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## A Balancing Act in the Archives: Increasing Access to the Great Plains Black History Museum Collections

Wendy Guerra

*University of Nebraska at Omaha, wguerra.mn@gmail.com*

Lori Schwartz

*University of Nebraska at Omaha, lschwartz@unomaha.edu*

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# **A Balancing Act in the Archives: Increasing Access to the Great Plains Black History Museum Collections**

Wendy Guerra  
Digital Initiatives Archivist, Assistant Professor  
University of Nebraska at Omaha

Lori Schwartz  
Hagel and Technical Services Archivist, Assistant Professor  
University of Nebraska at Omaha

## **Abstract**

The University of Nebraska at Omaha (UNO) Libraries' Archives and Special Collections is temporarily housing a portion of the Great Plains Black History Museum's (GPBHM) archival collection as a result of an ongoing community partnership. The GPBHM's stated mission is "...to preserve, educate, and exhibit the contributions and achievements of African Americans with an emphasis on the Great Plains region, as well as provide a space to learn, explore, reflect and remember our history" (<https://gpblackhistorymuseum.org/>). It was founded in 1975 and has since served as a rich resource for Black history in the Omaha community. UNO has a history of collaborating with the museum for co-sponsored panel discussions, history summer camps, and guidance on collection care. Building upon these joint efforts naturally led to piloting a partnership that involved the temporary transfer of archival collections to UNO for arrangement, description, and select digitization. At the time of transfer, the collection allowed no public access due to space limitations. As community members, UNO archivists wanted to help make these resources available to the wider community. UNO staff could reasonably offer their professional resources to contribute towards increased access to the GPBHM archival collection. The potential multiple pitfalls of community partnerships do require in-depth consideration though, some the authors were prepared for and others less so.

The ethical considerations of UNO staff forming a partnership that transferred records temporarily out of the community in which they were created were significant. While UNO archivists bring professional skills to the project, it was critical that they not approach it from a position of all-knowing power, but with a service mindset while incorporating significant input from the museum leadership. Communication between UNO and the GPBHM was an important piece in establishing the partnership. The MOU between both parties indicates exactly how UNO will assist the GPBHM in their efforts to increase access, while ultimately ensuring that the resources be as open as possible to the community. The authors learned that communication can be difficult when there is a single point of contact, made more difficult by a volunteer board populated by people who work full-time elsewhere. While the authors were prepared for these potential pitfalls, they were less so ready for the juggling act of balancing resources. Quite unexpectedly, the platform where digital collections were to be made accessible became a non-viable option only two years into the partnership. This coincided with uncertainties surrounding a permanent GPBHM location to house and provide access to the collection, which may not be settled for years. In addition, concerns over the annual library budget have contributed to discussions surrounding priorities in processing and digitization.

Despite these uncertainties, one of UNO's strategic priorities is community engagement. The authors are fortunate to have the support of both their unit Director and library Dean to pursue the work. The authors will continue to support increased access to the GPBHM archival collection by pursuing grants that will assist with conservation, further processing, and ongoing digitization. The ongoing work will build off the selection of materials originally chosen for its subject matter and relevance to UNO's Department of Black Studies. This paper will discuss building relationships with community partners, the ethics of partnerships that include relocating and hosting collections, complications with balancing resources, and handling the unknown. The authors will describe and reflect on UNO's partnership with the GBPHM with the goal of serving as one example of how positive community partnerships can benefit all parties involved.

# **A Balancing Act in the Archives: Increasing Access to the Great Plains Black History Museum Collections**

## **Introduction**

The University of Nebraska at Omaha (UNO) Libraries' Archives and Special Collections (ASC) has an ongoing community partnership with the Great Plains Black History Museum (GPBHM), which is a rich exhibit-based resource for Black history in the Omaha community. The latest collaboration has involved the temporary transfer of a portion of their archival collections to UNO for arrangement, description, and select digitization. Though this kind of partnership has potential pitfalls related to ethics, access, communication, and resource prioritization, UNO archivists are hopeful about seeing this project completed. One of UNO's strategic priorities is community engagement, and the authors are fortunate to have the support of their library leadership. They continue to support increased access to the GPBHM archival collection by pursuing grants that will assist with conservation, further processing, and ongoing digitization. This paper will discuss building relationships with community partners, the ethics of partnerships that include relocating and hosting (but not owning) collections, complications with balancing resources, and handling the unknown. The authors will describe and reflect on UNO's partnership with the GPBHM with the goal of serving as one example of how positive community partnerships can benefit all parties involved.

