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### Documenting the Pandemic: Libraries Launch COVID-19 Archival Projects

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# Documenting the Pandemic: Libraries Launch COVID-19 Archival Projects

by Jennifer A. Dixon

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**Paramount Theater, March 26, 2020**

Photo by Andrei Matei. [AR-2020-013-di057], Austin History Center, Austin Public Library.

In the midst of the disruption of the COVID-19 pandemic, many library workers and archivists have carried on with what they do best—gathering and preserving information for future researchers. Numerous digital archives are already capturing life during lockdown, represented through images, journals, videos, and other formats.

In Austin, TX, the Austin History Center’s COVID-19 collection began when archivists realized “we should work proactively to bring in donations, not passively wait for them to come to us after the pandemic ends,” said Madeline Moya, media archivist. “We decided to ask people to donate their materials before memories of this time in quarantine fade and everyone throws themselves into recovery. We believe that the experience will be much more honestly documented while it is happening than retold years down the line.” Moya emphasized the value of documenting the experiences of ordinary people in Austin during the pandemic, not just the actions of local and national governments.

A project at the University of Nebraska at Omaha (UNO) Libraries originated with the goal of keeping student library workers busy while working remotely by documenting their COVID-19 experiences, and has grown to much more, enabling faculty, staff, and the local community to

share their experiences. Archivist Claire du Laney told *LJ* the archive is prioritizing “gathering personal experiences so that individuals and researchers can understand different points of view that were expressed during COVID.” She contrasted this effort with records from the 1918 flu pandemic, when “the remembrances of ‘everyday’ people weren’t gathered in the same way,” and noted the need to capture diverse voices before memories are lost or overshadowed by other world events.

Universities and public libraries have spearheaded many of these new COVID-19 archives, with a focus on gathering stories from their local communities. Brianne Wright, city archivist for Kingsport, TN, is working on a project with the Kingsport Public Library and Archives to “document everyday life during this time” and gather “stories that reflect these experiences so that future generations will have a better understanding of this moment in history.” Wright noted the challenge of communicating the importance of documenting this time, including the diverse ways in which community members have been impacted.

Beginning with an effort at Arizona State University (ASU), the digital crowdsourcing archive “A Journal of the Plague Year: An Archive of COVID-19” has grown into an expansive project, with curators and contributors from across the United States and from Australia. While the internet has made it possible for people from geographically different communities to contribute photos, text, videos, and other content, “human connection is still a vital part of this effort,” said Mark Tebeau, associate professor of public history at ASU, who pointed to the value of friends and colleagues reaching out to one another, collecting stories, and collaborating on the curation of the archive. Tebeau also noted that this and other COVID-19 archives are following the best practices and lessons of [other real-time archives of major crises](#). Participants from the University of New Orleans and the Hurricane Katrina Digital Memory Project have played a significant role in development of this archive, including sharing the lesson that “you need humans to curate” a project like this, and “need to reach out in deeply personal ways,” said Tebeau.

These archives, wholly digital for now, capture the day-to-day experience of pandemic life. The Austin archive has received photographs of grocery shopping families and medical workers in protective gear, as well as images portraying deserted streets, buildings, and playgrounds. The Austin History Center has also collected local writings, including poetry, and a great deal of art, including scans or photographs of collages, paintings, and murals. They hope to receive video and audio, as well as business records that document the closure of Austin’s small businesses—some of which may never reopen, as is the case around the world. The UNO archive has sought journals, writings, art, and other created materials, and heard from varied local groups, such as a retirement community and members of Alcoholics Anonymous.

## SEEKING OUT STORIES

Social media has been a key way that people have communicated and coped during the pandemic, and screen captures from social media and memes have become an important part of ASU's "Journal of the Plague Year" archive. Beyond simply uploading these screen captures, the archive recommends that "people really make it a personal contribution," said Tebeau. "You're creating a story that you're sharing with this. Describing it, what it means to you, how it reflects your experience." The archive welcomed a range of voices, even including posts from conspiracy theorists or those who believe COVID-19 is a hoax, and aims to continue seeking out different areas to collect and fill gaps in the stories told.

