

All History is Local: Expanding Access to American Jewish Archival Collections

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Abstract: The Expanding Access to American Jewish Archival Collections initiative is a multistep collaborative project of the Center for Jewish History (the Center) and the American Jewish Historical Society (AJHS)—one of the Center’s five partner institutions—to enhance access to American Jewish archival collections at local Jewish historical societies and museums and within academic special collections on the Eastern seaboard. This paper focuses on phase one of the project, funded by the Council on Library and Information Resources (CLIR), and points to future project phases.

The *Expanding Access to American Jewish Archival Collections* initiative is a multiphase collaborative project of the Center for Jewish History (the Center) and the American Jewish Historical Society (AJHS)—one of the Center’s five partner institutions—to enhance access to American Jewish archival collections at local Jewish historical societies and museums and within academic special collections on the Eastern seaboard. The primary goal of the initiative is to create a place for local histories in the larger narratives of American Jewish history by boosting online representation and collection visibility so that local collections become widely accessible.

In its construction and process, the initiative represents an expansion of the collaborative model that currently exists between the Center and its five partner organizations. The partners of the Center—American Jewish Historical Society, American Sephardi Federation, Leo Baeck Institute, Yeshiva University Museum, and YIVO Institute for Jewish Research—are independently managed entities with unique collecting policies related to particular facets of Jewish history. The Center offers a unifying infrastructure for the five organizations in its provision of centralized services, which include archival processing, preservation and digitization services, as well as maintenance of a single OPAC and digital asset management

system. The Center's collaborative environment supports activities central to the partners' respective missions. It presents a promising model for resource-sharing among local Jewish cultural heritage institutions as well.

Phase one of *Expanding Access to American Jewish Archival Collections* entailed completing a series of repository site visits and focused on relationship building, information gathering, and the migration of a test batch of collection-level records into AJHS's *Portal to American Jewish History*. The Center for Jewish History and the American Jewish Historical Society are grateful for the generous support of the Council on Library and Information Resources (CLIR) for the project's first phase. The first step was to complete a preliminary survey of local Jewish historical societies and a geographic layout of local regional Northeast and Mid-Atlantic historical societies as a sampling of small, "hidden" repositories of archival material relevant to the American Jewish experience. AJHS provided a previously compiled list of Jewish historical societies in America (<http://ajhs.org/historical-societies>). The team worked from this list to select 12 institutions as potential project participants: Jewish Historical Society of Greater Bridgeport (CT); Jewish Historical Society of Greater Hartford (CT); Jewish Historical Society of Fairfield County (CT); Jewish Historical Society of Greater New Haven (CT); Jewish Historical Society of Delaware (DE); Jewish Heritage Center of the North Shore (MA); Jewish Historical Society of Western Massachusetts (MA); Jewish Historical Society of North Jersey (NJ); Jewish Historical Society of MetroWest New Jersey (NJ); Jewish Historical Society of Central Jersey (NJ); Trenton Jewish Historical Society (NJ); and Rhode Island Jewish Historical Association (RI).

The Project Directors and Manager then made "cold calls" to each of the institutions on the list and explained the proposed project. The call included basic introductions, information

about CLIR support, an outline of the project's goals and the particular objectives of phase one, and a description of the role of a project participant. After the call, a project summary and a Memo of Understanding were emailed to the prospective participant. In some cases, communication was immediately handed off to the institution's archivist or librarian—in one case, all roles were fulfilled by the same person—and more particular discussions were arranged with the proposed visiting archivists. Some institutions agreed to participate immediately while others requested more information or time to discuss the project with stakeholders at their institutions.

As the project team continued to communicate with prospective participants, they learned the value of refining the project pitch. Though prospective participants were receptive and willing to learn more, conveying a considerable amount of information about the project up front could be overwhelming and in some cases, off-putting. It was important to put forth the project team's goals and then listen to the prospective participants' responses, needs, envisioned roles and other concerns. Subsequent communication played a crucial role in cementing the relationships and developing concrete plans, such as site visit dates and data transfer procedures. In addition, a clearer understanding of the AJHS portal's function as a data aggregator was a vital element. It was important to the project team that participants understood that their metadata would be searchable via the portal, but would remain identified with their institution. Preservation of identity proved to be a salient issue among a few participants, and sensitively addressing this concern provided a valuable lesson for the project team.

