

## Right from the Start

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### The Digitization Program at the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture

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**ABSTRACT:** Before opening, the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture established a program to create digital collection records and surrogates, which play a critical role in collection care, collection accessibility, and enhancing the meaning of collections. The program is off to a good start because it supports the museum's mission, the museum has established a dedicated "Digi Team," the program has leadership buy-in and financial support, and other Smithsonian units have been generous with time and expertise. Also explored in this article are digitization program activities and results, the impact of digitization, and plans for the future.

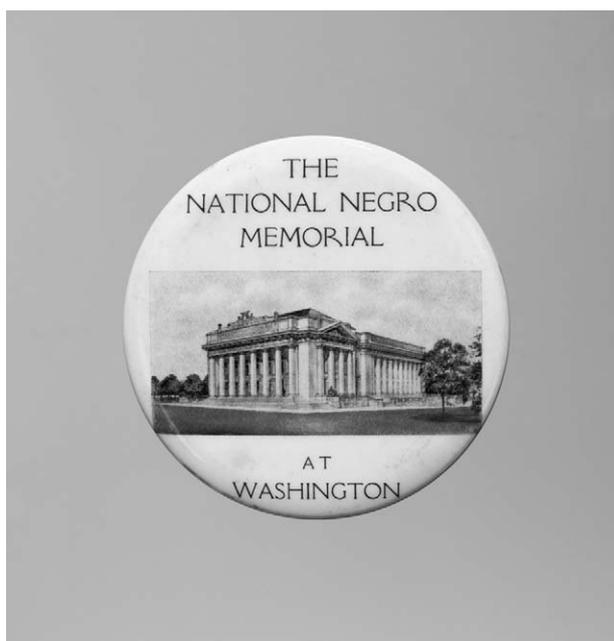
**KEY WORDS:** museum, digitization, African American, collection, digital

With the peal of the Freedom Bell hanging in the air, the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture (NMAAHC) opened to the public on September 24, 2016. President Barack Obama and First Lady Michelle Obama along with Ruth Bonner, the daughter of an enslaved man, and Bonner's family rang the bell.<sup>1</sup> Among the thousands celebrating the opening, many recognized that the museum was one hundred years in the making. The first widespread movement to erect a building to honor and serve as a national meeting place for Black Americans dates back to 1916, and activists persistently proposed a national African American museum from the 1930s into the twenty-first century.<sup>2</sup> Congress did not pass the legislation and authorize the seed money for the museum,

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1 Nick Baumann, "The Daughter of a Man Born a Slave Just Opened the First National History Museum," *The Huffington Post*, first published September 24, 2016, and updated December 19, 2016, accessed August 5, 2017, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/ruth-bonner-slave-daughter-museum\\_us\\_57e6d472e4boe80b1ba26222](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/ruth-bonner-slave-daughter-museum_us_57e6d472e4boe80b1ba26222).

2 Mabel O. Wilson, *Begin with the Past: Building the National Museum of African American History and Culture* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Books, 2016), 21–35. Wilson documents the events and movements that began during Reconstruction calling for memorials, and then a museum, to honor the achievements of Black Americans.



Keepsake pocket bank for the National Negro Memorial, ca. 1926. (Image courtesy of the Collection of the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture, Gift from the Ball-Hoagland family in honor of Robert Ball, 2016.74)

however, until 2003. Once approved, the museum opened with astonishing speed. Just eleven years elapsed between the time the Smithsonian appointed founding director Lonnie G. Bunch III in 2005, and the museum's grand opening. Beginning with nothing, and having a staff, collection, and museum to build, there was plenty to do, but the museum still committed to a digitization program well before it opened. This says a lot about what we now expect, especially of a new museum.

In this article, I focus on the digitization of the museum's collection. I provide a history of this young program, explore the reasons for collection digitization, and make the case for why the digitization program at the museum is off to a good start. Moreover, I discuss the impact of digitization on the museum, speculate about future directions, and end with a case study for how collection digitization can help us contextualize and push back against a recent act of hate in the museum's galleries.

### Digitization Right from the Start

The reasons why we digitize collections are straightforward: records and surrogates play a critical role in caring for the collection, making the collection more accessible, and enhancing the meaning of our collection. All of these functions support the museum's mission, which is to use its collection, publications, exhibitions, and other programs to give voice to the centrality of the African American experience and make it possible for all people to understand the depth, complexity, and promise of

the American experience. To further this goal, the museum strives to make all of its collection accessible online.<sup>3</sup> The museum's collection is diverse and poses challenges for digitization. It includes archives, clothing, decorative and fine art, photography, media arts, religious and sacred objects, textiles, tools and equipment, and toys. The collection even includes a plane, a train (actually a railcar), and an automobile: a PT-13D Stearman Kaydet aircraft used to train Tuskegee Airmen (2011.82.1-.2); a railroad passenger car from the "Jim Crow" era (2009.28); and red Cadillac Eldorado owned by Chuck Berry (2011.137.1).

The prospect of setting up a digitization program was daunting, but also exciting. The museum had a tremendous opportunity to get digitization right precisely because it was starting from scratch. The program is off to a good start for several reasons. First, the team responsible for a diverse array of digitization-related activities—known around the museum as the Digi Team—focuses on providing high-quality products and services to support the museum's mission. Work is based on an ambitious but flexible plan driven by what the museum needs, executed in stages. The team often implements pilot projects and then adjusts the plan based on their results, museum priorities, and available resources. Second, the museum has assembled an independent, multi-disciplinary team dedicated not only to the creation of museum records, images, and other surrogates but also their dissemination. The functions of the Digi Team are varied but interrelated, and everyone on the team is committed to the same overarching vision, providing an incentive to work together. The whole team participates in setting goals, problem solving, documenting standards and workflows, and measuring and analyzing results. Everyone is encouraged to come up with better and more productive ways of working. However, the fact that the Digi Team shares the same department as the curators, who have the greatest role and responsibility in shaping the stories told at our museum, makes it easy for the Digi Team to partner with them. Third, the digitization program from the outset had buy-in and financial support from the museum's leadership. Digitization is expensive and never complete. Nonetheless, our museum leadership recognizes digitization's crucial role in making sure the collection is properly managed, expanding the museum's reach, and enhancing the meaning of collections. Finally, the museum had tremendous support from around the Smithsonian. Everyone I approached was exceedingly generous with their time and expertise, and the museum benefits greatly from the many talented people involved with digitization throughout the Smithsonian.<sup>4</sup>

This narrative makes it sound as if the museum's Digi Team has digitization all figured out. It does not. Plenty of challenges remain, and we are not nearly as efficient as I wish we were. But the team is on the right path, and the digitization

<sup>3</sup> National Museum of African American History and Culture Collection Management Policy (draft), 2012.

<sup>4</sup> *Creating a Digital Smithsonian: Digitization Strategic Plan*, Smithsonian Institution, 2010, 5, accessed July 27, 2017, [https://www.si.edu/content/pdf/about/2010\\_si\\_digitization\\_plan.pdf](https://www.si.edu/content/pdf/about/2010_si_digitization_plan.pdf).



Cap worn by Pullman Porter Philip Henry Logan, 1966. (Image courtesy of the Collection of the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture; Gift of the Descendants of Garfield Logan, In Honor of Philip Henry Logan, 2011.73.1. Photograph by Alex Jamison)

program will continue to move forward as long as the museum recognizes and acts on its need to improve.

What is digitization?

