

## Reaping the Harvest: Descendant Archival Practice to Foster Sustainable Digital Archives for Rural Black Women

Jazma Sutton <Suttonj5\_at\_miamioh\_dot\_edu>, Miami University, Ohio  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4903-045X>

Kalani Craig <craigkl\_at\_indiana\_dot\_edu>, Indiana University Bloomington  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8909-0369>

### Abstract

Little is left of the built environment that marked the Greenville-Longtown Black Settlement, a once-thriving, free Black agricultural community on the border of Randolph County, Indiana, and Darke County, Ohio. The people of Greenville have not been forgotten, however, because of the memory-work undertaken by each generation of Black women whose power and agency connects their past with their future descendants. This article draws on “descendant archival practices” as a method to understand the importance of Greenville’s Black women in the preservation of rural Black community heritage and in the writing of Black women’s histories in the antebellum Midwest. Descendant archival practices connect Black digital humanities practices to the Longtown-Greenville descendant community’s digitization of artifacts and oral histories and supports a community-owned version of their active Facebook group. The result, a History Harvest called “Remembering Freedom: Longtown and Greenville History Harvest”, will facilitate ongoing community participation and future history harvests for overlooked, forgotten, and long-silenced communities.

By memory, those fond associations and ties of love which unite us together on earth, will be preserved in eternity...Memory should be cultivated. Like all other faculties of the mind and body, its vigor and activity depend on its exercise. The more the memory is exercised the stronger it becomes.

~J.B. Harrison, *Greenville Settlement*, 1864

95-year-old Cleo Fay Goens Mason is determined to narrate her own story. In her words, “Everybody has their own idea of what’s important. And you have to respect that” [Mason 2019b]. Perhaps this was a lesson she learned from her mother, who kept the books at Bethel Wesleyan Church in the early 1900s and held on to many of the items that adorned her during her life. Mrs. Mason, like her mother, is a memory keeper and descendant of the historic Longtown community, formerly known as the Greenville Black Settlement and now visible as Longtown on a map of Ohio. Mrs. Mason’s participation in the September 29, 2019 history harvest at the annual homecoming of Longtown, and the deliberate ways in which she unveiled her family’s heirlooms, suggests that her memory work is a practice cultivated across generations to bridge the gap of time and space between ancestor and descendant, between past and present, between the collections built by an individual and those housed in independent community archives [Mason 2019a][Flinn, Steven, and Shepherd 2009, 73].

Mrs. Mason’s contributions to *Remembering Freedom: Longtown and Greenville History Harvest*, henceforth *Remembering Freedom History Harvest*, extend her own memory work into a collaborative space that includes both Longtown descendants and a group of researchers and volunteers from Indiana University–Bloomington [Powell et al. 2018]. Like other history harvests, this history harvest paired the ethical concerns of community archiving with university partners, including the Institute for Digital Arts & Humanities and the Center for Research on Race and Ethnicity in Society, to digitize, preserve and showcase community historical artifacts in an open-source digital archive project [University of Nebraska at Lincoln History Department 2014][Rondo Ave, Inc. and Macalester College 2016 and 2017]. This shifts focus away from mainstream archives, the collections of predominantly white institutions that pose as inclusive and representative but fail to label Black people and their material as authoritative and constitutive. Women like Mrs. Mason and her female ancestors often show up in these institutional archives, both physical and digital, as nameless, faceless, victimized, objectified, or in the perspectives of others [Cifor et al. 2018][Zavala et al. 2017][Hartman 2019, 31]. Like the *Remembering Rondo History Harvest*, *Remembering Freedom* was created, and will be owned and sustained, by the individuals who have defined these descendant communities, foregrounding what rural Black women have been able to accomplish, across time and space, through an inherited practice of preservation work.

Mrs. Mason’s own ancestors shaped and preserved the memories that she then preserved for her own granddaughters and contributed to the *Remembering Freedom* in a conversation between individual, ancestral line and contemporary community that we are calling *descendant archival practices*. This approach explores alternative conceptions of community archives and memory work to expand the definition of slavery’s archive specifically. From historical documents stored in manila folders and cardboard boxes to memories invoked at her own will or with her granddaughter’s persuasion, Mrs. Mason’s individual contributions to the Longtown history harvest reveal the strategies of memory keeping individual women contributed to the communal legacies of Longtown’s history, which have not been erased but were instead preserved in plain sight. They left marks on the land they bequeathed their descendants, at the schools and churches in which they labored, in the secret rooms fugitive women used as safe havens, in the photographs they commissioned to recast the image of Black womanhood, and in the documents they passed down to their children and grandchildren.

1

2

3



Figure 1. Jazma Sutton, Mrs. Mason, and others at Longtown History Harvest.



Figure 2. Jazma Sutton, Mrs. Mason, and others at Longtown History Harvest.

*Descendant archival practices* cites as experts the many generations of Black women elders whose memory work preserves their history, and it holds as custodians the present generations of Black women whose power and agency connects their memory-work inheritance with their future descendants. The *Remembering Freedom History Harvest* builds on these intergenerational processes — which encompass on the collaborative aspects of community archiving, the individual actions of descendants who choose to keep their family's histories, and the collection practices of history harvests — to examine

free and fugitive Black women's experiences of freedom in the rural Midwest who have been overlooked in accounts of slavery and freedom. Over the past five years Jazma Sutton has worked collaboratively with individual Longtown descendants to center the sources, archives, and narratives produced by nineteenth-century Black women and their descendants, illuminate the multiplicity of archives that descendants of free and enslaved people have managed to create and preserve despite the constraints of white colonial power and white supremacy. *Descendant archival practice* foregrounds the individual and communal archival power of Black women, past and present, to “confront inequalities of power in the production of sources” as we look toward a digital future [Trouillot 2015]. The project thus grapples with the methodological and ethical concerns situated between archival excess and absence across the digital and analog divide. In a world that has always conceived of Black women in opposition to others, but never on her own terms, *Remembering Freedom History Harvest* builds a local Indiana historiography that relies less on resistant readings of archives and more on the community archives and memory work that join together in *descendant archival practice* as a way to generate Black women's histories.

