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Community Engagement: Leveraging Library Online Tools to Support Local Historical Organizations

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Jennifer Murray

Community engagement

Leveraging library online tools to support local historical organizations

Among Floridians, Jacksonville is known as the “First Coast.” It is a reference to the fact that Northeast Florida has some of the oldest European settlements in North America. The numerous local historical organizations are forever challenged to preserve and share the rich history of “all that is Jacksonville—including early settlers, 19th- and 20th-century urban planning and architecture, civil rights and Black history, city governance, and our national parks heritage.”¹ They often do not have the resources needed, but local academic libraries are rich in resources and tools that can benefit organizations outside the library and help bring more awareness to the organizations and the collections they have. As the role of academic libraries continues to evolve with technological changes, libraries are continuously looking for ways to reinvent themselves and expand their role within their university and throughout the greater community.²

Background

The Jacksonville Historical Society (JHS) was formed in 1929 by residents in the Jacksonville area who were interested in the local history. JHS began by collecting various historical memorabilia to begin their archival collection that was built over a period of 60 years. In 1988, a president was elected, and the scope of the JHS broadened. The society took the lead to preserve endangered landmark buildings in the community. One of those landmarks, Old St. Andrew’s Episcopal Church, became JHS headquarters in 1998. Since then, the society has worked on numerous restoration projects

to preserve historical buildings in the Jacksonville area. JHS continues to preserve the past in various ways, while looking at how they can enhance the future of Jacksonville.³

In 2003, the Jacksonville History Consortium (JHC) resulted from an assessment of local historical organizations that was performed by JHS. JHS realized that the organizations would benefit from stronger connections among themselves. Fast forward to 2016, when JHS did its first strategic plan that involved JHC members. Based on recommendations that emerged, in 2017, JHS and the Museum of Science & History worked on an initiative to survey the community organizations at the time to find out what types of collections they had. Thirty-one responded. The information captured was of great interest, but there was no easy way to share it or search to see the types of materials the organizations had, since the survey was a fillable PDF. JHS was looking for ways to manipulate the data and share it.

During this time, the University of North Florida (UNF) Thomas G. Carpenter Library was approached by JHS to participate in the consortium. The UNF Library saw it as an opportunity to join in and provide leadership to help preserve, sustain, and bring greater awareness to the Jacksonville historical collections. As a result, a partnership formed

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and the UNF Library realized they had tools that could be used to help with the survey initiative. The library created and provided access to robust, interactive visualizations and collaborative platforms that told a story in a unique, powerful way, and allowed the public to explore the history collections in the community.

new organizations and obtain updated information for organizations that are already part of the consortium.

Once the LibWizard survey was in place, the director of technical services and library systems (TSS) looked to improve the way the data was accessed by users. The UNF Library decided to acquire Tableau, a data visualization tool that



Figure 1: Sample of the Jacksonville History Consortium Archival Holdings Dashboard.

Process to preserve and share consortium information online

Initially, the UNF Library preserved the survey data results and made them discoverable in the library’s institutional repository, Digital Commons. However, it wasn’t robust enough to find information about the organizations’ collections and didn’t meet the needs of the consortium and what they wanted to accomplish. The UNF Library decided it was best to use other tools to improve the way the data was collected. A new survey form was created using Springshare’s LibWizard tool, which allowed for more flexibility and options. After creating the form, the data from the PDF version of the survey results was input manually allowing the data to be downloaded easily so that it could be further utilized. Going forward, the survey form will be an effective way to gather information for

helped to see and understand the data. Tableau allowed the library to create a robust, interactive dashboard for the users to easily search to see the variety of historical collections in the Jacksonville region and included information about the scope and nature of each organization’s collections. Filters were also added to allow users to limit based on format, time period, etc. (see figure 1).

After the Tableau dashboard of the survey results was created, Tableau was used to create an interactive map indicating where the consortium member organizations were located in the Jacksonville region. It also provided access to Google maps that showed each organization’s exact location, their address, a link to their websites to find out more about them, and displayed a picture of the organization or their logo (see figure 2). Since the map was created in 2018, JHC has continued to grow, and an additional

nine members that have joined the consortium have been added to the map.

Once both of these interactive visualizations were completed, ways to increase the accessibility of the consortium information were explored. Both the map and Archival Holdings dashboard were published to the UNF Library's Tableau Public site as part of the creation process, but more visibility was needed. This led to the development of a Jacksonville History Consortium Library Guide on the Thomas G. Carpenter

Library website in 2018.⁴ The guide included an overview and history about the consortium that was easily accessible from one resource. Both the map and dashboard were embedded into the guide that allowed users to interact with them

right within the guide. Also added was a link to the survey form for new organizations to fill out or current organizations to update their collection information as needed. An automatic email was sent to the director of TSS any time someone filled out the survey. The director of TSS then updated the map and dashboard as needed. JHC also had a website that linked to and from the guide to increase the visibility of the information available there that focused more on promoting and advertising.⁵ All of this information online helped to bring more recognition to the organizations and its valuable historical collections.