Most people think of digitization as digital images of collection objects. Images are crucial, but digitization is more than that. The Smithsonian defines digitization as “a set of processes that converts physical resources to a digital form or creates materials . . . in a digital format,” which can then be “shared, through digital devices, equipment, and networks.”<sup>5</sup> In practice at NMAAHC, digitization means that the museum creates and maintains high-quality digital cataloging records, digital images, and other types of digital surrogates. Digital images and other surrogates stand in for the original object. For example, when the museum transfers that fragile Super 8 home movie of siblings doing some outta sight dancing into a digital format, that digital version is a surrogate of the original. The surrogate preserves the content of the original and makes that content easier to experience.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>5</sup> For more information about the museum media preservation and digitization program, see: Jasmyrn R. Castro, “Black Home Movies: Time to Represent,” in *Screening Race in American Non-theatrical Film*, eds. Marsha Gordon and Allyson Field (Durham: Duke University Press, forthcoming); Walter Forsberg, “Red Star Black Star: Film Culture Worker Hortense ‘Tee’ Beveridge,” in *Screening Race in American Nontheatrical Film*, eds. Marsha Gordon and Allyson Field (Durham: Duke University Press, forthcoming), and Walter Forsberg, “Hortense Beveridge and Bedford Stuyvesant Youth In Action,” *INCITE: Journal of Experimental Media* #7/8, (Winter 2017).

<sup>6</sup> “Collection Stories,” National Museum of African American History and Culture, Smithsonian Institution, accessed July 27, 2017, <https://nmaahc.si.edu/explore/stories>.



Dorothy Swygert, and her brother Artis Swygert, dancing, ca. 1974. This still frame is from a Super 8 motion picture film home movie that was digitized as part of the NMAAHC's public initiative, "The Great Migration: Digitizing African American Home Movies." <http://sova.si.edu/details/NMAAHC.SC.0001?s=o&n=10&t=C&q=&i=o>. (Still courtesy of the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture)

The Digi Team is part of the Office of Curatorial Affairs, along with the curatorial and collection management departments. The team works closely with those within its division, as well as with many other museum departments. The Digi Team's responsibilities include documenting collections, creating catalog records, managing copyright and reproductions of collection objects, imaging, reformatting of analog audiovisual materials, and managing digital assets, as well as providing support for museum publications and digital content used on the web and with other digital systems.<sup>7</sup> Public collection records with high-quality images are accessible through two web-based portals. The first is the Smithsonian Collections Search Center, which allows users to conduct searches across multiple Smithsonian museums and archives simultaneously, and the second is a NMAAHC-only portal on the museum's award-winning website.<sup>8</sup> The team lends a hand as well in creating and supporting resources that use digitized collection objects and information, for example, the museum's mobile application.

<sup>7</sup> "Collections Search Center," Smithsonian Institution, accessed July 27, 2017, <http://collections.si.edu/search/>; "The Collection," National Museum of African American History and Culture, Smithsonian Institution, accessed July 27, 2017, <https://nmaahc.si.edu/explore/collection> Accessed 7/27/2017. The National Museum of African American History and Culture (NMAAHC) won the 2017 Webby Award and People's Choice Award for the best website by a cultural Institution. "The Webby Awards, 2017, Category: Websites Charitable Organizations/Non-Profit," accessed July 26, 2017, <https://www.webbyawards.com/winners/2017/websites/general-website/cultural-blogwebsite/>

<sup>8</sup> "Our Mobile Applications," National Museum of African American History and Culture, Smithsonian Institution, accessed July 27, 2017, <https://nmaahc.si.edu/connect/mobile/apps>.



Screenshot of Collection Story, Laura Coyle, “The Great Mississippi River Flood of 1927: Ain’t Got No Place to Go,” <https://nmaahc.si.edu/explore/stories/collection/great-mississippi-river-flood-1927>. (Screenshot courtesy of the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture)

#### The History and Ambition of the Digi Team

The museum may have been born in the digital era, but it was not born with a digitization, IT, or collection management staff. The museum’s earliest hires in 2005 and 2006 resulted in about a dozen people, who were charged initially with building the museum’s collection, finding a site, conceptualizing the building, and raising funds. For other immediate needs, the museum relied on established Smithsonian resources such as the central Office of the Chief Information Officer and other Smithsonian museums. The museum acquired Gallery System’s The Museum System (TMS) as its collection information database system in 2007, a year after the museum made its first acquisitions, and two years before it hired the first staff registrar. Although acquisition and location information was accurately and consistently entered into TMS, the registrar did not have the resources to set up and implement metadata standards. For a blessedly brief period, anyone in the curatorial department could enter any information in almost any non-registration, non-location field, with the mixed results one would expect. At the same time, for high-quality imaging, the museum relied on generous photographers at other Smithsonian units for occasional collection photography. These paths were not optimal or sustainable.

When I joined the museum in 2010, the “Digi Team” was just me. A few months later, David Braatz joined the museum, bringing experience working with the Smithsonian National Portrait Gallery’s collection database, TMS, the same database used at the NMAAHC. Braatz currently oversees training on TMS and is a proficient cataloger. Others early to join the team and still at the museum are



### Cap worn by Pullman Porter Philip Henry Logan

COLLAPSE -

#### CREATED BY

[Pullman Palace Car Company](#), American, 1867 - 1981

#### WORN BY

[Logan, Philip Henry](#), American, 1914 - 2007

#### MEDIUM

cloth with patent leather, metal and trimming

#### DIMENSIONS

H x W: 4 7/8 x 8 x 10 in. (12.4 x 20.3 x 25.4 cm)

#### TYPE

[caps \(headgear\)](#)

#### DATE

1966

#### DESCRIPTION

A black cap with metallic braid trim and a label reading PULLMAN PORTER in black. The bill is made of black patent leather and a label inside the hat reads, "For: P.H. Logan / Date: 8-29-66 / No. J-585054."

#### TOPIC

[African American](#)

[Clothing and dress](#)

[Labor](#)

[Pullman Porters](#)

[Transportation](#)

#### CREDIT LINE

Collection of the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture; Gift of the Descendants of Garfield Logan, In Honor of Philip Henry Logan

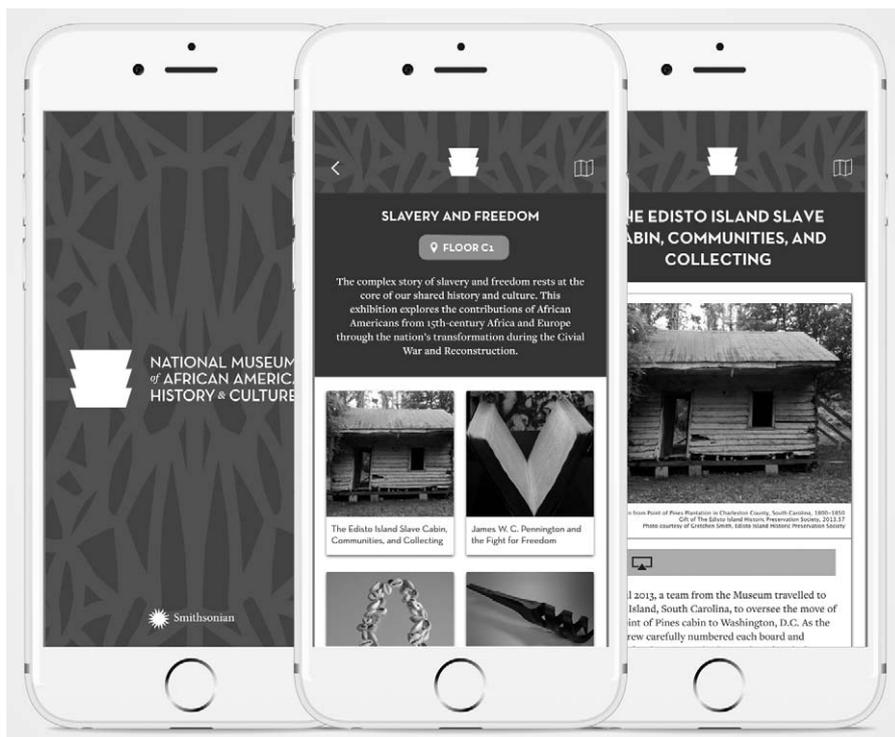
#### OBJECT NUMBER

2011.73.1

Screenshot the NMAAHC Collection Search record for the cap worn by Pullman Porter Philip Henry Logan. (Screenshot courtesy of the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture)