## Sowing the Seeds

The Greenville Settlement, which overlapped the borders of Indiana and Ohio, was one of the earliest and most prosperous Black communities in the region. The settlement was founded in 1818 in Darke County, Ohio, by James and Sophia Clemens. By 1822, it extended over the state-line into Randolph County, Indiana where Thornton Alexander purchased the first tract of Black-owned land in the county. At times, Indiana and Ohio both passed state laws that prohibited immigration into the state, denied access to public schools, promoted Black immigration to Africa, and stripped Black people of any rights and privileges in court. Despite this, by the mid nineteenth century the free and fugitive Black people of Greenville had collectively amassed the most Black-owned land of any county in Indiana. They had established Wesleyan and African Methodist Episcopal Churches, founded an integrated, co-educational school of manual labor known as the Union Literary Institute (ULI), and operated safehouses on the Underground Railroad. In these ways, Greenville pioneers forged a community that was conducive to rural life and anti-slavery activism.

Today, the Clemens farmstead, a disintegrating ULI school building, and three cemeteries, one of which stands neglected in the middle of a white-owned farm, are all that remain of the settlement's built-environment. The joint forces of racial violence, industrialization, agricultural innovation, and mass migration decreased the Black population of Longtown to 0.76%. Roane Smothers, a family historian, asserts “When this has happened at other African American settlements, the buildings and cemeteries were demolished and the story about these African American pioneers are forgotten and buried” [Staff of the Dailey Advocate 2015)]. Sustained resistance to archival and cultural erasure has allowed Longtown descendants to digitize hundreds of historical documents and artifacts, to obtain historical markers, and to restore old buildings and register them on the National Register of Historic Places and as Underground Railroad sites with the National Park Service. Despite what Greenville descendants have been able to achieve through grassroots preservation practices, we still know very little about the women who W.E.B. Du Bois noted, after visiting the settlement in 1909, “took hold of the community” [Du Bois 1909].

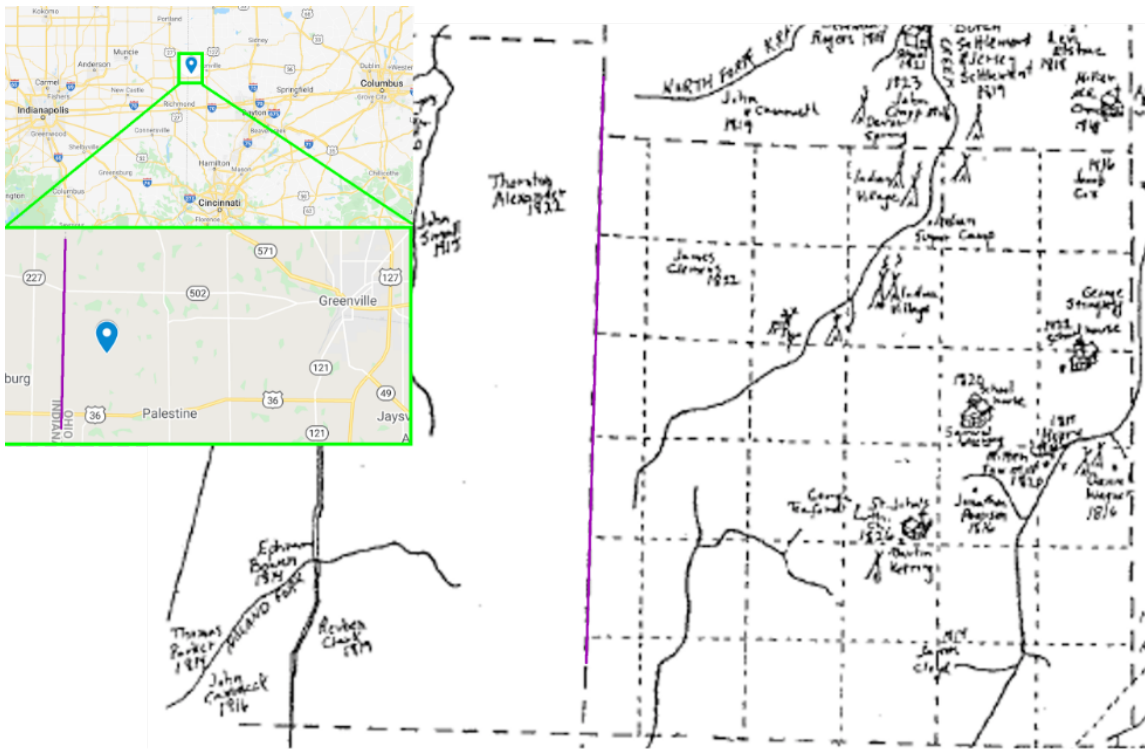


Figure 3. Map of Longtown, past and present

In this changing landscape of the Indiana-Ohio borderland, it was the women of Greenville and Longtown who carried its history into the present. Prior to the Civil War, Greenville women created spaces for themselves as free people, citizens, and women. Landownership and rural seclusion enabled Black women to raise families that could not be separated or destroyed, to educate their children, and to manage their own farms and homes. They labored as mothers, wives, caregivers, farm hands, and community leaders for the sake of community survival. The meager evidence that exists about Greenville women in male family members' estate records, white men's and women's reminiscences of the Underground Railroad, and some oral histories suggest that they were savvy. They adjusted to, and spearheaded at times, the latest agricultural, technological, industrial, and political advancements in arguably one of the



