



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

Susan Malbin, Co-Project Director, American Jewish Historical Society

Laura Leone, Co-Project Director, Center for Jewish History

Rachel Miller, Project Manager, Center for Jewish History

Rachel Harrison, Project Archivist, Center for Jewish History

Sarah Ponichtera, Project Archivist, Center for Jewish History

Christine McEvelly, Data Implementation Specialist, American Jewish Historical Society

Kevin Schlottmann, Data Implementation Specialist, Center for Jewish History

Abstract

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

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

In its construction and process, the initiative represents an expansion of the collaborative model that currently exists between the Center and its five

partner organizations. The partners of the Center—American Jewish Historical Society, American Sephardi Federation, Leo Baeck Institute, Yeshiva University Museum, and YIVO Institute for Jewish Research—are independently managed entities with unique collecting policies related to particular facets of Jewish history. The Center offers a unifying infrastructure for the five organizations in its provision of access-oriented services, which include archival processing, preservation and digitization services, and maintenance of a single OPAC (Online Public Access Catalog) and digital asset management system. The Center’s collaborative environment relieves the partners of much of the burden of collection management, freeing resources for other activities central to the partners’ respective missions. It also presents a promising model for resource sharing among local Jewish cultural heritage institutions.



Phase one of the initiative entailed completing a series of repository site visits focused on relationship building, information gathering, and the migration of a test batch of collection-level records into AJHS's Portal to American Jewish History. The Center for Jewish History and the American Jewish Historical Society are grateful for the generous support of CLIR (the Council on Library and Information Resources) for the project's first phase.

Selecting Project Participants

The first step was to complete a preliminary survey of local Jewish historical societies and a geographic layout of Northeast and Mid-Atlantic historical societies as a sampling of small, "hidden" repositories of archival material relevant to the American Jewish experience. AJHS provided a previously compiled [list of Jewish historical societies in America](#). The team worked from this list to select 12 institutions as potential project participants: Jewish Historical Society of Greater Bridgeport (CT), Jewish Historical Society of Greater Hartford (CT), Jewish Historical Society of Fairfield County (CT), Jewish Historical Society of Greater New Haven (CT), Jewish Historical Society of Delaware (DE), Jewish Heritage Center of the North Shore (MA), Jewish Historical Society of Western Massachusetts (MA), Jewish Historical Society of North Jersey (NJ), Jewish Historical Society of MetroWest New Jersey (NJ), Jewish Historical Society of Central Jersey (NJ), Trenton Jewish Historical Society (NJ), and Rhode Island Jewish Historical Association (RI).

The project directors and manager then made cold calls to each of the institutions on the list and explained the proposed project. The calls included basic introductions, information about CLIR support, an outline of the project's goals and the objectives of phase one, and a description of the role of a project participant. After the call, the project team e-mailed a project summary and memo of

understanding to the prospective participant. In some cases, institutions immediately handed off communication to their archivist or librarian. In one case, the same person fulfilled all roles—and more particular discussions were arranged with the proposed visiting archivists. Some institutions agreed to participate immediately. Others requested more information or time to discuss the project with stakeholders at their institutions.

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

Several factors affected prospective participants' decisions about whether to participate: staff changes, prior commitments to conflicting projects, and internal resource limitations. In two cases, institutions either did not have 501(c)3 status, a requisite for participation, or had recently transferred their collections to other repositories. For two institutions, the prospect of contributing



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

However, most of prospective participants responded positively, and a few went so far as to recommend additional repositories to contact based on regional connections and collaborations. The project directors and manager expanded the geographic area down the east coast to include additional regional Jewish historical societies or institutions with relevant collections. The team spoke by phone with 20 repositories. Ultimately, the following 13 organizations agreed to participate:

- [Beth Ahabah Museum and Archives](#) (Richmond, VA)
- [Charlotte Jewish Archives at the Jewish Historical Society of Greater Charlotte](#) (Charlotte, NC)
- [Jewish Buffalo Archives Project](#), University at Buffalo (SUNY) and Bureau of Jewish Education of Greater Buffalo (Buffalo, NY)
- [Jewish Heritage Foundation of North Carolina and Duke University's Rubenstein Library](#) (Durham, NC)
- [Jewish Heritage Museum of Monmouth County](#) (Freehold, NJ)
- [Jewish Historical Society of Central Jersey](#) (New Brunswick, NJ)