## **Literature Review**

Informal discussion about shared stewardship, reciprocity, empathy, and ethics related to the role of institutions in community collecting has been occurring for years amongst the authors and their colleagues. Existing published literature clarifies and focuses the authors' ongoing discussion and provides alignment of thought with the professional discourse. Additionally, published literature has opened new lines of inquiry to consider.

One major theme frequently considered throughout the existing literature is the impact of community archives on people and their communities. Community archive users are documented as perceiving their records as haunted in the way that writing narratives about people and events that have been excluded from mainstream archival institutions is like writing ghost stories. Thus, community archives provide a space in which to summon ghosts, learn about past community members, and document invisible histories (Tai, Zavala, Gabiola, Brilmyer, Caswell, M., 2019).

One track related to this theme of the impact of community archives are records contributing to representational belonging of a community as a counterweight to symbolic annihilation of that community's history and culture. In part, community archives fill gaps in the historical record due to past bias and neglect and can help users recognize their own belonging in a community and draw meaning from that community's history and culture (Caswell, Cifor, Ramirez, 2016). Yet another related track considers reciprocal archival imaginaries, a new term proposed by the article. Imaginaries consider how a community is defined by people in and out of the community. So then, reciprocal archival imaginaries refer to the circular, entangled relationships and influences between community-based archives, their users, and their imaginaries. These in turn

influence decisions, policies, and procedures in the community archives (Brilmyer, Gabiola, Zavala, Caswell, 2019).

A much-discussed aspect of community and mainstream/institutional archives are the benefits and challenges facing such joint efforts. Both parties benefit in these types of partnerships, with community archives often gaining training, increasing their public visibility, and making strides toward sustainability. Institutional archives often receive the benefits of appealing to new user groups while increasing the diversity of the collections they interact with and stretching the roles of professionals participating in the partnership while growing their skills beyond those required for certifications and degrees. The major challenge facing these collaborations is the balance between trust and autonomy, which often involves communication and cooperation obstacles (Pool, 2020).

### **The Project**

The processing and digitization project was guided by a memorandum of understanding (an MOU) signed between UNO ASC and the GPBHM board in 2021. To start, the GPBHM executive director sent archivists the inventory and collection plan completed a couple years prior by a grant-funded temporary archivist at the GPBHM. This was essential because the authors needed to find material related to UNO's Department of Black Studies out of the over 200 document boxes that made up the GPBHM Archives. The authors and the ASC director identified boxes on the inventory that indicated the presence of papers related to UNO's Department of Black Studies. This was the starting point because the processing and digitization work soon to be completed by a student under the authors' supervision would be funded by a grant tied to the history of UNO's Department of Black Studies.

To retrieve these boxes, the authors visited the then-downtown branch of the Omaha Public Library where the GPBHM archival collection was temporarily housed. The authors knew that the boxes they pulled would likely hold additional topics beyond those related to the Department of Black Studies, but there was no time to separate the materials. As it was, the retrieval was made even more swiftly than planned because a strong windstorm was bearing down on Omaha, and the public library and university were set to close early for safety. The authors returned to ASC with eight document boxes for processing and digitization.

The student employee hired for this project used the inventory and collection plan, along with a processing plan developed with Schwartz, to arrange and describe all the Department of Black Studies material, as well as papers related to K-12 and higher education in Omaha that shared those six boxes. The student worked so efficiently that Schwartz and another archivist in the department arranged with the GPBHM executive director for a second pickup of boxes from the Omaha Public Library. They returned with sixteen more document boxes with material related to sports, the military, and more education. The student employee arranged and described those using the same processing plan previously developed.

When this work was completed, the student employee moved to digitization of the Black Studies records supervised by Guerra. As with the processing, the student worked efficiently and finished these records before moving on to digitize additional GPBHM material and Black Studies-related records in the University Archives. For now, the GPBHM's digital collection is hosted in UNO's

online repository, the finding aid is available in UNO's public ArchivesSpace interface, and eighteen boxes are stored in UNO's secure storage. (Note that though archivists took in twenty-four boxes from GPBHM, the eighteen completed boxes reflect natural shrinkage resulting from processing.)