## Nurturing the Archive

The historical examination of slavery and freedom in the Northwest Territory (present-day Midwest) has been slow. A move towards engaging the lives of free, enslaved and fugitive Black women who lived in the territory's hundreds of free Black communities has lagged even further behind. Scholars like Erica Armstrong Dunbar, Amrita Chakrabarti Myers and Jessica Millward focus on urban spaces, pushing us to consider enslaved and free Black women's lived experiences of freedom, their definitions of freedom, and the varying degrees of freedom they occupied. To a certain extent, they each rely on traditional records such as court records, wills, church minutes, city directories, other official documents, and in rare cases like *A Fragile Freedom*, Black women's friendship albums to partially piece together the lives of free Black women who often left little to no sources behind about their lives [Dunbar 2008] [Dunbar 2017]. In *Forging Freedom*, some of these women were considered exceptional, having owned property and other enslaved people, yet they appear in the archive, not strictly in their own right, but mainly as a result of their legal negotiations or sexual relations with white men [Myers 2011]. Millward, in *Finding Charity's Folk* is fortunate to have one formerly enslaved woman's manumission papers, will, and court case, but is also aware that these records alone can not reconstruct the multifaceted lives of enslaved and free Black women. In search of Charity Folk whose "ghost refuses to be silent", Millward turns to memory, descendants of enslavers and enslaved people, historical buildings, and cemeteries to chronicle the life of a single woman [Millward 2015]. In *All That She Carried: The Journey of Ashley's Sack, a Black Family Keepsake*, historian Tiya Miles uses a single artifact from Black women's material culture — a sack filled with a tattered dress, three handfuls of pecans, and a braid of hair, which one enslaved woman bequeathed her daughter before being sold away — to trace the lives of a mother, daughter, and granddaughter trio during slavery and its immediate aftermath. Miles' treatment is an innovative assessment of the inheritance practices Black women drew on to maintain family connections between generations when the forces of slavery severed those connections all too readily [Miles 2021]. Millward and Miles show us what is possible when historians of enslaved women step outside of the confines of the traditional archive and demonstrate the importance of naming *descendant archival practice* to acknowledge the many contexts in which it appears in Black women's history.

8

Saidiya Hartman in "Venus in Two Acts" finds Black women in the "archives of slavery" in similar deplorable conditions — "No one remembered her name or recorded the things she said, or observed that she refused to say anything at all". To make meaning of this sort of archival encounter with "Black Venus", for Hartman, is akin to entering a mortuary — it permits one final viewing and allows for a last glimpse of persons about to disappear into the slave hold [Hartman 2008][Hartman 2006]. Her account is as much an account of the violence of the archive as it is of enslaved women. Like Hartman, in *Dispossessed Lives*, Marisa Fuentes, reckons with archival power, the violence of the archive, and the impossibilities of writing about Black women during slavery. While Hartman encourages historians to "respect the limits of what cannot be known", Marisa Fuentes suggests that we stretch these limits by "reading against the bias grain" [Fuentes 2016]. Instead of focusing solely on the lived experiences of enslaved women, she shifts her methods to examining the production of historical narratives that result from "archival fragments" [Fuentes 2016].

9

Black digital humanists have engaged a number of insurgent archival practices that, like *descendant archival practice*, model best-practice collaboration with community partners and bring digital methods to bear in both the practical and ideological transformation of tools and organizations that "resist and counteract slavery's dehumanizing impulses" as Jessica Marie Johnson notes in "Markup Bodies: Black [Life] Studies and Slavery [Death] Studies at the Digital Crossroads". Johnson further defines Black digital practice as "the revelation that Black subjects have themselves taken up science, data, and coding, in other words, have commodified themselves and digitized and mediated their own Black freedom dreams in order to hack their way into the system (modernity, science, the West), take root, and live where they were "never meant to survive" [Johnson 2018]. In that vein, *descendant archival practice* in *Remembering Freedom* echoes the engaging public-facing, community-based digital research done at #DigBlk, the Center for Black Digital Research at Penn State University in its community involvement. It orients toward "information" with the intent of bringing technology into play as a platform for descendants to convene regular conversation, as do the spaces defined by eBlack Studies, Black social media, and conversations like those at the Afrofuturism listserv.

10

Descendant archival practice builds on the concept of community archiving to understand Black women's personalized family "collections" as sites of resistance, identity formation, and community empowerment [Zavala et al. 2017]. While institutional examples of post-custodial approaches like the University of Texas Libraries or the University of Nebraska's history harvest offer community empowerment through the collection of community owned objects, descendant archival practice offers a community-owned model built on history harvests like *Remembering Rondo*, in which the community and the institutional partner hold joint ownership of the digital records themselves [Alpert-Abrams, Bliss, and Carbajal 2019, 4]. This community ownership makes explicit the give and take between individual family record-keeping done by descendants and the labor required to build digital community histories that will continue to bind those discrete families together into a whole in the future [Alpert-Abrams, Bliss, and Carbajal 2019, 73][Cook 1994, 301].

11

Like the *South Asian American Digital Archive*, *Transgender Archive*, and *Documenting the Now*, the *Remembering Freedom History Harvest* acknowledges and respects the agency and values of rural Black communities, and emulates the participatory and activist approaches of exclusively digital post-custodial archives [Cifor et al. 2018][Jules, Summers, and Mitchell 2018]. However, instead of focusing on the documentation of current events or a contemporary activist focus, *Remembering Freedom* is most interested in what the material culture of Black women can tell us about the intergenerational memory work of Black women descendants. In that way, descendant archival practice follows Black women archivists Chaitra Powell, Holly Smith, Shanee' Murrain and Skyla Hearn, themselves connected to this culture of care and memory-keeping, in understanding how a culture of dissemblance and careful management of archival practices within a closed community keeps that community safe. As historian Vanessa Holden puts it "silence saves lives" [Holden 2021].