- [Jewish Historical Society of Delaware](#) (Wilmington, DE)
- [Jewish Historical Society of Fairfield County](#) (Stamford, CT)
- [Jewish Historical Society of Greater Hartford](#) (West Hartford, CT)
- [Jewish Historical Society of Greater New Haven](#) (New Haven, CT)
- [Jewish Historical Society of Western Massachusetts](#) (South Deerfield, MA)
- [Rhode Island Jewish Historical Association](#) (Providence, RI)
- [University of North Carolina Chapel Hill, Southern Historical Collection](#) (Chapel Hill, NC)

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

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

The two archivists who conducted on-site surveys of the 12 repositories found a number of trends among project participants. Although the

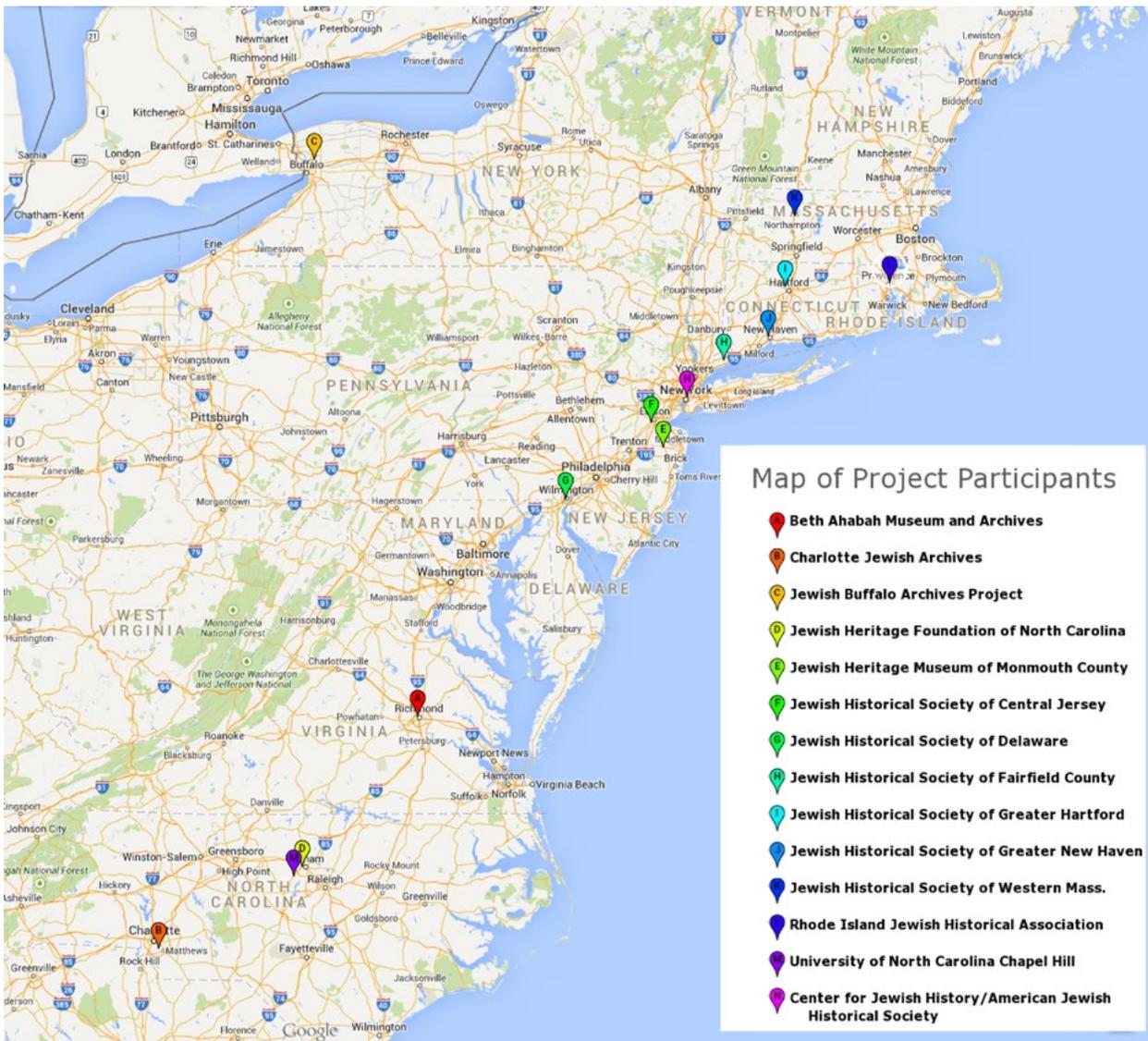


Fig. 1: Map of project participants

institutions visited during phase one are highly diverse—from lone arrangers to university archives—all reported a desire to raise their public profile and increase user traffic and public awareness of their holdings, as well as to engage in more outreach and programming activities. Users of these institutions are often interested in doing genealogical research. They are often faculty and students from local universities, local authors and historians, or staff from Jewish organizations. A number of the repositories are