Additionally, Schwartz and two other archivists from the department visited the Omaha Public Library for a third time to help the GPBHM executive director rehouse and label the collection in anticipation of moving out of the downtown branch, which was set to be demolished by the city. The collection was destined for a storage unit and would be inaccessible until a new source of funding became available to finish largescale processing and additional digitization or a permanent space was built, whichever came first. Meanwhile, the 18 boxes housed in UNO's secure storage would remain at UNO until that time.

The obstacles in any community-institutional partnership are many, but persevering through them can lead to a richer historical record. This kind of work adds breadth and depth to historical narratives of communities and events that mainstream archives, media, etcetera have largely ignored.

### **Establishing Trust - History of Partnership**

Establishing a partnership between a formal institution and a community entity requires consistent engagement and trust building. In the 1980's and early 1990's a few UNO administrators and faculty from the Department of Black Studies worked collaboratively with people from the GPBHM. At that time, the library and archives were not involved. Years later in 2014, UNO Libraries' ASC director was hired and came to UNO with the goal of establishing connections with other local history and cultural heritage groups. There was no relationship between ASC and the GPBHM, and while she desired to connect with them, she was discouraged from doing so at that time. The museum board was dealing with their own internal complications, so a slow and mild approach to relationship building was deemed the best way to connect as circumstances allowed. The environment at the time did not call for the assertive friendliness the director typically used to form new connections; consideration had to be given to how best to cautiously connect and establish trust.

Gradually over a few years, opportunities for connection and trust building presented themselves. ASC's director along with Schwartz did neighborly things like attending museum programming and exhibit openings, introducing themselves to museum staff and leadership, and hosting small tours of the library and department for a few museum people. ASC staff's actions laid the groundwork for Guerra connecting with the museum director in 2021. At that point there was a pre-existing relationship that had established ASC as an institution that cared and wanted to be involved with the community. Guerra felt that the existing relationship would be open to the project despite the large amount of trust the community archive would need to place in UNO as an institution. Many emails were shared back and forth, along with a few Zoom calls as funding sources were identified and considered and ultimately secured along with a project defined by a clear MOU.

## **Communication**

Communication is critical to relationship building, establishing trust, and carrying out an ongoing project with a community partner. The information shared between UNO and the GPBHM presented the opportunity to demonstrate both parties' willingness to share and receive knowledge while working towards a joint goal. While UNO archivists bring professional archival knowledge to the equation, the GPBHM knows best how to connect and interact with the specific community they seek to serve; sharing each type of expertise requires intentional communication. While critical to a successful partnership, the communication between ASC and the GPBHM was not always straight forward. It was challenging to connect and solicit interaction from the museum as it has one paid employee who spends the majority of their time creating exhibits and speaking with community groups. Owing to this reality, archivists did not expect efficiency and timeliness in all communications, but looming grant deadlines and tight timetables heightened the frustration.

While most of the initial conversation revolved around funding sources to support a joint project and discussion of what grant funded work had previously been performed, Guerra initially routinely updated the GPBHM director on the status of the project. After receiving minimal and eventually no replies, even to inquiries into the museum's preference for handing off and storing copies of the digitized objects and metadata, her intentional communication tapered off. Guerra had a goal of sharing knowledge about digital preservation and access but felt that there was not much appetite for receiving such information. While one benefit of a community partnership could theoretically be a professional sharing their knowledge with a community member, that only works if the receiving party is interested.

## **Funding**

Sustainability is often one benefit for community archives, and part of that sustainability is due to funding sources that institutional archives may have available to them. While ASC does have some state-aided money for employing students to complete department work, those funds have continuously declined over the years. As a result, funding is both an obstacle and a benefit in the UNO/GPBHM partnership. ASC seeks grants and private funding to move processing, digitization, and outreach projects forward. Some collections have specific funds attached to them, money that has been intentionally raised for that collecting area only, while other funds can be utilized with greater flexibility depending on department priorities. As indicated above, the GPBHM archival collection project was connected to UNO's Department of Black Studies anniversary. The decision to focus and begin processing and digitization of the collection materials documenting the early formative days of the department was directly related to Humanities Nebraska and Eugene S. and Sunny M. Thomas Endowed Fund for Innovation monies secured by the Outreach Archivist, ASC director, and Department of Black Studies faculty. As such, funds to support this partnership project come from external sources, not state-aided accounts, with the exception of ASC archivists' salaries.