12

As these studies show, some of the most innovative methodologies for studying free, enslaved, and fugitive women have emerged from encounters with colonialism, silence, fragmentation, and violence in the archive. The *Remembering Freedom History Harvest* builds on these methods by examining free and fugitive Black women's experiences of freedom in the rural Midwest who have been overlooked in accounts of slavery and freedom. As part of *descendant archival practice*, we expand the definition of the archive of slavery to include living individuals who hold, in their ancestry, an inheritance that keys to what is unknown. The major ethical concern driving the *Remembering Freedom History Harvest* is the normalization of silence and violence in the narratives, archives, and methods we use to write about Black women during slavery. At the same time, *descendant archival practice* does not accept that enslaved women must always appear nameless, faceless, and forgotten in the archives of slavery. In fact, attention to the preservation practices of descendants and other Black digital humanists who are concerned with centering overlooked Black communities and issues of accessibility allow us to

13

create intentional practices to ensure that this does not happen in the future.

Because of its joint emphasis on openness and digital-community-engagement structure, the history harvest model offers a platform for enacting the elements of *descendant archival practice* that hold space for the individual and communal voices of Black women in particular. A more adequate counter-history of slavery — a history of the past and present intertwined — privileges the overlooked communities of descendants, the archives they have produced, and the stories they have to tell. For the descendants of Greenville, women have taken up this call. One such archive is their Facebook page, “Remembering Freedom”, which serves as a core inspiration for this history harvest. As a digital archive, and an easy-to-use platform for community empowerment, the “Remembering Freedom” Facebook page echoes the technical expertise that has always been necessary for Black people to flourish in rural communities. The ability to learn, adapt, and invent technologies was one of the hidden hallmarks of free Black rural communities, and Longtown’s women descendants are carrying on that tradition in digital and analog spaces. Its near-ubiquity as a social media platform — Pew Research estimates 69% of adults had Facebook accounts in 2019, and 74% of those users visited the site daily [Perrin and Anderson 2019] — and its ease of use offers equitable access to Longtown descendants, historians and other interested parties from across many demographic groups to collaboratively fill the silences in Longtown’s history. At the same time, Facebook’s proprietary approach to and control over its data means that, without consideration for backups or presentation elsewhere, any digitized archives on Facebook’s platform are prone to unexpected loss and erasure (though to be fair, this isn’t a concern limited to Facebook for born-digital archives). Its algorithmic presentation of a “feed” selected for each user also serves to make the silences and gaps in that feed invisible and unknowable to the average Facebook visitor.

## Reaping the Harvest

An emphasis on *descendant archival practice* helps surface the voices of enslaved, free, and fugitive Black communities in parallel with those of their individual descendants in the present. As we considered how to honor this parallel in both the in-person and digital components of the *Remembering Freedom History Harvest*, several projects informed our work. Some of these projects were good models for the technical and community-engagement portions of the history harvest; others provided grounded examples of our theoretical frameworks expressed in practice.

Our first reference point was the project’s namesake, the first history harvests at Nebraska in 2013.<sup>[1]</sup> [University of Nebraska at Lincoln History Department 2014]. The basic principle is built on community contribution of objects, with academic support in order to digitally preserve family heirlooms that might otherwise not be included in the historical record without removing them from the families whose history they tell. These history harvests provided a service-learning model that puts historians into dialogue with the public-history needs of local community members. Such digital-public-engagement projects foster collaboration between community members and the academy, a democratization of history that still maintains the academic-history connection between preservation and the analysis of change and continuity. While a later K-12 model extends the history-harvest practices to “Invisible Histories” in Omaha’s minoritized communities, the prominent early models presented in the “History Harvest Handbook” are those in which undergraduates worked in classroom settings with largely white homesteader audiences in the communities surrounding Lincoln [Friefeld et al., 2015]. While contributions solicited by undergraduates from these rural Russian and German immigrant communities lack some representation in the archives, the experiences of rural white communities in general are already well represented in academic history.

To bridge that gap, we looked then to *Remembering Rondo* History Harvests for a community engagement model that emphasized the efforts of Detroit’s largest red-lined Black community working to preserve the community’s memory of the community before and after it was forcibly divided in 1956 by the construction of the I-94 freeway [Wingo and Anderson 2020]. These history harvests focused on the importance of community agency and operational oversight, a process driven by now-retirement-age community members. The community’s interest in these history harvests were meant not just to preserve Rondo’s memory of itself before the I-94’s construction. The history harvest team also served as one prong of many community efforts to highlight and publicize Rondo’s unity through its long physical divide, as Rondo’s residents sought to address the physical reuniting of Rondo through, among other efforts, construction of a land-bridge over the I-94. Rondo’s model of community custody with university-provided sustainability, compared to the post-custodial models in previous history harvests, was particularly instructive.

Finally, we looked to the Texas Freedom Colonies Project, which has elements of the community contributions that are central to history harvests but re-focuses the communal element of the history harvest on pre-existing Black community preservation practices that can be supported and extended through digital means [Roberts 2018]. This project is also driven by what founder Andrea Roberts, calls “critical sankofa planning — a process of looking back, believing there’s wisdom there, and applying that knowledge to current dilemmas”. As she points out, the social justice aim embedded in critical sankofa planning is especially relevant to “rural or unincorporated [black] spaces” like Longtown, dealing with “gentrification and cultural erasure” in the present.

To continue redressing the absences and erasure in the archive, we focused on five features that reshaped some of the history harvest digital conventions in ways that center the existing community practices unique to Longtown descendants. Two of these shifts were part of the history-harvest day itself. First, we were invited to participate in an already scheduled community homecoming day. We also shifted away from archival-level capture practices that emphasize specific preservation quality (and therefore equipment) requirements. Instead, we focused on low-cost easy-to-use equipment that community members would be likely to have on hand already (cell phones, desk lamps) or could purchase for very low cost (e.g. homemade cardboard lightboxes or inexpensive pop-up lightboxes to improve photo quality<sup>[2]</sup>). Both of these considerations are directly connected to the idea of the archive as a nexus of community-academy partnership, rather than a site of academic praxis that seeks to meet purely academic standards.