Emily Houf, collection information specialist; Christopher Louvar, cataloger; Jennie Smithken-Lindsay, cataloger; and Alexander Jamison, photographer. In 2014, the museum hired Walter Forsberg as media archivist and Courtney Bellizzi and Carrie Feldman as museum specialists. By 2015, the museum had built a dedicated cataloging, photography, media digitization, and digital assets management staff of about twenty federal employees and contractors who had created and implemented standards for cataloging metadata and data entry and for imaging and reformatting media.

The museum's first step in 2010 was to establish protocols establishing permissions to add to or edit information in the database. Then the staff began a survey of cataloging standards from other museums. One early discovery was that adopting an existing set of rules would not work. I should not have been surprised; there are no established, universal cataloging and data entry standards for museums.



The NMAAHC Mobile App expands on stories told in the museum. (Illustration courtesy of the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture)

Standards must reflect and serve each museum’s mission, collection, budget, staffing, and audience, and the combination of these at NMAAHC is unique.

Historically, museums have not paid as much attention to systematic cataloging as libraries and archives.<sup>9</sup> In the pre-digital era, a single museum could and often did maintain an extensive variety of cataloging styles and standards by collection—object type or department. This worked well enough because the records were created and used almost exclusively by people—mainly curators and their assistants—working with a subset of the collection with which they were or became quite familiar. Some museums did not bother to do much cataloging at all and adopted other ways of managing collection information. Even when better-resourced museums began to use databases in the 1980s, they were primarily used to track locations and organize exhibitions—often in separate, unintegrated systems—not to store and share robust, vetted collection information. In larger, mainstream institutions, museum curators were not accustomed to sharing collection information widely outside a time-honored, deliberate, controlled, and limited system of scholarly publications, even with other departments at their museums.

<sup>9</sup> Alison Eisendrath, “A Museum Professional Sees AAM Conference from New Perspective,” Coalition to Advance Learning in Archives, Libraries and Museums, accessed July 27, 2017, <http://www.coalitiontoadvancelearning.org/aam-conference-reflections-museum-professional/>.

Registrars and exhibition organizers needed only a minimum amount of collection information to do their jobs well. Approaches to documenting collections at smaller museums, community museums, and nontraditional museums were often less rigorous because they were (and often still are) underresourced. At most African American museums, most of which were small, other priorities—like securing resources, presenting exhibitions, and running community programs—were understandably considered more important.

Then came the Internet. Its arrival challenged assumptions and practices everywhere, even among notoriously conservative museum professionals at mainstream institutions. Most curators and collection staff, no matter what type of museum they were in, recognized the potential of sharing their collections online, but unlike libraries and archives, most museums' collection records did not adapt easily to a digital format. The accuracy, number, format, consistency, and completeness of records varied considerably from collection to collection and from museum to museum. The task for museums not only to upgrade the records, but also entirely rethink how collection information should be documented and managed was daunting, expensive, and mysterious. By the time the NMAAHC came on the scene, some museums, especially major museums with both vision and plentiful resources, had made tremendous progress. Nevertheless, for most museums, it may take decades to catch up, even if they have the resources and expertise—which many do not. This reality exists for many museums because people with training in digitization are rare at their institutions. It is telling that hardly any museum studies programs in the United States offer courses about cataloging—or digital imaging, digital asset management, or archival management for that matter.<sup>10</sup>

Unlike in most museums, our catalogers do not work directly for curators and they work on a wide variety of collection and object types. An independent cataloging team at NMAAHC within the curatorial division started as a practical matter—the curators were much too busy to catalog or oversee catalogers and had no background in digitization—and we have kept it autonomous because it works well for us. The cataloging team includes a collection information specialist, Emily Houf, with training in information science, who coordinates cataloging projects, standards, and record review. The museum's catalogers follow comprehensive standards and source all information, and the curator of record reviews and approves records that meet Digi Team standards before the records are made public. The Digi Team tries to ensure via standards and review that the museum's public records are accurate, consistent, and comprehensive; the goal is enlightening, reliable collection information for use by the museum and the public. However, the records are not perfect, and they will never be complete—cataloging is an open-ended process. Instead of using this as an excuse for not making the records available, the museum invites users of the records to make them better. Catalogers update records all the time based on information provided by curators, scholars,

10 Ibid.

and the general public. Working together, the museum has what a colleague in another part of the Smithsonian calls “the most beautiful data.”

Digi Team members and curators also agree that our cataloging must reflect our mission to look at American history and culture through an African American lens. This perspective necessitates new approaches to cataloging and standards. At our museum, for instance, the lives and stories of people who were enslaved greatly matter, and many of these people are known by only one name. Official records of their lives are often difficult to find if they exist at all. Leaving this group of individuals out of our database is not an option. We were compelled, therefore, to come up with alternate ways of identifying, referring to, and creating useful, dignified references in our records for enslaved people.

Right from the start, the Digi Team was mindful of the biases inherent in existing ways of cataloging and in the controlled vocabularies of terms used by catalogers. As in the case above, at our museum and throughout our cataloging, we use the term “enslaved person” instead of “slave.” By using “enslaved person,” we identify people as individuals and slavery as a condition, making it clear that slavery is imposed on an individual and remains separate from the person’s identity. Although this usage may be common in academia and Black history museums, it is not the norm outside these institutions. For example the subject heading in the Library of Congress is “slaves”; the variant term is “enslaved persons.”<sup>11</sup> Our museum therefore also has a highly visible platform for challenging common usage and the assumptions that underlie the way we use language.

The museum is consciously trying to build a more inclusive database. This means looking critically at the choices catalogers make as they describe, classify, interpret, and deliver collection information. The cataloging team works closely with others at the museum on this effort. The team has also started a conversation about these issues beyond NMAAHC to encourage more culturally responsive databases.<sup>12</sup> As Digi Team members note:

At NMAAHC, one of our priorities is to be mindful of how we catalog identities. The interrelated concepts of identity and freedom reverberate throughout our collection, often through stories of individuals who historically have been under-represented. Our cataloging incorporates multiple interrelated identities, including race, gender, sexuality, occupation, and nationality, without reducing an individual to a particular identity in a way

<sup>11</sup> “Slaves,” Library of Congress Subject Headings, Library of Congress, accessed August 5, 2017, <http://id.loc.gov/authorities/subjects/sh85123347.html>.