Jewish historical societies housed in spaces that they share with other organizations such as local Jewish Federations, Jewish community centers, larger historical societies, university library special collections, or synagogues and museums. The repositories often benefit from this physical proximity because of shared resources, visitors, and occasionally access to staff and volunteers. Many of the repositories have small staffs who work part time and have numerous responsibilities beyond working with collections. Several



rely on volunteers and interns who may not have access to formal archival training. At the smaller repositories, both staff and volunteers would benefit from training in current archival methods, standards, and practices.

In terms of holdings, the smallest repository comprises eight linear feet, and the largest around 1,000 linear feet. Many range from 300 to 500 linear feet. The dates of holdings range from the 1700s to the present, with most from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, often corresponding to the dates of mass Jewish immigration to this country. The collections are in a variety of languages, mostly English, Hebrew, Yiddish, with some in German, Russian, and Polish. Staff members' ability to work with these languages ranges widely.

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

The institutions have a range of intellectual control over their collections. Several have inventories that list the contents of folders and boxes but lack the other elements of a formal finding aid. Others have accession records but no contents

lists. Photographs account for many research requests and tend to be better described. Other than those working in the largest of participating institutions, the staff of the repositories mentioned an interest in receiving help with processing their archival backlogs and creating online finding aids. Several repositories have organizational systems set up by previous staff, many of whom were not archivists, and are using these systems even though they may not prefer or even fully understand them. Among the processed materials, some are arranged alphabetically by subject and use local terms, some are in collections, and some are just in alphabetical folders. At most of the repositories, some of the collection information resides with the staff and can be hard to access from outside the institution. Many finding aids and inventories exist only on paper or on a local computer as a Word or Excel document or PDF, and should be encoded in EAD (Encoded Archival Description) to provide online access and searchability. Several small- to mid-size institutions provide summaries or inventory lists online, though the data are not structured or easily searchable. Large academic institutions have their data online and in a searchable format, but the records do not consistently have access points indicating that the material is related to the American Jewish experience.

Several repositories requested guidance on developing and improving their collecting and accession policies, increasing their collecting activities, and determining what to keep of their own institutional records. They also expressed interest in how to do outreach for accessioning Jewish collections, how to better capitalize on what they already have, and in getting assistance with grant writing. Some repositories expressed a wish for guidance on how to best conduct oral histories and how to make them

more available to users through online hosting. Repositories had myriad questions about general archival practice, technology trends, digitization and born-digital materials, and audiovisual materials. A few repositories mentioned needing access to a conservator for consultations or for actual conservation work. The Jewish historical societies are also interested in increasing their membership, particularly among younger members, and hope that greater access to their archival collections will help them do this.

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

Ingesting Collection-Level Records into AJHS's Portal

After establishing collaborative relationships, the initiative's next step toward increasing access to American Jewish collections was the ingestion of collection-level records into AJHS's [Portal to American Jewish History](#). AJHS's portal is a metadata aggregator that enables researchers to perform complex searches across American Jewish archival collections currently residing at more than 10 geographically dispersed repositories. It is currently set up on a Drupal Collective Access platform. Drupal is an open source website content management system, and CollectiveAccess is an open source collection information management



Fig. 2: Jewish Heritage Museum of Monmouth County (photo credit: Sarah Ponichtera)

system (or metadata database). Using a Drupal plug-in, CollectiveAccess feeds information into Drupal, allowing users to search the database seamlessly throughout the site.

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

that lets AJHS create new fields as needed, handle authority records, and manage subject and genre terms for website browsing facets.

As part of phase one of the Expanding Access to American Jewish Archival Collections project, data implementation specialists ingested 104 collection-level records into the portal. The records originated from three project participants: the Jewish Historical Society of Fairfield County (Stamford, CT); the Jewish Buffalo Archives Project, University at Buffalo (SUNY) and Bureau of Jewish Education of Greater Buffalo (Buffalo, NY); and the Jewish Historical Society of Greater Hartford (West Hartford, CT). Different approaches were used to prepare each set of data for ingest. For their metadata, all three repositories signed Creative Commons licensing agreements with the Center and AJHS, with an eye toward easing future data sharing, especially with the Digital Public Library of America.