The other three technical shifts are situated in the digital context of the history harvest: a series of vocabulary changes to the history harvest site, a move to Github Pages, and the interleaving of the community’s Facebook page with the history harvest page. Each of these technical considerations was driven by our digital-engagement theory. Compounded, all five draw on considerations of “racialized design” — an intentional challenge to uninterrogated project management and design standards that perpetuate racism [Mercer and Moses 2019]. The choice of Github Pages in particular meant that we could effectively support community custody of the web site with a free, stable, sustainable hosting solution that emphasizes simple, static web pages. That in turn allowed us to draw on university-sponsored resources and workflows to facilitate regular “backups” of the *Remembering Freedom History Harvest* web site on the Internet Archive’s Wayback Machine, ensuring long-term public access to the site regardless of community hosting considerations. Together, these five changes radically transform the history harvest from a space that perpetuates “white colonial power” in present-day archives and narratives to one that truly promotes “innovative new authentic learning initiatives” for the future through the historical productions of overlooked people.

## In the Pews at Longtown

First, we scheduled the event day around several pre-existing community traditions centered on gathering at the physical site of Longtown and Greenville itself. Descendant Brenda Jett was responsible for organizing the event at the local Bethel Wesleyan Church, and she functioned as the main contact between researcher and community. Homecoming events like the one at which the history harvest took place are evidence of how the community sees its past as a source of identity and a guide for future conduct. The invitation to participate in the history harvest portion of the homecoming event was explicitly focused on memory as an heirloom. By signaling that oral histories rooted in the built environment itself, in an ancestral home, were equally valid as contributions of digitized family heirlooms, we acknowledged the silences of free and enslaved voices in archives that are often dependent on physical objects and traditional historical texts to anchor a community's history.

Second, we centered the event on digitization tools that would minimize the amount of computing and technology necessary to generate a digital archive and situate that digitization effort in the community's most familiar spaces [Gil and Ortega 2016]. This minimal-computing approach, which we address more fully below, allowed us to be flexible and take community direction once we arrived at the homecoming, rather than requesting guaranteed access to WiFi or power outlets, which might redirect community focus to our needs rather than theirs.

Upon arrival, we were invited to attend the community's Homecoming church service. Our digitization efforts would be located at the church and began at the conclusion of the Homecoming ceremony. In a small room behind the sanctuary, where we were able to access a few power outlets, we set up a single, foldable light box, a scanner, and a sign-in table. Members crowded the space; some were holding a few folders, others carried boxes filled with decades-old materials. Still, others toted nothing but their personal stories and histories. We sent a few graduate and undergraduate students to the pews with handheld battery-powered audio recorders for interviews and began encouraging community members to fill out our paper forms.

Standing together in the small room, we issued directions and were also directed. One descendant sought accommodations for Shari Petersime, a family historian who is visually impaired. Shari, still residing in the Longtown area, contributed a draft of the family history book she was writing titled, "Only God Can Make a Tree: Tracing my Burden Family Roots" [Petersime 2019]. A couple of months after the history harvest, she contacted Sutton via phone and made arrangements to send her a copy of the final project. Sutton has since then cited the publication, which has a wealth of information on antebellum women from the settlement, in her dissertation and consulted Petersime's expertise to weave together archival fragments. This is also when we first met Mrs. Mason, who offered the largest collection of documents and objects of any descendant. The particularity with which she handled her material or responded to our requests was evidence of the intentionality that generations of rural Black women have placed on how they wanted to be remembered. Mrs. Mason, highlights the ways in which rural Black women and their female descendants have subverted the fate of Black Venus. We could not ignore the care and concentration with which she chose the information she wanted to share from her personal archive.

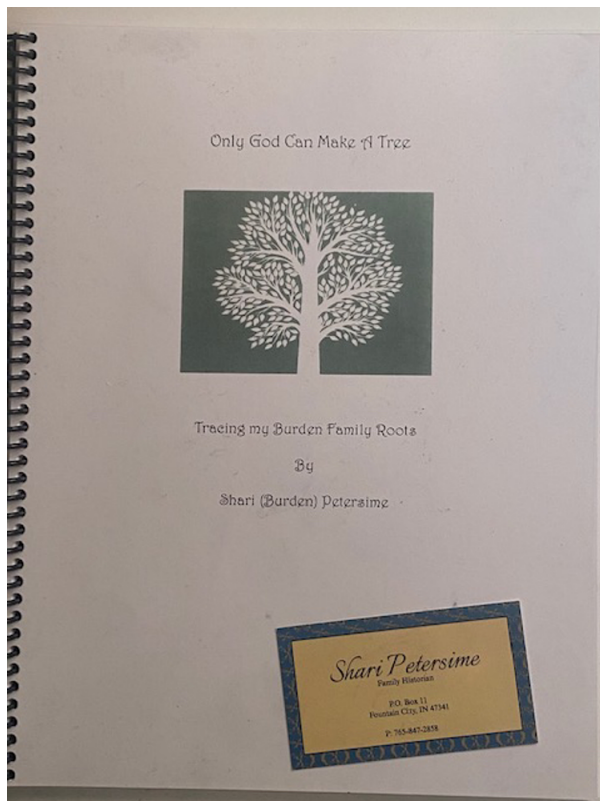


Figure 4. Shari Petersime's Family History Book

As the example of Mrs. Mason makes clear, the amount of material to collect far exceeded the number of hands and time available to do the work of collecting. We worked with descendants to choose – or limit — what they wanted scanned, photographed, or recorded, but those choices were circumscribed by the sometimes-slow nature of high-quality digital capture. In some cases, we compromised the quality of the digitization process in order to acknowledge the importance of a memory or heirloom. In each of these cases, the question looming over our labor is one of theoretical, practical, and historical importance: Would those interested in seeing this archive, whether they be researchers, descendants of the public, “emerge from the encounter

[with the archive] with a sense of incompleteness and with the recognition that some part of the self is missing as a consequence of this engagement?” [Hartman 2008]. We were compelled to contend with the possibility that, in our efforts to address the silences and violence of the archive, we had sustained them because of the twin limitations of time and technical ability.