<sup>12</sup> Collection information specialist Emily Houf leads this effort at our museum. She and former NMAAHC cataloger Terri Anderson gave two presentations on this work, both titled “Building an Inclusive Database: Cataloging Race, Gender, Sexuality and other Identities,” one at Collective Imagination in New York City in April 2016, for those who use the TMS collection information database, and the other at a session titled “The Culturally Responsive Database” at the American Alliance of Museums Conference in May 2016. The term “culturally responsive database” was coined by Vickie Stone, who suggested the AAA session and co-presented with Houf and Anderson.

that segregates them from the dominant cultures. We aim for representation without othering.<sup>13</sup>

Our museum is also unusual in collecting visual art, cultural materials, historical artifacts, and archival collections. Each of these types of collections has its conventions for documenting, classifying, organizing, and making the materials accessible. The museum could have adopted several different systems, but that was antithetical to the curators' interdisciplinary intentions to use various types of materials in their research and exhibitions. The Digi Team also wanted to make sure that certain themes—identity, agency, the struggle for freedom and equal rights, the role of religion and spirituality, resilience, creativity—run through the cataloging of all of our objects as they do through the museum's exhibitions. The museum's policy is to make all types of materials searchable in a single database, using shared vocabularies and subject terms across all of the museum's holdings. This approach facilitates "one-stop searching," making it much easier to find items across collection types that relate to a particular theme, historical period, person, event, or place. Each archival collection, for example, has at least one detailed, highly discoverable record in the main museum collection database. In public searches, if the archival collection also has an Encoded Archival Description (EAD) finding aid, the link to the finding aid is provided in the collection search record. Comprehensive, unified searching of a museum's collection may seem like an obvious thing to do, but it requires a paradigm shift in museum theory and practice to achieve.

The Digi Team is constantly trying to find ways to make records more discoverable and rich without creating standards that are overly complicated and complex because that slows down cataloging and record creation. At our museum, a cataloger completes about ten records per week, but there are extensive variations in how long a single record may take. Even with digital tools, cataloging remains a labor-intensive, expensive practice.

## Imaging

Imaging, on the other hand, has undergone a revolution, making some types of photography and scanning much faster and easier to manage without sacrificing quality. Admittedly, new equipment and software can be costly and a challenge to master. However, automated tools for image capture, quality control, and image file management, as well as automated integration of images with corresponding records, are having a significant impact. This approach, combined with more efficient workflows, is sometimes called "rapid capture" or "mass digitization," which is the

<sup>13</sup> Vickie Stone, Terri Anderson, and Emily Houf, "Museums in Motion Today," in *Museums in Motion: An Introduction to the History and Functions of Museums*, 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition, eds. Edward P. Alexander, Mary Alexander, and Julie Decker (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017), 20, <https://books.google.com/books?id=iw4TDgAAQBAJ&pg=PA20&dq=culturally+responsive+database&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwiPioqAw6rVAhWHoD4KHR7cCjcQ6AEIKDAA#v=onepage&q=culturally%2oresponsive%2odatabase&f=false>.



*Violets* by Pauline Powell Burns, ca. 1890. (Image courtesy of the Collection of the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture, 2014.42.2a. Photograph by Alex Jamison)

term currently preferred at the Smithsonian.<sup>14</sup> Mass digitization at the Smithsonian is dramatically bringing down the cost per image and significantly boosting the number of images available to staff and the public. A particularly impressive museum digital imaging project by the Smithsonian's Digitization Program Office (DPO) developed mass-digitization techniques to photograph 200,000 varied objects in the collection of the Cooper-Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum, over a period of eighteen months.<sup>15</sup>

Like the cataloging program, the NMAAHC imaging program started modestly. With the opening of a multi-purpose digital imaging/photography studio at the museum's storage facility in May 2014, the museum completed the transition from outsourcing and short-term in-house projects to a full time operation. NMAAHC uses mass digitization-type workflows to create images for documentation, preservation, and access, but also still needs relatively expensive custom photography. Custom photography is usually reserved for significant three-dimensional objects in the collection which are selected for inclusion in print publications or other very high profile uses. Examples of selected NMAAHC objects include the cap worn by Pullman Porter Philip Henry Logan (figure 2), the freedom papers and handmade tin carrying box that belonged to Joseph Trammell (figure 9), and *The Mothership*

<sup>14</sup> "Mass Digitization Program," Digitization Program Office, Smithsonian Institution, accessed July 26, 2017, <https://dpo.si.edu/mass-digitization-program>.

<sup>15</sup> Margaret Rhodes, "The Cooper Hewitt Design Museum Just Put 200,000 Items Online," *Wired*, September 2, 2016, accessed July 27, 2017, <https://www.wired.com/2016/09/cooper-hewitt-design-museum-just-put-200000-items-online/>.

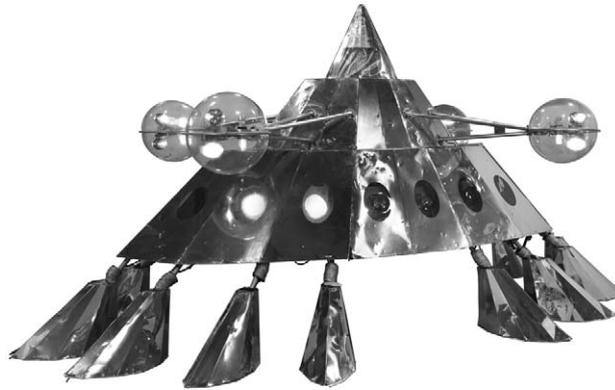


Tin box handmade and carried by Joseph Trammell to hold freedom papers, 1852. (Image courtesy of the Collection of the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture, Gift of Elaine E. Thompson, in memory of Joseph Trammell, on behalf of his direct descendants, 2014.25.2. Photograph by Alex Jamison)

used by Parliament-Funkadelic (figure 10). Custom photography is not necessarily “better” photography as quality really depends upon how the image will be used. For example, researchers generally prefer mass digitization images to custom because the objects are more evenly lit and often they are photographed from multiple viewpoints. Photographers taking custom photos routinely use more dramatic lighting to make more compelling or artistic images, but details are then often lost in the shadows. And because custom photography is expensive, museums often pay for only one or two views of an object.

#### Mass Digitization of Inaugural Exhibition Objects

The NMAAHC’s most ambitious mass imaging project to date was created to ensure that we would have high-quality images of at least 85 percent of the collection objects featured in the inaugural exhibitions on hand before opening. The museum had already completed excellent custom photography of several hundred of these objects, but by late 2015, the remaining two thousand objects, in all shapes and sizes, posed an enormous challenge. Many of the objects still to be photographed had been inaccessible in the preceding year or two because they needed conservation work before they could be photographed, were not yet identified for exhibition, or, in more than a few cases, were not yet acquired. Even for the objects that were available, custom photography for each and every one was too expensive and too slow. We knew for months that we would only have a small window in early 2016 in which to photograph as many of the two thousand objects as possible using a mass digitization approach. The project needed to be wedged between exhibition prep (such as object cleaning, conservation, and mount fitting) and packing for transfer to the new building for installation.