UNO faculty gladly gave of their time, and the student employee hired to process and digitize the materials was fortunately more efficient than the authors expected. A significant amount of work

was able to be completed before the student employee had to leave the position. Unfortunately, ASC is now in the position of having a small amount of specific funds remaining, but not quite enough to hire a student employee for any length of desirable time. Additional grant funds will need to be identified, applied for, and secured before any further processing, preservation, or digitization work continues. Moreover, the cost of providing online access has surfaced as an unexpected obstacle due to the loss of the opensource software utilized to present collections to the public. While the path forward remains unknown, ASC will do all in their ability to continue hosting the digital collection.

### **Staffing and Student Labor**

The authors benefited in 2022 from the grant-funded student who processed the boxes in the department's care and selectively digitized some of that material. UNO archivists felt strongly that when a project was being funded by grants or private monies the hourly wage should be above minimum wage for students at the university. Thus, the hourly wage for this position was 50% over the wage a student would make on state-aided monies.

Related to this is that while there is a flexibility benefit to using short-term student employees, the authors' experiences with student employees the last several years has been incredibly hit and miss as students seem to be struggling more and more with physical and mental health issues and increased financial pressures. Of course, the authors understand these stressors and have compassion for student employees. Additionally, UNO archivists support student employees as students first, employees second. Even the student on this project, who performed at a high level, could not continue their employment after several months. As it was, it would have been a challenge to get additional boxes out of storage. As indicated above, the project is now paused as the project partners consider other funding opportunities.

### **Hosting and Access**

Processing and digitization of GPBHM materials increased representation in ASC's digital collections and contributed to an overall increase in access to resources for research, exhibits, community events, engagement, etc. UNO archivists have already been able to locate material in the processed portion of the collection for the museum to use at a significant community event and were contacted by the media for a related question soon after. These reference interactions were encouraging to archivists for whom providing access to materials is a vital activity.

A major obstacle to providing access is the digital infrastructure that also supports preservation. UNO archivists are currently providing online access to the collection via a LYRISIS-hosted instance of Islandora 7, which has a sunset date of April 2024. Guerra is in the process of securing a new access and preservation platform but cost and budget are severely limiting available options and there is much she still does not know about this platform. UNO agreed to host the digitized collection and is committed to fulfilling that. However, given costs, Guerra may be required to distribute collections across various platforms, incorporating no cost options (Internet Archive and Flickr) as needed along with a hosted content management system for select collections. An additional, unexpected layer of complexity is choosing a platform that serves the needs of UNO and the GPBHM.



There are hosting and access uncertainties when it comes to the physical collection, as well. As noted, archivists are housing the boxes that the student employee arranged and described because there is not an accessible place to return them. The rest of the archival collection is currently in inaccessible storage until a new museum space opens, and the timing and features of this space are yet unknown.

This also creates access uncertainties for the bulk of the archival collection that is inaccessible currently, but also for the portion of the collection temporarily housed at UNO. Since ASC does not have the deed to the collection (which it does not seek), UNO archivists are limited to what they can do with the material for research and exhibits, according to terms in the MOU or considerations left out of the MOU. ASC is storing the boxes but does not have full access and rights to them. For example, archivists may respond to a museum request for items in the GPBHM boxes to be displayed at a community event, but may not receive those materials back, which creates access and description issues. Or archivists may not offer GPBHM materials to researchers or use materials for in-house exhibits without clearance from museum staff.

Traditionally, archival repositories have expected ownership of collections to come with the transfer of material into the archives. The reasoning is that if archives go to the cost and effort of processing, digitizing, and storing archival material, they should also have the ability to make the materials as accessible as possible via research, exhibits, digitization, and outreach. For this community partnership, UNO archivists have decided that the benefits to the community-based archives and its users are more than worth their investment. The professional literature offers several reasons why this may be the priority for archivists in community partnerships, and particularly for archivists at UNO who prioritize community engagement and preserving and making accessible collections from underrepresented communities over the ownership of those collections.

### **The Future / Conclusion**

For future work related to community-based archives, the authors see a need for empirical research surrounding how institutions manage partnerships with community entities, particularly the decision-making that results from these partnerships, and the prevalence of hosting but not owning community-based archives. There are many case-study based journal articles about community archives and community partnerships, and while very useful, there is not as much supporting empirical research. UNO archivists plan to continue working on this community partnership, pursuing grants to continue this project, and providing access as they can. Driven by strategic priorities and pursuit of resources, they plan to develop more community partnerships and continue to increase access to historical records.

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