


Fig. 2. Early “Charleston 1750-1755” test map showing initial results. The red circle icon represents the location of an enslaved craftspeople. The green hammer icon represents buildings associated with the labor of enslaved craftspeople. Map by Tiffany Momon.

frican American craftspeople across the Charleston landscape by examining where they lived and labored and their movements throughout the city. Figure Two shows our test map titled “Charleston, 1750 – 1755,” which is a snapshot of the 1750-1755 craftspeople landscape based on research conducted by our team and also research compiled by Jeanne A. Calhoun, Martha A. Zierden, and Elizabeth Paysinger in their article “The Geographic Spread of Charleston’s Mercantile Community, 1732-1767.” Using their data

compiled from sources such as the *South Carolina Gazette* in conjunction with our data drawn from private papers and other archival sources, spatial relationships between both white and African American craftspeople began

to emerge.

Using Google Maps to build our test map allowed us to view the 1750-1755 craftspeople landscape juxtaposed against the present-day landscape adding a level of excitement to our findings. Future plans to make our maps available via a cellphone app will allow users to connect the map's findings to their present-day locations as they experience the city of Charleston. Additionally, our test maps also incorporate images of buildings associated with the labor of black craftspeople along with other representative ephemera including John Williams's signature at the location of his home, images of the names of enslaved individuals on documents connected to their labor, and even fingerprints in bricks known to be made by enslaved craftspeople.

What we envision through the use of data visualization techniques is what Karen Kemp describes as adding a geographic reference to data. Kemp stated that by doing so, "it then becomes possible to compare that characteristic, event, phenomenon, etc. with others that exist or have existed in the same geographic space. What were previously unrelated facts become integrated and correlated" (Kemp 32). Comparing the characteristics of work done or objects produced by skilled black craftspeople will allow us to compare the true depth of their work across the South. By making these comparisons, we then have the possibility to compare architectural techniques, furniture designs, and the like while examining the patterns of craftsmanship that emerge.

To date, the digital archive includes seven hundred craftspeople involved in twenty-five trades across Charleston, SC and the South Carolina Lowcountry. Each of those seven hundred craftspeople has a physical location on the digital map representing their presence on the landscape. As we prepare for the launch of the website, including the archive and digital map, we maintain an active social media presence and use apps such as Instagram to engage with our audience and provide historical information and images in short form. After the launch of the website, including archival entries and digital map locations for the first seven hundred craftspeople, we will continue researching and adding craftspeople every six weeks.

Conclusion

According to folklorist John Michael Vlach, "the history of the whole aesthetic program of Afro-American decorative arts is a fascinating story that has never been fully told" (Vlach 1). The BCDA is only one of the numerous additions necessary to resolve Vlach's statement and to present an impactful and cohesive narrative of the literal and figurative building of this country.

The BCDA is not just a repository of historical information. The BCDA synthesizes all of the gathered historical data into a narrative that shares a history of the lives of black craftspeople across Charleston. Future plans for the expansion of the BCDA include expanding into other cities with legacies of African American craftsmanship, including Baltimore and Annapolis, MD, New Orleans, LA, and Wilmington, NC. The true intent of this work is to set free a voice kept dormant by the obvious loitering of racism but also the more covert systemic attributes of biased museum collections management processes with regards to African American history.

The BCDA simultaneously fills numerous voids in the study of labor, movement patterns, and enslavement for African Americans while also making a crucial intervention into the study of free African Americans and free communities of color. As we continue to grow this exploration of African American craftsmanship across the Southern landscape, we hope to unite the stories of African American craftspeople who likely experienced the same trials and shared like experiences making them closer to each other than their spatial distance would ever allow.

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European University Institute in Florence. Since then, she worked as a curator for the Ghent City Museum, a postdoctoral researcher at the Ghent Institute of Social History and at the University of Ghent, and as a lecturer at Artevelde University of Applied Sciences. She spent the academic year 2017/2018 as a Fulbright postdoctoral fellow in South Carolina, where her interest in the history of segregation and desegregation was born.

Gregory P. Downs is a professor of history at UC Davis, the author of three history monographs and one prize-winning short story collection, as well as co-author of the National Parks Service's first theme study of Reconstruction, with Kate Masur. With Masur he co-edits the *Journal of the Civil War Era*. With Scott Nesbit, he co-created the digital history site *Mapping Occupation*.

Elijah Gaddis is an assistant professor of public history at Auburn University where he teaches courses in material culture, digital humanities, and African American cultural history. He is also the co-director of the Community Histories Workshop, a digital public history collaboration between Auburn and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. His book on the material culture of racial violence, *Gruesome Looking Objects: A New History of Lynching and Everyday Things*, will be published next year by Cambridge University Press.

Torren Gatson is an assistant professor in the Department of History at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. He is a historic preservationist who has produced numerous impactful projects in North Carolina, Tennessee, and Alabama. Gatson conceptualizes the impact of African American material culture on the physical and cultural landscape. Gatson works with communities to build lasting public products that reflect the dynamic and difficult aspects of African American history. Gatson recently guest edited the *Journal of Early Southern Decorative Arts* special issue on African American material culture (vol. 41, 2020).

Eric Gonzaba is an assistant professor of American Studies at California State University, Fullerton where he teaches courses on the history of race and sexuality in America. He received his Ph.D. in American history at George Mason University in 2019. His work has previously been supported by grants and fellowships from the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Point Foundation, and the Elton John AIDS Foundation. Gonzaba currently serves as co-chair of the Committee on LGBT History.

Kristen Lillis is Muellerleile Endowed Chair and Professor of English at St. Catherine University. She is the project director and co-editor of the digital archive *Movable: Narratives of Recovery and Place* (movableproject.org), author of *Posthuman Blackness and the Black Female Imagination* (University of Georgia Press, 2017), and co-editor of *Community Boundaries and Border Crossings: Critical Essays on Ethnic Women Writers* (Lexington, 2016).

Tiffany Momon is a public historian and assistant professor at Sewanee: The University of the South, with years of experience participating in preserving community histories. Her work has taken her throughout the southeast, organizing community-based historic preservation projects. Momon is the founder and co-director of the Black Craftspeople Digital Archive (blackcraftspeople.org), a black digital humanities project that centers black craftspeople, their lives, and their contributions to the making and building of America. Throughout her career, Momon has lectured on the subject of black craftspeople at organizations such as the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, the Museum of Early Southern Decorative Arts, Winterthur Museum and Gardens, the Daughters of the American Revolution Museum, and others.

Scott Nesbit teaches digital humanities, historic preservation, and the history of the American South at the University of Georgia, where he is an associate professor. His digital history projects include Mapping Occupation, with Greg Downs, and Visualizing Emancipation, with Edward L. Ayers and others.

Amanda E. Regan is a lecturer in the Department of History and Geography at Clemson University. Regan studies the United States in the late nineteenth and twentieth century. She specializes in gender, women, and digital history. Currently, she is revising a book manuscript that examines instances in the late nineteenth and twentieth century when the state sought to encourage the fitness of female bodies. Regan is also the co-Project Director and Digital Lead on *Mapping the Gay Guides*, an NEH funded digital history project that seeks to map entries from historical LGBTQ guidebooks.

Andrea Ringer is an assistant professor of history at Tennessee State University (TSU). She teaches a course called America Behind Bars at TSU, which traces the history of incarcerated life in the US and includes an evolving public-facing project led by students. She is the author of “‘Purely personal and philosophical’: Reaction and Response to Gov. Winthrop