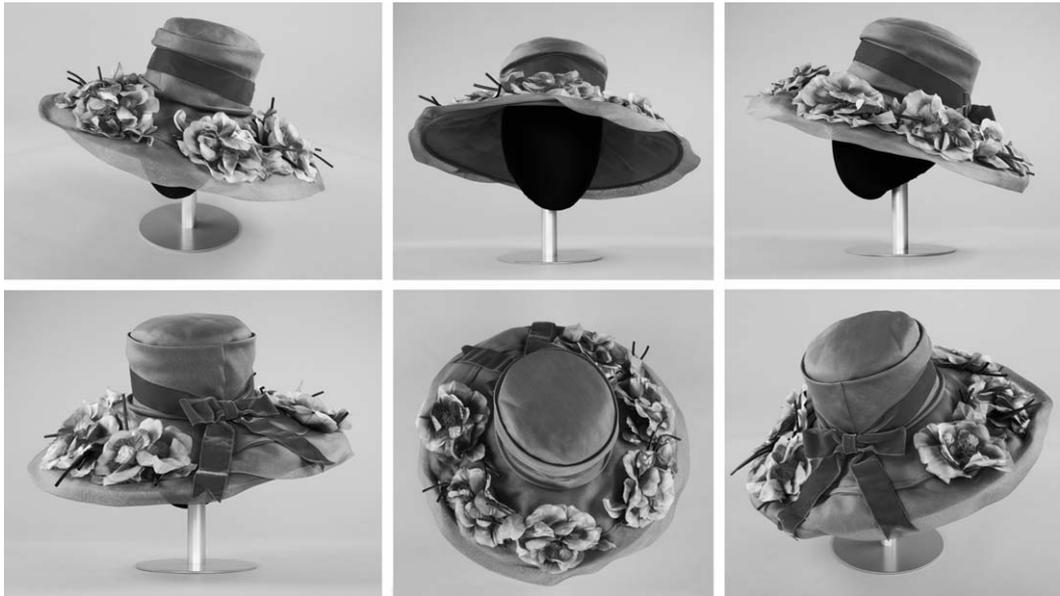


The Mothership used by Parliament-Funkadelic, designed by George Clinton, Peter Larkin, and Jules Fisher, 1990s. (Image courtesy of the Collection of the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture, Gift of Love to the planet, 2011.83.1.1-.9. Photograph by Alex Jamison)

The central Smithsonian Digitization Program Office (DPO) guided and provided staff assistance and equipment to the NMAAHC staff for this project. By DPO standards, our project was small, and it included constraints that would affect productivity, but everyone recognized that the results would have an immediate and huge impact. The project required months of preparation. Every object needed in advance to have an item-level record in the database to implement a barcode system to name and manage image files, and the museum also needed to develop conservator-approved plans for moving and handling several hundred objects every few days. Photographing objects by type and size would have been most efficient, but the looming installation schedule precluded that option and instead the imaging team photographed mixed groups of objects staged in cabinets or on shelves organized by the date the objects were to be installed. During the intense, daylong photography sessions, the object handlers and photographers broke into smaller teams to image a shelf or cabinet of artifacts at a time. Different types of objects required different set ups, and frequently the team used three or four photography stations simultaneously. For many objects, photographers used an Ortery rig and turntable that allowed us to take photographs from seven different angles in less than a minute. This project was difficult, but worthwhile. We exceeded our goal, we learned a great deal for future mass digitization projects, and we used the photographs right away for collections management, publicity, and collection access.

#### Reformatting Film, Video, and Audio Recordings

Digitizing museum objects poses one set of challenges; digitizing analog film, video, and audio recordings poses another. About two and a half years before opening, the museum hired Walter Forsberg, an archivist trained in media preservation and digitization to oversee the care of the museum's growing collection of film, video,



Several views of a pink mushroom hat with flowers from Mae's Millinery Shop designed by Mae Reeves. (Images courtesy of the Collection of the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture, 2013.213.9. Photographed using an automated Ortery Technologies system)

and audio recordings and to make them more accessible via digital reformatting. The museum collects amateur films, documentaries, feature films, home movies, race films, radio and television shows, audio and video oral histories, and a wide range of musical sound recordings. One of the most significant holdings is the Pearl Bowser collection (2012.79), which includes not only 35 mm and 16 mm films, video and audio formats, but also related printed materials, notes, photographs, posters, and artifacts related to Bowser's scholarship on Oscar Micheaux and early African American films. The NMAAHC is noteworthy because of the wide range of media it reformats in-house, although for some formats, it is still more cost effective to use an offsite service.

The media collections are crucial in supporting the exhibitions and programs offered by the museum's Earl W. and Amanda Stafford Center for African American Media Arts (CAAMA), which is dedicated to helping the public understand how the media arts have shaped African American history and culture.<sup>16</sup> CAAMA presents media arts in the museum, offsite, and online. It includes an interactive exhibition space on the museum's second floor, and visitors to the museum can see the nearby media preservation and digitization lab in action. Often the team is digitizing home movies and videos for the public free of charge. Called the "Great Migration Home

<sup>16</sup> "The Earl W. and Amanda Stafford Center of African American Media Arts, National Museum of African American History and Culture, Smithsonian Institution, accessed July 27, 2017, <https://nmaahc.si.edu/explore/initiatives/caama>.

Movie Project,” and launched just after opening, the name is a play on words, referring not only to the historical migration of African Americans from the South but also the process of “migrating” analog materials to a digital format. With permission, the museum retains digital copies of these home movies for the museum’s Study Collection and to share with the public via the Smithsonian Online Virtual Archives (SOVA).<sup>17</sup>

### Digitization by Opening

By the time the museum opened, the Digi Team had accomplished several critical goals. The most fundamental was creating the ability to find specific objects or accessions, both digitally in the collection database and physically in their storage or other locations. It might have been tempting to focus exclusively on the 2,350 or so collection items needed for the inaugural exhibitions and ignore for a while the others, now about 37,000 items, but Smithsonian collections are held in trust for the public; the museum had a duty to care for our collection responsibly. By September 2016, about 80 percent of accessioned collections were in the museum’s database with at least acquisition information and locations.

By summer 2016, the digitization staff had also completed full cataloging records for 99.9 percent of the collection objects featured in the inaugural exhibitions, a total of 2,334 records. By opening, more than eighty audiovisual titles had been digitally reformatted, including sixty-five film reels, and forty-five videotapes. We created more than 31,000 still images of collection objects, including 15,000 captured during the 2016 partnership with DPO. Many of the new images created accompanied the 8,000 curator-approved records that were online by opening. These accomplishments are points of pride and honor for the museum.

Digital records, digital images, and digitized media also support more than one hundred audiovisual pieces and seven museum interactive experiences in the exhibitions. Digitized collections played a role as well in more than a dozen special projects, including Google Cultural Institute exhibitions and a virtual reality experience, twenty-two online stories in Smithsonian Magazine, and a stunning museum “mapping” titled *Illuminate NMAAHC: Commemorate and Celebrate Freedom*. A video montage with an original soundtrack projected on the building’s façade, this mapping was collaboration between Quixotic Entertainment and Stanley Nelson. A version of the *Illuminate NMAAHC* may be viewed online.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>17</sup> “The Great Migration: Digitizing African American Home Movies & Analog Audiovisual Media,” National Museum of African American History and Culture, Smithsonian Institution, accessed July 26, 2017, <https://nmaahc.si.edu/explore/initiatives/great-migration>.

<sup>18</sup> “National Museum of African American History and Culture Comes Alive Nov. 16–18,” National Museum of African American History and Culture, Smithsonian Institution, accessed August 6, 2017, <https://nmaahc.si.edu/about/news/national-museum-african-american-history-and-culture-comes-alive-nov-16%E2%80%9318>. The mapping may be viewed here: “Illuminate



The Obama Family tours the new Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington, DC. (Official White House Photo by Pete Souza. From the series, Behind the Lens: 2016 Year in Photographs. <https://medium.com/obama-white-house/behind-the-lens-2016-year-in-photographs-9e2c8733bbb3>)

### Smithsonian Transcription Center and “Volunpeers”

We also used digital records and images to reach a new and growing audience via the Smithsonian Transcription Center.<sup>19</sup> Launched in August 2014, this website harnesses the power of volunteers to transcribe digitized images “to unlock the content” contained in tens of thousands of Smithsonian documents.<sup>20</sup> Our museum put its first documents up in June 2015, under the direction of Courtney Bellizzi. One of the earliest projects was 124-pages of previously unpublished

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NMAAHC: Commemorate and Celebrate Freedom Project Mapping,” YouTube, accessed August 6, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sYIWLZMAPNA>.