Several factors impacted prospective participants' decisions about whether to participate, including staff changes, prior commitments to conflicting projects, and internal limitations on resources. In two cases, institutions either did not have 501c3 status, a requisite for participation,

or had recently transferred their collections to other repositories. For two institutions, the prospect of contributing data to AJHS's *Portal to American Jewish History* presented problems of identity, control and ownership. In one of those cases, leadership did not understand that an aggregated portal would drive more traffic back to the institution's own site, and in another of those cases, the society did not interpret the project as a collaborative venture and believed their role in the project would be problematically construed as that of a follower rather than a leader. The leadership at these two institutions felt that they had no need of the services the project team could offer through the project.

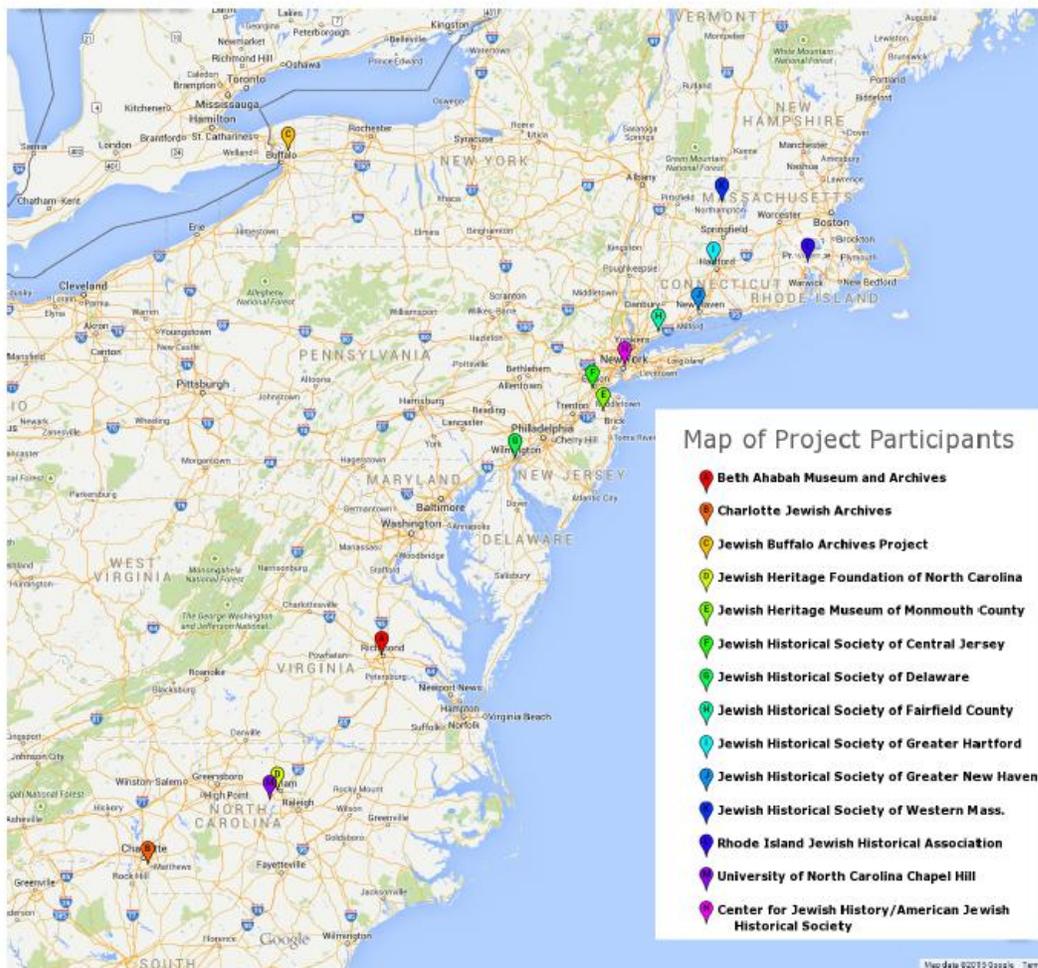
However, the majority of prospective participants responded positively, and found the project goals resonant and practical. A few went so far as to recommend additional repositories for the Project Directors and Manager to contact based on regional connections and collaborations. The Project Directors and Manager were able to expand the geographic area down the East Coast to include additional regional Jewish historical societies or institutions with relevant collections. They spoke on the phone with a total of 20 repositories. Ultimately, the following 13 organizations agreed to participate:

1. [Beth Ahabah Museum and Archives](#) (Richmond, VA)
2. [Charlotte Jewish Archives at the Jewish Historical Society of Greater Charlotte](#) (Charlotte, NC)
3. [Jewish Buffalo Archives Project](#), University at Buffalo (SUNY) and Bureau of Jewish Education of Greater Buffalo (Buffalo, NY)
4. [Jewish Heritage Foundation of North Carolina and Duke University's Rubenstein Library](#) (Durham, NC)
5. [Jewish Heritage Museum of Monmouth County](#) (Freehold, NJ)
6. [Jewish Historical Society of Central Jersey](#) (New Brunswick, NJ)
7. [Jewish Historical Society of Delaware](#) (Wilmington, DE)
8. [Jewish Historical Society of Fairfield County](#) (Stamford, CT)
9. [Jewish Historical Society of Greater Hartford](#) (West Hartford, CT)
10. [Jewish Historical Society of Greater New Haven](#) (New Haven, CT)
11. [Jewish Historical Society of Western Massachusetts](#) (South Deerfield, MA)
12. [Rhode Island Jewish Historical Association](#) (Providence, RI)

13. [University of North Carolina Chapel Hill, Southern Historical Collection](#) (Chapel Hill, NC)

The Jewish Buffalo Archives Project served solely as a data collaborator. (The organization was in the middle of a move and preferred to forgo the site visit component of phase one.) One factor of success for the project was the fact that the final list of participants represented an even more diverse spectrum of institutions and collections than originally envisioned. The participant list included everything from small, volunteer-run institutions to large collections affiliated with universities.

Figure 1: [Map of Project Participants](#)



After confirming the list of project participants, the Center assigned two Project Archivists to conduct site visits to 12 institutions (one archivist per visit). During the site visits, which averaged about 2-3 hours in length, archivists recorded information about the history, collections, projects and priorities of each institution. Following the visits, archivists compiled a 2-3 page site visit report on each repository. Summaries of the individual reports can be found at the [project webpage](#).

The two archivists who conducted on-site surveys of the 12 repositories found a number of trends among the project participants. Although the institutions visited during phase one are highly diverse, from lone arrangers to university archives, all reported a desire to raise their public profile and increase user traffic and the public's awareness of their holdings, as well as to engage in more outreach and programming activities. Users of these institutions are often interested in doing genealogical research or are faculty and students from local universities, local authors and historians, or staff from Jewish organizations. A number of the repositories are Jewish historical societies housed in spaces that they share, whether with other Jewish organizations such as local Jewish Federations or Jewish Community Centers or with larger historical societies, university libraries special collections, or adjacent synagogues and museums. They often benefit from this physical proximity due to shared resources, visitors and occasionally access to staff and volunteers. Many of the repositories have small staffs who work part-time and have numerous responsibilities beyond working with collections. Several rely on volunteers and interns who may not have access to formal archival training. At the smaller repositories, both staff and volunteers would benefit from training in current archival methods, standards and practices.

In terms of holdings, the smallest repository has eight linear feet, and the largest has around 1,000 linear feet. Many are in the 300-500 linear feet range. Dates range from the 1700s to the present, with a majority from the 19th-20th centuries, often corresponding to the dates of mass Jewish immigration to the country. The collections are in a variety of languages, mostly English, Hebrew, Yiddish, and some German, but there are also materials in other languages, such as Russian and Polish. There is a range in staff ability to work with these languages.

Many of the repositories' collecting policies focus on local Jewish history. Along with genealogical materials, the surveyed repositories collect manuscripts, personal papers, Jewish institutional records, farm records, account books and financial records, ledgers, photographs, books, cemetery records, rabbis' sermons, synagogue records, graphic materials, historic ketubahs, artifacts, correspondence, brochures and programs, albums and scrapbooks, oral and video histories, microfilm, audio and video cassettes, DVDs, electronic records, meeting minutes, memoirs and diaries, slides, historic newspapers, yearbooks, city directories and phone books, family trees, obituaries, maps, and drawings. Oral and video histories are particularly well-represented, although few of them have associated transcripts.

The institutions have a range of intellectual control over their collections. Several of the institutions have mainly inventories that list the contents of folders and boxes but lack the other elements of a formal finding aid, while others have accession records but no contents lists. Photographs account for a great deal of research requests and tend to be better described. Other than those working in the largest of participating institutions, the staff of the repositories mentioned an interest in receiving help with processing their archival backlogs and creating online finding aids. Several repositories have organizational systems that were set up by previous staff, many of whom were not archivists, and are using these systems even though they may not

prefer or even fully understand them. Among the processed materials, some are arranged alphabetically by subject and use local terms, some are arranged in collections and some are just arranged in alphabetical folders. Among most of the repositories, a certain amount of the collection information resides with the staff and can be hard to access from outside the institution. Many finding aids and inventories only exist on paper or on a local computer as a Word or Excel document or PDF, and should be encoded in EAD to provide online access and searchability. Several small to midsize institutions have either summaries or inventory lists online, though the data is not structured or easily searchable. While the large academic institutions have their data online and in a searchable format, the records do not consistently have access points that indicate that the material is related to the American Jewish experience.