Use of consortium information online

The JHC Library Guide provides a wealth of

information about the members of the consortium for the community to explore. Information about JHC and its members is discoverable in one place and allows people to explore the history of Jacksonville virtually. Members are easily located on the interactive map along with access to their websites to obtain more information about their organization. Information about the collections pertaining to Jacksonville's history can be explored through the Archival Holdings

dashboard. The dashboard is also useful to the members, who can direct researchers and potential donors to the most appropriate organization.⁶

As the collections are better understood, individually and collectively, the

consortium continue to explore ways to help shape the future of the historical collections in the Jacksonville community. One of the next steps being explored is to take the data from the initial survey to look at gaps and overlaps. This would help determine what each organization can do individually to reduce irrelevant materials, and help the JHC as whole to find ways to reduce overlaps and identify and actively collect the gaps.

The consortium recently formed task groups to focus on different initiatives. One of them is Collections Development and Access, which is focused on compiling more in-depth collection summaries from JHC members. The group developed a Collections Management Survey that the director of TSS created using

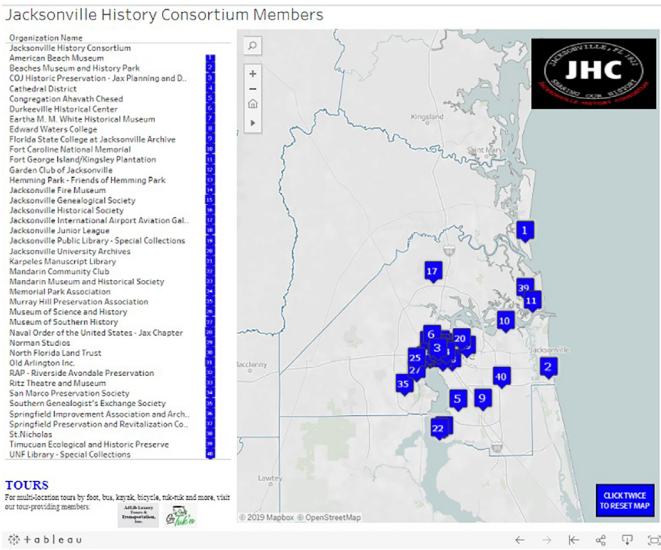


Figure 2: Map of Jacksonville History Consortium Members.

LibWizard. It was distributed to all consortium members in early 2020 to gather information on how collections are being managed throughout the consortium, which is critical to ensure the materials are maintained appropriately in the short- and long-term. The survey includes questions about acquisitions policies, collecting plans, deaccessioning and disposal policies, processing/cataloging status, digitization, and preservation challenges. This information will help the consortium to develop a comprehensive collection plan to align with individual acquisitions and deaccession policies.

The use of the JHC information continues to grow. At the time this article was written, the guide has been viewed more than 3,600 times, the map more than 1,400 times, and the survey dashboard more than 900 times. Furthermore, as more information is gathered and analyzed, it provides opportunities to evaluate collections further and work towards increasing capacity for preservation and access, and promoting operational efficiencies.

Final thoughts and future plans

Through conversations in the community, partnerships can form and bring together diverse people to enhance the discovery of materials in backyards of any library. The partnership between the UNF Library and JHC that formed has not only increased the visibility of the organizations in our community and their collections, but continues to evolve and lead to a wealth of potential opportunities. The UNF Library's Special Collections and University Archives is now a member of the consortium, and the library from the head of special collections and university archives to the dean and associate dean continue to participate and assist with the current and future endeavors of the consortium.

The UNF Library has used a variety of resources and tools to bring greater awareness to the consortium and its members. Springshare's LibWizard tool effectively gathered information about the historical collections. Tableau visually communicated information, rather than just data, to help tell the story of the Consortium. Springshare's LibGuides served as the

repository of dynamic and robust data-driven information about the members.⁷

Through greater knowledge of the holdings of other organizations, is an opportunity to better shape future collection development individually and across the consortium. Additional ways to help shape the future of the JHC collections continue to be explored today. As more data is collected, it will help to direct researchers and potential donors to the most appropriate organization. There are also opportunities to use Digital Commons in other ways to preserve history about the consortium, such as creating a digitization program of old fliers, pamphlets, and images. The possibilities continue to grow as more is learned about the diverse organizations in the consortium.

As the partnership continues, the library will continue to support JHC in any way it can, and the greater Jacksonville History Society's mission to "Educate and inspire the greater Jacksonville community to value its history, by fostering understanding of how the region's past shapes our present."⁸

Notes

1. See <https://www.jaxhistoryconsortium.org/about>.
2. Diane Arrieta, Barbara Brunnick, and Leah Plocharczyk, "Expanding Roles and Resources: Assessing the Collaboration between Florida Atlantic University Libraries and Taras Oceanographic Foundation," *Public Services Quarterly* 11, no. 2 (2015): 79-94, <http://dx.doi.org.dax.lib.unf.edu/10.1080/15228959.2015.1016197>.
3. See <http://www.jaxhistory.org/about-jhs/mission-history/>.
4. LibGuide, <https://libguides.unf.edu/jhc>.
5. See <https://www.jaxhistoryconsortium.org/>.
6. The Library Guide also connects to the Jacksonville History Consortium sister site at <https://www.jaxhistoryconsortium.org/>, where people can learn more about the consortium and their members.
7. See <https://libguides.unf.edu/jhc>.
8. See <http://www.jaxhistory.org/about-jhs/mission-history/>. 