<sup>19</sup> Smithsonian Digital Volunteers: Transcription Center, Smithsonian Institution, accessed July 26, 2017, <https://transcription.si.edu/>.

<sup>20</sup> Volunteers Needed for Massive Smithsonian Digitization Project: New Website Allows Anyone with Internet Connection to Help,” Smithsonian Institution Press Release, August 12, 2014, accessed July 26, 2017, <http://newsdesk.si.edu/releases/volunteers-needed-massive-smithsonian-digitization-project>; Andy Wright, “How the Smithsonian Institution is Crowdsourcing History,” accessed July 26, 2017, <http://www.atlasobscura.com/articles/how-the-smithsonian-is-crowdsourcing-history> accessed. The Spring 2016 Issue of *Collections: A Journal for Museum and Archives Professionals*, vol. 12, issue 2, is devoted to the Smithsonian Transcription.

correspondence and other documents related to James Baldwin (2011.99).<sup>21</sup> By its opening, the museum had launched thirty-seven projects, including documents related to the inaugural exhibitions, documents needed for research, and stand-alone collection projects.<sup>22</sup> The variety is striking. Documents range from a 1685 deed of sale for assets including “negro slaves”<sup>23</sup> to a promotional kit for the famous world heavyweight championship boxing match on February 25, 1964, between Sonny Liston and Cassius Clay—who after this fight changed his name to Muhammad Ali.<sup>24</sup> Transcription not only makes handwritten documents easier to read and use (copies of the originals and transcripts are downloadable); it also makes the documents easier to find with Google and other Internet search engines. In Smithsonian’s public Collections Search Center, the digital collection record is paired with a link to the transcribed record in the Transcription Center. In the first few months, we engaged about eighty “volunpeers,” and by the time we opened, we had 228 volunteers who transcribed 808 pages. Volunpeers is the name the Smithsonian uses to recognize the important contributions of those who volunteer in the Smithsonian Transcription Center. Many do more than transcribe; the Smithsonian has volunpeers that research and provide staff new information about collections, make constructive suggestions for improving the website, and foster an online community of volunpeers and staff to share discoveries and assist each other. The manager of our museum’s projects, Courtney Bellizzi, describes the volunpeers’ appetites as “voracious.”<sup>25</sup> The museum continues to post new projects every month, and volunpeers often complete them within days. The Digi Team cannot keep up with them, but this is a great problem to have.

#### Digital Uses for the Media, Museum Print Publications, and Graphics

The Smithsonian Transcription Center is perhaps “inside baseball,” despite engaging impressive numbers of people. A more visible way of using digitized collections surfaced in the explosion of media coverage in the run-up to the museum’s grand opening. The Digi Team encouraged and supported this unprecedented publicity, fulfilling requests for more than two thousand collection and museum images from our public affairs office and the media. In addition,

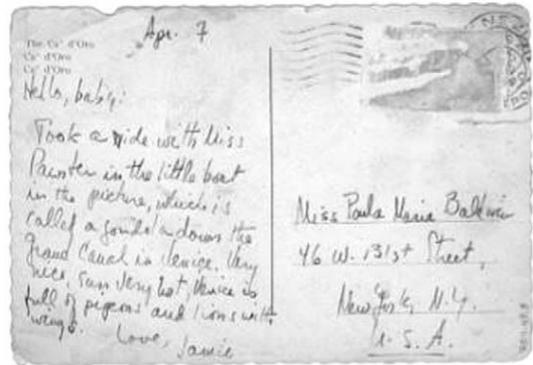
21 “James Baldwin Collection,” Smithsonian Digital Volunteers: Transcription Center, Smithsonian Institution, accessed July 26, 2017 <https://transcription.si.edu/project/7660>.

22 Courtney Bellizzi, “Planning and Storytelling with Collections: Establishing the National Museum of African American History and Culture’s Transcription Center Presence,” *Collections: A Journal for Museum and Archives Professionals* 12, no. 2 (Spring 2016): 166–67.

23 “Deed of Sale between William Walker and John and Joan Gunston,” Smithsonian Digital Volunteers: Transcription Center, Smithsonian Institution, accessed July 26, 2017, <https://transcription.si.edu/project/8344>.

24 “Cassius Clay vs. Sonny Liston Heavyweight Title Press Kit,” Smithsonian Digital Volunteers: Transcription Center, Smithsonian Institution, accessed July 26, 2017, <https://transcription.si.edu/project/7878>; “Sonny Liston vs Cassius Clay (Muhammad Ali) Boxing Match [February 25, 1965],” YouTube, accessed July 26, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OezriPEepZs>.

25 Bellizzi, “Planning and Storytelling,” 166–67.



James Baldwin Collection  
 Transcribed and Reviewed by Digital Volunteers  
 Extracted May-23-2018 05:51:01

[[preprinted, upper left corner]] The Ca' d'Oro Ca' d'Oro Ca' d'Oro  
 [[/preprinted]]

Apr. 7

Hello, baby:

Took a ride with Miss Painter in the little boat in the picture, which is called a gondola down the Grand Canal in Venice. Very nice, sun very hot, Venice is full of pigeons and lions with wings.

Love,  
 Jamie

[[postmark, upper right corner]]

Miss Paula Maria Baldwin  
 46 W. 131st Street,  
 New York, N.Y.  
 U.S.A.  
 [[line]]

Front, back, and transcription of a postcard to Paula Baldwin from James Baldwin, April 7, 1954. (Image courtesy of the Collection of the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture, Gift of The Baldwin Family, 2011.99.8)

a feature for the website made 575 images and captions available to the media for self-service download and use. These include images of the building, Lonnie Bunch's "signature objects," the curators' choices of the "Top Ten" objects featured in each exhibition, photographs of influential African Americans, and images representing subject-area strengths of the museum's collection, including Jack Mitchell's photographs of the Alvin Ailey Dance Theater, civil rights, fashion, music, photography, slavery, and women.

It stands to reason that our digital records and surrogates are made available via digital platforms, devices, and networks, but the role of digitization in creating traditional museum products should not be underestimated. All print publications, for example, rely heavily on digital tools and resources for their creation.<sup>26</sup> Demand for more traditional products featuring collection objects sometimes drives

<sup>26</sup> "Publications," National Museum of African American History and Culture, Smithsonian Institution, accessed July 26, 2017, <https://nmaahc.si.edu/explore/publications>.



National Museum of African American History and Culture. (Image courtesy of the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture, Photograph by Alan Karchmer)

digitization. At other times, having collection objects digitized inspires the product itself. The museum's first project with DPO to scan 1,500 collection photographs in about four days in September 2013 led to the first collection publications. So many high-quality images inspired Michèle Gates Moresi, curator of collections, and me to co-edit a series of small-format books about our photography collection. Called *Double Exposure*, the sixth and seventh volumes in the series are currently in production.<sup>27</sup> Digital photography, combined with beautiful design, excellent essays, and sidebars also drives sales for our ambitious inaugural publications. They include *Dream a World Anew: The African American Experience and the Shaping of America*, edited by Kinshasha Holman Conwill; *Begin with the Past: Building the National Museum of African American History and Culture*, by Mabel O. Wilson; and the *Official Guide to the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History*, by Kathleen M. Kendrick. The small format *National Museum of African American History and Culture: A Souvenir Book* is flying off the shelves. Another important

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.



Judith Jamison in *Facets*, 1976. (Image courtesy of the Collection of the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture. Photograph by Jack Mitchell. © Alvin Ailey Dance Foundation, Inc. and Smithsonian Institution, All rights reserved. 2013.245, Box 2 Pr 217 Facets Jamison)

nondigital use of digital collection images is for exhibition graphics. The exhibition designers and curators used hundreds of images from our collection and others to enrich and strengthen the powerful stories told in the museum.