Several repositories requested guidance on developing and improving their collecting and accession policies and increasing their collecting activities, as well as help with determining what to keep of their own institutional records. There was also interest in questions of how to do outreach for accessioning Jewish collections and how to better capitalize on what they already have, and a specific need for assistance with grant writing. Some repositories expressed a wish for some guidance on how to best conduct oral histories and how to make them more available to users through online hosting. There were a myriad of questions regarding general archival practice, technology trends, digitization and born-digital materials, and audiovisual materials. A few repositories mentioned needing access to a conservator for consultations or for actual conservation work on their materials. The Jewish historical societies in particular are also interested in increasing their membership, particularly among younger members, and hope that increased access to their archival collections will aid them in this endeavor.

Overall, the site visits completed in phase one established strong relationships between the Center, American Jewish Historical Society and the project participants. Visits allowed for in-depth dialogue and created space for informal exchange of knowledge and questions. Face-to-face sessions led to new and unexpected lines of inquiry and discoveries that would have not happened as easily over the phone or email. The site visits were an integral component of the project, allowing all project participants to consider how they might collaborate on collection management needs and access issues.

Figure 2: [Jewish Heritage Museum of Monmouth County](#) (photo credit: Sarah Ponichtera)



After establishing collaborative relationships, the initiative's next step towards increasing access to American Jewish collections was the ingestion of collection-level records into AJHS's [Portal to American Jewish History](#). AJHS's Portal is a metadata aggregator that enables researchers to perform complex searches across American Jewish archival collections currently residing at over ten geographically dispersed repositories. It is currently set up on a Drupal-Collective Access platform. Drupal is an open source website content management system (CMS) and CollectiveAccess is an open source collection information management system (or metadata database). Using a Drupal plug-in, CollectiveAccess feeds information into Drupal, allowing users to search the database seamlessly throughout the site.

In 2013, Whirl-i-gig, the independent contracting firm that created CollectiveAccess, set up AJHS's system on an Amazon cloud server. Since then AJHS has been maintaining the site and continuing to import data from new repositories. In the past few months, AJHS has moved the system to an in-house Center for Jewish History server to improve control over the site, reduce costs and leverage the resources of the Center. The use of Drupal and CollectiveAccess gives AJHS the opportunity for extensive future growth. Drupal can be modified and extended with many freely available plug-ins; it can be extensively modified to present results with faceted browsing and with thumbnails of images. CollectiveAccess is a robust platform that lets AJHS create new fields as needed, handle authority records, and manage subjects and genres terms for website browsing facets.

As part of phase one of the *Expanding Access to American Jewish Archival Collections* project, the Data Implementation Specialists ingested 104 collection-level records into the Portal. The records originated from three project participants: the Jewish Historical Society of Fairfield County (Stamford, CT); the Jewish Buffalo Archives Project, University at Buffalo (SUNY) and

Bureau of Jewish Education of Greater Buffalo (Buffalo, NY); and the Jewish Historical Society of Greater Hartford (West Hartford, CT). Different approaches were used to prepare each set of data for ingest. For their metadata, all three repositories signed Creative Commons licensing agreements with the Center and AJHS, with an eye towards easing future data sharing, especially with the Digital Public Library of America.

Acquiring the Jewish Buffalo Archives Project data was straightforward, and, excitingly, outlines a process by which one can obtain data from any HTML finding aid(s) published from a digital asset management system in a scalable and automated way. Buffalo provided a list of formulaic links to HTML finding aids and the HTML produced by Buffalo's DAM, XTF, is regular and well structured. Therefore, staff could easily scrape all the HTML and extract the needed data via xQuery. Each collection has a MARC record in the University of Buffalo system, and most have HTML finding aids that are linked from the MARC record. Buffalo provided AJHS and the Center a list of collections with records numbers. From Cygwin Unix command-line shell, the Center archivist used the a single “curl” command to scrape all the HTML finding aids into one file. The list of IDs was taken from the spreadsheet provided by Buffalo. The “curl” command allowed staff to use one link, with variable IDs, to scrape the URLs for each finding aid. The command wrote the HTML it found at each URL into one large file.