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

one link, with variable IDs, to scrape the URLs for each finding aid. The command wrote the HTML it found at each URL into one large file.

The resulting document was opened in oXygen XML Editor, with doctype declarations removed and an XML root element and XML declaration added. The resulting valid XML file was imported into the XML database software BaseX. After some study of the HTML, an xQuery script was written to extract the metadata fields required by the portal's CollectiveAccess software and those used for public display. This process produced CSV data that could be imported using Excel. For the exact script used, see the [project webpage](#).

The Jewish Historical Society of Greater Hartford provided EAD files by e-mail. The EAD files were exported from Archivists' Toolkit, and were thus uniform in terms of tag and data placement.



The screenshot displays a record entry for the 'Buffalo Jewish Review Archive'. The record is presented in a structured format with various fields and their corresponding values. The fields include URL, Description, Date, Publisher, Source, Creator, Subjects, and Rights. The URL is a long alphanumeric string. The Description provides a brief overview of the archive's contents and time period. The Date field indicates the creation period from 1917 to 2012. The Publisher and Source fields both list the Jewish Buffalo Archives Project at the University at Buffalo. The Subjects field contains a list of related terms and locations. The Rights field provides contact information for the project.

Field	Value
URL:	http://libweb1.lib.buffalo.edu:8080/findingaids/view?docId=ead/archives/lubar_ms0217.xml
Description:	MS217; The archive of the Buffalo Jewish Review contains issues of the Buffalo Jewish Review and its predecessor the American Jewish Review from November 9, 1917 to the present; 74 boxes, 3 microfilm reels
Date:	1917 - 2012 (Date Created)
Publisher:	Jewish Buffalo Archives Project, at University Archives, University at Buffalo
Source:	Jewish Buffalo Archives Project, at University Archives, University at Buffalo
Creator:	Buffalo Jewish Review
Subjects:	Buffalo Jewish Review; Jewish Buffalo Archives Project State University of New York at Buffalo; University Archives Bureau of Jewish Education (Buffalo, N.Y.); State University of New York at Buffalo--Archives; Judaism--United States--History; Jews--New York (State)--Buffalo Region--Archives; Jewish archives--New York (State)--Buffalo Region;
Rights:	Please contact the Jewish Buffalo Archives Project, at University Archives, University at Buffalo for information about access, use, and copyright restrictions

Fig. 3: Record in the Portal to American Jewish History

The Center's data implementation specialist analyzed the EAD files, imported them into the XML database software BaseX, and ran an xQuery script to extract metadata fields for the portal's CollectiveAccess software. For the exact script used, see the [project webpage](#).

The Jewish Historical Society of Fairfield County provided AJHS and the Center with very rich container list information in an Excel format, exported from the collection management software PastPerfect. The records were not organized at the collection level, but included title information that indicated the provenance of a particular container. For instance, a sample container-level row contained this information:

Temple Sinai of Stamford, CT Bulletins from 2000-2001. Temple Sinai Bulletins. Bulletins. 478

The Center and AJHS's data implementation specialists suggested manually creating collection-level records, and the society agreed. The final collection-level record, which was imported into the portal, looked like this (record slightly abbreviated):

Articles on Temple Sinai of Stamford, CT. Includes monthly bulletins from 1959-1960, 1978-2004 with gaps and missing issues. Also includes board, annual meeting reports, various historical documents. Subjects include memorial services, High Holiday services, membership directories, adult education, congregation history, bar mitzvahs, centers, Rabbi Isaac Chalk, Rabbi Co. Rice, Rabbi David Wolfson, Rabbi Shalom Kohn, Rabbi Samuel Shive, Rabbi Stephen Pearce, Rabbi David Pepperman, Rabbi Jay Ted Ray, and Rabbi Temple Sinai archival and bulletin collection. Temple Sinai 1959-2012. HRC: 473-536. 473-534, 535

This manual process was time-consuming, but the resulting records were contextually appropriate for the portal.

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

- Becoming a Digital Public Library of America (DPLA) Judaica content hub

- Migrating additional collection-level records into the AJHS portal
- Encoding legacy finding aids and inventories
- Processing selected participant collections or training staff to process collections
- Hosting already digitized materials online in the Center's DAM, providing both access and long-term preservation
- Digitizing selected material and hosting that material in the Center's DAM
- Augmenting the development of the AJHS Portal by:
 - Monitoring and checking in with participating repositories to update feeds as necessary
 - Evaluating usage using Google Analytics
 - Building interpretative exhibits and interactive social media tools

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