#### Digitization Programs at Other Museums

A major factor inhibits comparison of the NMAAHC's digitization program to other African American museums: NMAAHC's size. The NMAAHC is a national museum with generous federal and private support, an annual revenue in fiscal year 2018 of about fifty million dollars, a spectacular new building on the National Mall, a collection of about 37,000 objects, and a permanent staff of more than a hundred and dozens of contractors. By every measure related to resources, the NMAAHC is an outlier compared to other African American museums. The 2017 *National Needs Assessment for the Association of African American Museums* reports that one-third of African American museums have annual revenues of less than \$50,000, and two-thirds have annual revenues under \$500,000. One third of African American museums have no full-time staff members, relying entirely on part-time staff and volunteers, while another

quarter have only one to three full-time staff members. Only five museums assessed have revenues over \$5,000,000, and none have revenues approaching \$50 million.<sup>28</sup>

More fair comparisons among digitization programs would be first, between African American museums and other American history or general museums of similar size in revenue and collections, and second, between the NMAAHC and other American history or general museums of similar size and collections. Here, a second factor inhibits comparison: lack of data. Remarkably, given all the talk about the role of and need for digitization at museums, no studies exist that assess the basic level of digitization in American museums: the percentage of the collection with standard digital catalogue records, the percentage of the collection imaged or reformatted to standard, and the percentage of the collection available to the public online. These measures would only be useful, though, if it were possible to sort and compare museums by various critical factors, such as the type of museum, annual revenue, number of full-time staff, type of collection, number of objects, and number of objects targeted for digital catalogue records, imaging, and reformatting. Even Smithsonian museums, libraries, and archives have been systematically collecting, reporting, and analyzing annual digitization statistics across the institution for only a few years. Compiling “digi stats” is not a favorite part of my job, but a clear-eyed assessment of what has been done, what needs to be done, and what it will cost to reach specific goals is extremely useful, if sobering, for planning and resource allocation. Surely a study of digitization levels in American museums is in order, in part to find out where museums stand in relation to one another, but more importantly to help identify museums that have come up with successful, cost-effective, culturally relevant strategies for digitization that can be shared. In the meantime, I encourage better-resourced museums to have a serious discussion about how they can assist museums that are not so fortunate. African American communities in particular have a strong tradition of “lifting as we climb” that can be applied to museums. We need to be more creative in figuring out how to digitize and share underresourced collections because these collections are powerful. African American museum collections bear witness to the contributions, trials, and triumphs of African Americans that have been consistently marginalized. Collections—actual and digital—help to set the record straight.

With a generous gift from Robert Frederick Smith, the NMAAHC is taking steps in this direction. The Robert Frederick Smith Fund for the Digitization and Curation of African American History supports three main activities: digitization to make non-NMAAHC collections related to African American history and culture easier to access; managing the museum’s Robert Frederick Smith Explore Your Family History Center on the museum’s second floor; and internships and fellowships that build skills in collection information management, digital

<sup>28</sup> Jeff Hayward, Christine Larouche & Marla Shelasky, “2017 National Needs Assessment for the Association of African American Museums,” (unpublished research report, Association of African American Museums, 2017).

imaging, and media preservation and digitization. Part of the gift is being used to encourage communities and individuals to digitize their own collections and document them with stories using a community curation mobile app launched in November 2017, which uploads images, video, and stories to a virtual community museum and makes them accessible through a searchable, NMAAHC-maintained platform. The gift also allows the museum to collaborate with other organizations around the country. The program will provide these collaborators the technical and financial assistance they need to digitize and make accessible selected collection materials relating to African American history and culture. It also aims to educate organizations about creating and sustaining their own digitization programs. In return, the museum will receive a copy of the digitized collections. With partners' permission, NMAAHC curators will have the option recommending these copies for addition to the museum's Study Collection, which will make them discoverable online with the rest of the NMAAHC's collection.<sup>29</sup>

### The Future

Now that the museum has established a solid digital foundation, digitization can take many directions, but our first priority is to maintain and build on successful projects, especially making the collection available online. As of January 2018, more than 10,400 collection records were available through both portals for searching the museum's collection, steadily advancing our goal of making the entire collection accessible to the public. The museum also recently made object descriptions part of the public record. Although written originally to make sure museum staff could identify and distinguish between similar objects, these descriptions greatly improved discoverability of the records and are also a boon to those with impaired vision. Many with low vision have programs on their computers that read texts out loud; the ability to listen to descriptions of objects should provide this group an enhanced experience with our collection. Recordings of the collection object descriptions are also used to make the mobile museum tours more accessible. In addition, the Digi Team is exploring how best to make public our constituent records—documentation of people and organizations associated with our objects—and investigating ways to better integrate stories about our objects with object cataloging records. For example, the museum already provides links from the objects featured in NMAAHC Collection Stories on our website and on our mobile app to the online catalog records for those objects; the next step would be to provide links that move in the opposite direction, from the object record to multiple museum and other resources that relate to and help our audience contextualize the objects. With respect to

<sup>29</sup> "The Robert Frederick Smith Explore Your Family History Center," National Museum of African American History and Culture, Smithsonian Institution, accessed August 5, 2017, <https://nmaahc.si.edu/explore/initiatives/family-history-center>; "Community Curation," National Museum of African American History and Culture, Smithsonian Institution, accessed March, 23, 2018, <https://communitycuration.org/home/gettingStarted>

collection records, the Digi Team is enthusiastic about the holy grail of collection information and systems specialists: linked open data (LOD). We hope to build on initiatives already underway and learn from experiences with LOD elsewhere at Smithsonian.<sup>30</sup> More immediate is the project to thoroughly document the museum's opening exhibitions with still photography, creating a valuable record for posterity. Video and 360-degree photography of the galleries adds other types of documentation and provides the basis for virtual reality museum tours.

The museum's participation in the Transcription Center also has been greatly expanded. The team continues to add collection documents each month, but in an effort coordinated by Digi Team member Douglas Remley, the Transcription Center is now also hosting records housed at the National Archives related to the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, often referred to as the Freedmen's Bureau.<sup>31</sup> As the Civil War ended, the federal government established the Freedmen's Bureau to supervise all affairs relating to war refugees, freedmen, and the disposition of abandoned lands and property. Formally launched in December 2016, the project benefited from nearly two million images of Freedmen's Bureau documents from records at the National Archives and Records Administration provided by FamilySearch International to NMAAHC. Transcription and dissemination of these records will substantially enhance our understanding of American history, especially Reconstruction. Combined with the results of FamilySearch International's Freedmen's Bureau Project, which indexed the Freedmen's Bureau papers so that the names of nearly 1.8 million people are now searchable online,<sup>32</sup> transcription will greatly assist genealogists, family historians, and scholars—not to mention our catalogers—who are documenting the lives of African Americans immediately following the Civil War. Every reader of this article is warmly invited to participate in this or one of the other user-friendly Smithsonian Transcription projects, which has resulted in more than 300,000 transcriptions as of February 2018.<sup>33</sup> Our museum is also exploring ways to adapt the Transcription Center as a crowdsourcing tool for other tasks, for example, identifying people and places in photographs, annotating collections, and translating transcriptions into and from English. On the frontier of the digital era, the field of the digital humanities shows great promise and the Digi Team looks forward to the day when thousands of volunteers participate digitally to document our collection.