The resulting document was opened in oXygen XML Editor, doctype declarations were removed, and an XML root element and xml declaration added. The resulting valid XML file was imported into the XML database software BaseX, and after some study of the HTML, an xQuery script was written to extract the metadata fields required by the Portal's Collective

Access software and those used for public display. This process produced CSV data that could be imported using Excel. For the exact script used, see the [project webpage](#).

Figure 3: Record in the Portal to American Jewish History



The image shows a record page for the Buffalo Jewish Review Archive. The page has a teal background with white text. The title 'Buffalo Jewish Review Archive' is at the top. Below it are several sections: URL, Description, Date, Publisher, Source, Creator, Subjects, and Rights. Each section is followed by its corresponding information.

Buffalo Jewish Review Archive

URL:
http://libweb1.lib.buffalo.edu:8080/findingaids/view?docId=ead/archives/ubar_ms0217.xml

Description:
MS217; The archive of the Buffalo Jewish Review contains issues of the Buffalo Jewish Review and its predecessor the American Jewish Review from November 9, 1917 to the present.; 74 boxes, 3 microfilm reels

Date: 1917 - 2012 (Date Created)

Publisher:
Jewish Buffalo Archives Project, at University Archives, University at Buffalo

Source:
Jewish Buffalo Archives Project, at University Archives, University at Buffalo

Creator: Buffalo Jewish Review

Subjects:
Buffalo Jewish Review; Jewish Buffalo Archives Project State University of New York at Buffalo.; University Archives Bureau of Jewish Education (Buffalo, N.Y.); State University of New York at Buffalo--Archives; Judaism--United States--History; Jews--New York (State)--Buffalo Region--Archives; Jewish archives--New York (State)--Buffalo Region;

Rights:
Please contact the Jewish Buffalo Archives Project, at University Archives, University at Buffalo for information about access, use, and copyright restrictions

The Jewish Historical Society of Greater Hartford provided EAD files by email. The EAD files were exported from Archivists' Toolkit, and were thus uniform in terms of tag and data placement. The Center Data Implementation Specialist analyzed the EAD files, imported them into the XML database software BaseX, and ran an xQuery script to extract metadata fields for the Portal's Collective Access software. For the exact script used, see the [project webpage](#).

The Jewish Historical Society of Fairfield County provided AJHS and the Center with very rich container list information in an Excel format, exported from the description

management software PastPerfect. The records were not organized at the collection level, but included title information that indicated the provenance of a particular container. For example, a sample container-level row contained this information:

Temple Sinai of Stamford, CT Bulletins from 2000-2001	Temple Sinai Bulletins	Bulletins	478
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The Center and AJHS Data Implementation Specialists suggested manually creating collection-level records, and the Society agreed. The final collection-level record, which was imported into the Portal, looked like this (record slightly abbreviated):

Materials on Temple Sinai of Stamford, CT. Includes monthly bulletins from 1959-1960, 1978-2014 (with gaps and missing issues). Also includes booklets, annual meeting reports, various historical documents.	Temple Sinai archival and bulletin collection	Temple Sinai	1954-2012	JHSFC_473-524	473-524, 516b
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This manual process was time-consuming, but the resulting records were contextually appropriate for the Portal.

Encouraged by phase one of the project, the Center and AJHS have established ambitious goals for continuing with the *Expanding Access to American Jewish Archival Collections* project. Future goals for the project include:

- Becoming a Digital Public Library of America (DPLA) Judaica content hub
- Migrating additional collection-level records into the AJHS Portal
- Encoding legacy finding aids and inventories
- Processing selected participant collections or training staff to process collections
- Hosting already digitized materials online in the Center’s DAM, providing both access and long-term preservation

- Digitizing selected material and hosting that material in the Center’s DAM
- Augmenting the development of the AJHS Portal by:
 - monitoring and checking in with participating repositories to update feeds as necessary
 - evaluating usage using Google Analytics
 - building interpretative exhibits and interactive social media tools

In the future, the *Expanding Access to American Jewish Archival Collections* initiative will expand to include additional project participants, including those in the South and Southwest U.S., broadening the geographical scope and type of institutions. A social media component in the Portal would also enable self-selecting historical societies, Jewish community centers, and individuals to upload material and participate. In addition to allowing participants to share highlights of their collections and make these items discoverable at little cost, the Portal will allow participants to situate their currently “hidden” local histories within larger narratives of the American Jewish experience. Information and updates about the next phases of the *Expanding Access to American Jewish Archival Collections* can be found on the [project website](#).