At the same time, we did not “stumble upon her in exorbitant circumstances that yield no picture of everyday life, no pathway to her thoughts, no glimpse of the vulnerability of her face or what looking at such a face might demand” [Hartman 2008]. In fact, we encountered her — Venus, rural free and fugitive Black women, Mrs. Mason — because she made the decision to show up. The sum of Mrs. Mason’s collections — birth, death and church records, marriage certificates, property deeds, poetry, sewing baskets, photographs, a kerosene light, photos of the 1850 home built by the founder of the settlement in which she was born and raised — yield a picture of everyday life that no archive in the states of Indiana and Ohio, together, has been able to reveal [Mason 2019a][Mason 2019b]. Looking at her face and witnessing the choices she made about the information she wanted to share, demanded that we see her as evidence of the past and allow her to narrate her own story.

## Longtown Online

This worry stayed with us after we returned home, and the remaining three of our five changes were driven by the ongoing realization that we would need to do more work to address the archive as a site of erasure. To that end, our third major change reoriented the web site around the idea of descendant voices, even down to the variable names. As we noted earlier, our pre-event Call for Contributions included a call to contribute voice in addition to object; on site, we stressed the importance of descendants’ preferences for digitizing the items that were significant to them — not to us or anyone else — as a way to emphasize the community’s archival power. To echo that emphasis, what would have been the “Collections” and “Items” portion of another history harvest site is now called “Descendant History” In that section, we bring digitized objects together with descendant interviews and give both equal weight as part of the preservation efforts. We also addressed the divide between “contributor”, “creator”, and “owner” in the language of the original history harvest metadata, a holdover that assumes creation, ownership, and contribution have a transactional nature. These divided roles are gone, replaced by “descendant” to acknowledge the inheritance that makes descendants like Mrs. Mason the guardians of their own history.

Fourth, the “Remembering Freedom” Facebook page created by Lori Archey, which is descendant-driven and will see more regular updates than the history harvest page, is embedded front-and-center on the history-harvest home page and on the page that documents the 2019 homecoming event [Archey 2011]. Similarly, some of the photos that are part of the community’s own archive on Facebook are re-presented as part of the history harvest collection, clearly labeled and with additional links to the Facebook site and its preserved heirlooms. These embeddings and linkages highlight the active role Longtown and Greenville’s descendants have taken for years in their own ongoing preservation efforts. Just as Mrs. Goens’ particularity in person is matched digitally in how her history is told in the history harvest, the interweaving of Facebook and history harvest is a visible expression of the community’s own notions of preservation as a link between their past and their present.

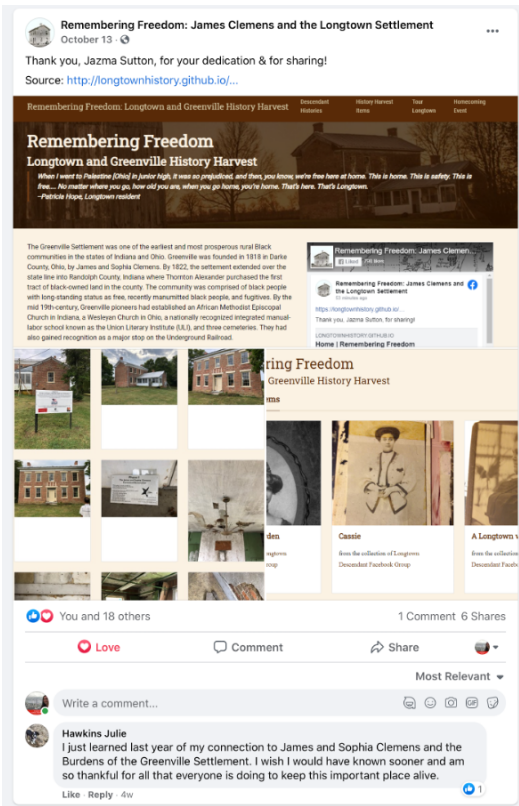


Figure 5. A Screenshot of the Remembering Freedom Facebook Page sharing the History Harvest

A fifth change required more substantive effort as we considered the entwined issue of sustainability, affordability, and access in archive building and digital preservation. The community’s Facebook preservation efforts are robust, well-organized and literally well-liked in Facebook terms. Community organizers, however, acknowledge that the platform is less well suited to long-term permanence. The need for stability, combined with a low-cost solution that encourages community ownership of the archive, led us to GitHub. Most history harvests are built on a custom Omeka installation, a boutique university-

built content-management system with built-in metadata processing that makes duplication in a university-sponsored repository easy. It does so at the cost of ongoing access to paid hosting with more complex requirements that require academic intervention; these requirements also make it more likely that academic ownership of the site would become the default. We instead opted for a simple, static, text-only site hosted using Jekyll in Github Pages, a free platform whose primary function is shared, collaborative technical practices. This hosting choice also better supported the necessary metadata vocabulary changes that acknowledge the need to move away from colonizing ideals of creation, contribution, and ownership. While we are committed to partnering for whatever technical needs the Longtown/Greenville community identifies in the future, this platform choice is part of an overall design shift that offers the community full stewardship of their own preservation practices, including more history harvests in the future, with minimal computing needs [Gil and Ortega 2016].

In the near future, we intend to engage more fully with one necessary feature of digital projects generally, and history harvests in particular: documentation. This effort has begun, but our long-term documentation efforts will be designed to offer a sustainable method for Longtown and Greenville's communities to incorporate the history-harvest option as one of their own preservation efforts. We chose a well-documented Jekyll theme Medium-ish on which to build our template, which gives future history-harvest preservationists a community of practitioners that is much larger than the IUB history harvest team [sal@wowthemesnet 2019]. Our own customization, including storage and naming convention for images and text, builds on the standards built into that existing structure, making it more likely that anyone with basic web skills can learn how to update and add to the site. Finally, we have begun the process of documenting our approach to customizing Medium-ish through a combination of in-person training, video tutorials, and in-line commented code. In this way, too, we actively sought to subvert the supposed "clarity and simplicity" of code that obscures and excludes non-white voices and use it intentionally to support Longtown's descendants as they voice their own preservation [McPherson 2012].