In time for NMAAHC's first anniversary, the museum improved its mobile app, launching a version for blind and low-vision audiences, and is ramping up production of the next round of museum publications. Another recent development is

30 "Linked Open Data," Smithsonian American Art Museum, accessed August 5, 2017, <https://americanart.si.edu/collections/search/lod/about/>.

31 "Freedmen's Bureau," Smithsonian Digital Volunteers: Transcription Center, Smithsonian Institution, accessed August 5, 2017, <https://transcription.si.edu/browse?filter=owner%3A16&sort=&showcompleted=1>

32 "Discover your roots and unlock your future," FamilySearch International, accessed August 5, 2017 <http://www.discoverfreedmen.org/>.

33 Smithsonian Digital Volunteers: Transcription Center, Smithsonian Institution

a partnership between Google and the museum to create 360-degree scans of collection objects for a new educational interactive in the museum, launched in February 2018. With technology and expertise on loan from Google and the participation of Digi Team staff and the Smithsonian's own 3D Imaging Program team,<sup>34</sup> the museum is creating innovative and educational ways to engage with our collection. The museum hopes to use these images in other ways as well, such as "printing" collection replicas for hands-on use in educational programming and making the images directly available on the web.<sup>35</sup>

Perhaps, though, the most important future uses of our digital collection records and surrogates are ones the Digi Team cannot even envision. Literally in the palm of our hand, we have mobile phones and small computers with access to sophisticated digital technology, systems, tools, and information that did not exist a few years ago. Like our fancy smartphones, future devices and systems will someday seem as hard to live without as they were once hard to imagine.

In the near term, though, many of our most valuable digital collection efforts are embedded in the familiar, ancient, and powerful art of storytelling. On May 30, 2017, museum visitors discovered a noose left in the exhibition *Defending Freedom, Defining Freedom: The Era of Segregation*. This evoked visceral reactions among all the staff and the public, especially those who are African American. As Lonnie Bunch pointed out in an editorial about the incident to the *New York Times*, for Black people the noose is a terrifying "symbol of extreme violence." He argued that the discovery of the noose confirmed the need for our museum, not only in its traditional role as a place of education, but also as a platform to condemn such hateful acts and as a place of refuge, reflection, and solace for those shaken by them.<sup>36</sup>

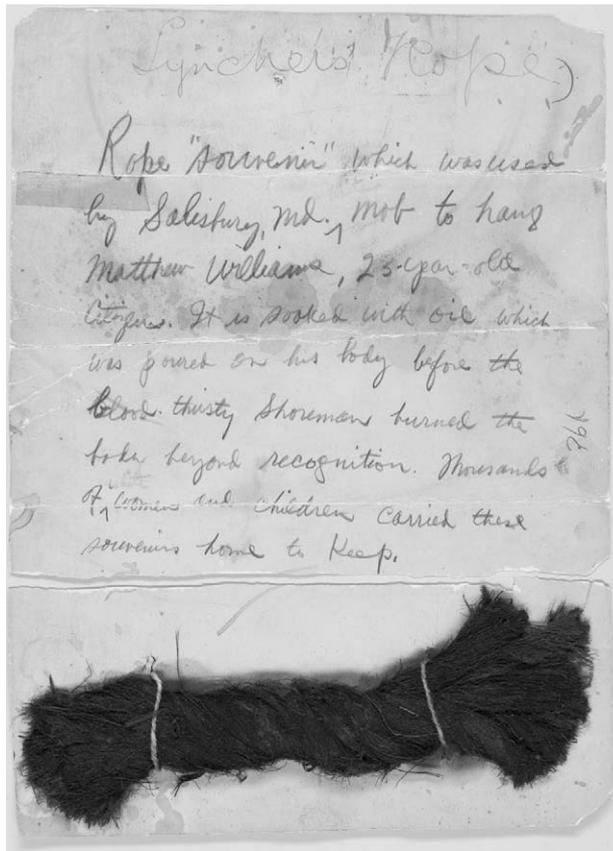
For many Americans, the understanding of nooses is abstract. As one scholar points out, lynchings are frequently engraved on "the collective psyche of a black community for generations," but the topic of lynching is also so sensitive that people often refuse to speak about it.<sup>37</sup> This has had a grievous result: it obscures the fact that white supremacy is not merely an ideology, but also an active, deadly system of terror against African Americans and other targets. At the time of the incident, the museum was already planning a feature for Collection Stories by Tulani Salahu-Din about a remnant of rope that was used in a lynching in NMAAHC's collection. Titled "The Evidence of Things Unsaid," it puts our

34 "3D Imaging Program," Digitization Program Office, Smithsonian Institution, accessed July 26, 2017, <https://dpo.si.edu/3d-imaging-program>.

35 "Digitization | 3D, [Viewer]" Digitization Program Office, Smithsonian Institution, accessed July 26, 2017, <https://3d.si.edu/>.

36 Lonnie G. Bunch III, "A Noose at the Smithsonian Brings History Back to Life," *New York Times*, June 23, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/23/opinion/noose-smithsonian-african-american-museum.html>.

37 Sherrilyn A. Ifill, *On the Courthouse Lawn: Confronting the Legacy of Lynching in the Twenty-first Century* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2007), [https://books.google.com/books?id=Hzww6psskK0C&printsec=frontcover&source=gbs\\_ge\\_summary\\_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q=williams&f=false](https://books.google.com/books?id=Hzww6psskK0C&printsec=frontcover&source=gbs_ge_summary_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q=williams&f=false)



Rope used to lynch Matthew Williams, December 1931. (Image courtesy of the Collection of the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture, Gift of The Estate of Paul S. Henderson, 2013.50abc)

collection in context, like all of our stories.<sup>38</sup> But in this case, the story proved incredibly timely. It took the noose out of the abstract realm and the bloody history of white supremacy out of the shadows.

As the collection story reveals, the rope bears witness to a specific time, December 4, 1931, and a specific place, the property of Wicomico County Courthouse in Salisbury, Maryland. It refers to the lynching of a specific person, Matthew Williams, a twenty-three-year old Black man who was dragged by a group of white men from his hospital bed and hanged on the courthouse lawn. During the first weeks the story was posted on NMAAHC's website, with no fanfare or publicity, thousands of people read it. The story of Matthew Williams and the rope used to lynch him puts the noose found at the museum in perspective and validates the Smithsonian's condemnation of the act; it further makes the reality of lynching

<sup>38</sup> Tulani Saluhu-Din, "The Evidence of Things Unsaid," National Museum of African American History and Culture, Smithsonian Institution, August 5, 2017, <https://nmaahc.si.edu/explore/stories/collection/evidence-things-unsaid>.

clear, illuminates a dark corner in our country's history, and exposes white supremacy, which still exists in our country, for what it is. This is why we digitize.

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*Laura Coyle* is Head of Cataloging and Digitization at the Smithsonian Museum of African American History and Culture. She oversees collection research and cataloging, standards and data entry for the museum's collection information system, digital imaging, digital assets management, and rights and reproductions. Before joining the Smithsonian in 2010, she was the owner of Curator at Large, LLC adjunct faculty in the Johns Hopkins Museum Studies Program; and Curator of European Art at the Corcoran Gallery of Art. Coyle has a BA from Georgetown University, a MA from Williams College, and a PhD from Princeton University.

I dedicate this article to my colleagues on the Digi Team, past and present; Lonnie G. Bunch III, Founding Director; Rex Ellis, Associate Director for Curatorial Affairs; Michèle Gates Moresi, Curator of Collections; and Jacquelyn Days Serwer, Chief Curator, all at NMAAHC; and the staff in the Smithsonian's Digitization Program Office, especially Ken Rahaim.