New York City has become an epicenter of the COVID-19 crisis. In the hard-hit borough of Queens, the Queens Memory COVID-19 Project, working with the technology nonprofit Urban Archive, is inviting Queens residents to share their stories. Queens Memory is a community archiving program supported by Queens Public Library (QPL) and the Queens College Library. Residents may call a toll-free phone number to record their own oral history, or submit recordings, writings, videos, or photographs through a webform. The project is also training volunteers to conduct long form, remote oral history interviews. Queens residents may also share social media posts through the hashtag #QueensCOVID or by tagging Queens Memory, which can ultimately be web archived by QPL.

The project has already accepted materials and initiated conversations with Queens residents that include frontline workers and their families, and will continue to seek out these stories. It will also record grassroots and community efforts to support Queens communities that are suffering in the pandemic. Meral Agish, community coordinator for Queens Memory, told *LJ* that this project came together quickly in response to the pandemic's dramatic impact on New York City. The project is "making these histories be visible," said Sam Addeo, director of community and development at Urban Archive. "As the pandemic started building in Queens and we started hearing about the numbers, percentages," she said, this project has served an important role in capturing, "who are the people behind the numbers?" and "bringing the humanity back into the story."

"The pandemic is truly illuminating how we can work together, collaborate, across different mediums" and is bringing to light "better supporting tools for crowdsourced collections" and for "collecting digitized items that also facilitate public access," said Addeo.

The Wiregrass Archives at Troy University, AL, has created the "Wiregrass Under COVID-19 Documentation Project" to capture local life in this area of Alabama, Florida, and Georgia. Martin Oliff, director of the Wiregrass Archives, emphasized the importance of collecting materials like journals, noting that "when the passions of COVID measures fade, these things will be cast aside: individual journals will find their way to drawers and attics while class projects will

accumulate on teachers' shelves.... Such things become 'hidden collections' at best and lost collections at worst." Starting these collection efforts now makes it possible for these items to become part of the historical record.

## ONGOING EFFORTS

News of these archives has spread through press releases, videos, and simple word of mouth, and archivists are striving to quickly make materials publicly available through platforms like ArchivesSpace, Omeka, and Preservica. Wright, working with the Kingsport Public Library and Archives, noted the challenge of collecting materials in digital formats for institutions that are used to dealing with physical objects rather than digital archiving, but explained that simple, free platforms can help institutions get started—the Kingsport project is using Google Forms and Google Drive to gather submissions. The process of collecting and gaining rights and permissions to use donated materials is only just beginning; digital platforms and finding aids may evolve over time.

In the longer term, archives may accept physical materials, including hard copies of content previously submitted digitally, once it is safe to do so. Queens Memory is treating its COVID-19 project as a long-term effort, and the coming months may include follow-up interviews with people who have already submitted their stories. "It takes so long for people to process and get through," said Agish, who noted that "there is no end point" for the project. For the "Journal of the Plague Year" archive, Tebeau said that there will be ongoing efforts to reach out to different communities and local collections. This may include working with public libraries, once they are able to reopen, to gather patron stories.

Oliff, of the Wiregrass Archives, told *LJ* that most of what he has received thus far "has been promises of contributions after things have settled," with future plans that include downloading a YouTube quarantine video diary or gathering student artworks. Oliff also acknowledged that early efforts may "privilege those already comfortable in the literate and technological culture who have leisure (broadly defined) to capture their thoughts," and suggested the possibility of eventually supplementing "with an oral history or similar project to get at those people who are not in a position to donate archivally-friendly materials."

Moya noted that "one challenge is trying to reach people [who] may be devastated financially, professionally, or personally. We hope that those most affected by the crisis will tell their stories, but we must be sensitive to the real trauma that people are living right now." The Austin History Center hopes to support people in sharing their stories when they are ready to do so, and is also allowing sensitive materials to remain restricted from public access where requested. Archivist Lori Schwartz of UNO similarly acknowledged the challenges of requesting donations from people experiencing stress and anxiety, and said the archive aims to make it "very simple" to

donate. It also helps to view the archive as a long-term project and, Schwartz said, “we know many people are recording their experiences in some manner, and we will be following up and collecting material for years to come.”

Sharing materials with an archival collection can also provide relief from the isolation and anxiety of life under quarantine. Moya told *LJ* that “archival documentation and storytelling can be empowering sources of hope and healing,” and described the process of sharing individual perspectives as potentially “cathartic.” Of the Queens Memory project, Agish also noted, “this is something that people felt a very deep need for—trying to make meaning out of this.” In the longer term, these archival collections can support understanding of how people experienced the pandemic, and its longer-term impacts on our society and culture.