30

## Let She Who Has Watered Be Watered

As we look forward into the future of the *Remembering Freedom* History Harvest, our thoughts turn to an emphasis on what the descendant community will need to guide their preservation and outreach efforts moving forward. That will take on several dimensions. As academic collaborators, we need to address not just the transfer of the accounts and passwords that provide access to Github and the email addresses that are used for Github logins. We also need to center the community's Facebook practices as we work together to grow the site; new additions to the Facebook page that encourage community cohesion can go hand in hand with the stability of Github preservation. These endeavors should also situate a more formal university partnership, which should address backups and long-term file migration support for permanent preservation. In all of these formal partnership efforts, we will work with the community to emphasize a similar centering of descendant community needs that brings Black voices back into archival spaces without reifying the archive as the only legitimate site of preservation. To make this history harvest the site of true change, however, we need to consider one final step: a clear provision of outreach, time, tutorials and resources so that other communities can draw on this site for their own preservation work in the absence of the extractive patterns that are the hallmark of "traditional" academic archives. Our hope is that this focus on community-based archival production and sustainability — using digital technologies and platforms that are easily adaptable for the creation of sustainable/equitable/democratized archives for the future — will continue to serve those whose lives and experiences have been left void by traditional archives.

31

## Notes

[1] From the History Harvest site at [historyharvest.unl.edu](http://historyharvest.unl.edu): "The University of Nebraska-Lincoln Department of History partners with institutions and individuals within highlighted communities to collect, preserve, and share their rich histories. Advanced undergraduates lead the History Harvest project and curate and digitize these artifacts and stories.... The History Harvest, then, is an invitation to local people to share their historical artifacts, and their stories, for inclusion in a unique digital archive of what we are calling the people's history."

[2] The pop-up lightboxes.

## Works Cited

- Alpert-Abrams, Bliss, and Carbajal 2019** Alpert-Abrams, H., Bliss, D. A., & Carbajal, I. (2019). "Post-Custodial Archiving for the Collective Good: Examining Neoliberalism in US-Latin American Archival Partnerships". *Journal of Critical Library and Information Studies*. 2.1 <https://doi.org/10.24242/jclis.v2i1.87>.
- Archey 2011** Archey, L. (2011). "Remembering freedom: James Clemens and the Longtown Settlement [Online]". <https://www.facebook.com/Remembering-Freedom-James-Clemens-and-the-Longtown-Settlement-170627093017850/>. Accessed July 5, 2020.
- Cifor et al. 2018** Cifor, M., Caswell, M., Migoni, A.A., & Geraci, N. (2018). "What We Do Crosses over to Activism": The Politics and Practice of Community Archives". *The Public Historian*. 40.2: 69-95. <https://www.muse.jhu.edu/article/737515>.
- Cook 1994** Cook, T. (1994). "Electronic records, paper minds: the revolution in information management and archives in the post/custodial and post/modernist era". [Based on a presentation delivered by the author during his November 1993 Australian tour.] *Archives and Manuscripts* 22.2: 300-328.
- Documenting the Now** Documenting the Now. Available: <https://www.docnow.io/>. Accessed August 25, 2021.
- Du Bois 1909** Du Bois, W. E. B. (1909). "Long in Darke". *Colored American Magazine*.
- Dunbar 2008** Dunbar, E. A. (2008). *A fragile freedom: African American women and emancipation in the antebellum city*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Dunbar 2017** Dunbar, E. A. (2017). *Never caught: The Washingtons' relentless pursuit of their runaway slave, Ona Judge*. New York, NY: Simon and Schuster (Aladdin).
- Flinn, Steven, and Shepherd 2009** Flinn, A., Stevens, M. AND Shepherd, E. (2009). "Whose memories, whose archives? Independent community archives, autonomy and the mainstream". *Archival science*. 9.12: 71-86. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10502-009-9105-2>
- Friefeld et al., 2015** Friefeld, J. K., Thomas III, W. G., Jones, P. & Class, T. U. O. N.-L. H. H. (2015). *The history harvest handbook*. University of Nebraska — Lincoln. [https://historyharvest.net/?page\\_id=152](https://historyharvest.net/?page_id=152)
- Fuentes 2016** Fuentes, M. J. (2016). *Dispossessed lives: Enslaved women, violence, and the archive*. Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Gallon 2016** Gallon, Kim. "Making a Case for the Black Digital Humanities." *Debates in the Digital Humanities* (2016): 42-49.



- Gil and Ortega 2016** Gil, A. & Ortega, É. (2016). "Global outlooks in digital humanities: Multilingual practices and minimal computing". In C. Crompton, R. J. Lane, & R. Siemens (Eds.), *Doing digital humanities: Practice, training, research*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Hartman 2006** Hartman, S. (2006). *Lose your mother: A journey along the Atlantic slave route*. New York, NY: Macmillan.
- Hartman 2008** Hartman, S. (2008). "Venus in two acts". *Small Axe: A Caribbean Journal of Criticism*. 12: 1-14.
- Hartman 2019** Hartman, S. (2019). *Wayward lives, beautiful experiments: Intimate histories of riotous Black girls, troublesome women, and queer radicals*. New York, NY: WW Norton & Company.
- Holden 2021** Holden, V.M. (2021). *Surviving Southampton: African American women and resistance in Nat Turner's community*. Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press.
- Holden and Dunbar 2021** Holden, V. M. & Dunbar, E. A. (2021). "Surviving Southampton Virtual Event: Vanessa M. Holden in conversation with Erica Armstrong Dunbar". *YouTube video*. Available: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G2phoHE2IVo>. Accessed July 30, 2021.
- Johnson 2018** Johnson, Jessica Marie. (2018). "Markup bodies". *Social Text*. 36.4: 57–79. <https://doi.org/10.1215/01642472-7145658>.
- Jules, Summers, and Mitchell 2018** Jules, B., Summers, E., & Mitchell, V. (2018). "Ethical considerations for archiving social media content generated by contemporary social movements: Challenges, opportunities, and recommendations" *Documenting the Now Whitepaper*. Available: <https://www.docnow.io/docs/docnow-whitepaper-2018.pdf>. Accessed Aug 25, 2021.
- LongtownHistory@gmail.com 2020** LongtownHistory@gmail.com (2020). "Welcome to history harvest item editing". *YouTube*. Available: <https://youtu.be/aqMoGK50vt0>. Accessed July 5, 2020.
- Mason 2019a** Mason, C. F. G. (2019). "Collection of Cleo Fay Goens Mason". *Remembering Freedom: Longtown and Greenville History Harvest*. Available: <https://longtownhistory.github.io/descendants/mason.html>. Accessed July 5, 2020.
- Mason 2019b** Mason, C. F. G. (2019). "Interview with Cleo Fay Goens Mason". *Remembering Freedom: Longtown and Greenville History Harvest*. Available: <https://longtownhistory.github.io/oralhistories/mason.html>. Accessed Aug 31, 2021.
- McPherson 2012** McPherson, T. (2012). "Why are the digital humanities so white? Or thinking the histories of race and computation". In M. K. Gold (Ed.), *Debates in the digital humanities*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Mercer and Moses 2019** Mercer, L. E. & Moses, T. (2019). "Identifying racialized design to cultivate a culture of awareness in design". *The Design Journal*. 22: 1399-1407.
- Miles 2021** Miles, T. (2021). *All that she carried: The journey of Ashley's sack, a Black family keepsake*. New York, NY: Penguin Random House.
- Millward 2015** Millward, J. (2015). *Finding charity's folk: Enslaved and free Black women in Maryland*. Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press.
- Myers 2011** Myers, A. C. (2011). *Forging freedom: Black women and the pursuit of liberty in Antebellum Charleston*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press.
- Perrin and Anderson 2019** Perrin, A. & Anderson, M. (2019). "Share of U.S. adults using social media, including Facebook, is mostly unchanged since 2018". *Pew Research*. Available: <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/04/10/share-of-u-s-adults-using-social-media-including-facebook-is-mostly-unchanged-since-2018/>. Accessed November 5, 2020.
- Petersime 2019** Petersime, S. (2019). *Only God can make a tree: Tracing my burden family roots*.
- Powell et al. 2018** Powell, C., Smith, H., Murrian, S., & Hearn, S. (2018). "This [Black] woman's work: Exploring archival projects that embrace the identity of the memory worker". *KULA: Knowledge Creation, Dissemination, and Preservation Studies* 2.1: 5. <https://doi.org/10.5334/kula.25>.
- Roberts** Roberts, A. *The Texas Freedom Colonies Project Atlas & Study: Mapping the Unmapped Black Settlements of Texas*. Available: <http://www.thetexasfreedomcoloniesproject.com>. Accessed July 5, 2020.
- Roberts 2018** Roberts, A. (2018). "The Texas Freedom Colonies Atlas (BETA) Guidebook: Mapping the Unmapped Black Settlements of Texas". *Texas A&M University College of Architecture, Center of Digital Humanities Research*. [https://oaktrust.library.tamu.edu/bitstream/handle/1969.1/168567/The%20Texas%20Freedom%20Colonies%20Atlas%20%28BETA%29%20Guidebook\\_DRAFT.pdf?sequence=2](https://oaktrust.library.tamu.edu/bitstream/handle/1969.1/168567/The%20Texas%20Freedom%20Colonies%20Atlas%20%28BETA%29%20Guidebook_DRAFT.pdf?sequence=2). Access April 7, 2022.
- Rondo Ave, Inc. and Macalester College 2016 and 2017** Rondo Avenue, Inc. & Macalester College (2016 & 2017). *Remembering Rondo | A History Harvest*. Available: <https://omeka.macalester.edu/rondo/>. Accessed November 1, 2020.
- South Asian American Digital Archive** *South Asian American Digital Archive*. Available: <https://www.saada.org/> [Accessed August 25, 2021].
- Staff of the Dailey Advocate 2015** Staff of the Dailey Advocate (2015). "Wright State student Connor Keiser works to preserve historical black settlement of Longtown". *The Daily Advocate*. Available: <https://www.dailyadvocate.com/news/education/7764/wright-state-student-connor-keiser-works-to-preserve-historic-black-settlement-of-longtown>. Accessed July 5, 2020.
- Transgender Archive** "Transgender Archive". *University of Victoria*. Available: <https://www.uvic.ca/transgenderarchives/>. Accessed August 25, 2021.
- Trouillot 2015** Trouillot, M-R. (2015). *Silencing the past: Power and the production of history*. Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press.
- University of Nebraska at Lincoln History Department 2014** University of Nebraska at Lincoln History Department (2014). *History Harvest*. Available: <http://historyharvest.net/>. Accessed July 5, 2020.
- Wingo and Anderson 2020** Wingo, R. S. & Anderson, M. R. (2020). "Harvesting History". In R. S. Wingo, J. A. Heppler, & P. Schadewald (Eds.), *Digital Community Engagement: Partnering Communities with the Academy*. Cincinnati, OH: University of Cincinnati Press.
- Zavala et al. 2017** Zavala, J., Migoni, A.A., Caswell, M., Geraci, N. & Cifor, M. (2017). "A process where we're all at the table': community archives challenging dominant modes of archival practice". *Archives and Manuscripts*. 45.3: 202-215. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01576895.2017.1377088>
- sal@wowthemesnet 2019** sal@wowthemesnet (2019). *Mediumish Jekyll Theme*. Available: <https://github.com/wowthemesnet/mediumish-theme-jekyll>. Accessed July 5, 2020.



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License.