

# Digital Roots: Community Approaches to Local and Family History

When asked why they attended one of the “Digital Local and Family History” workshops held in spring of 2012, responses were almost as many and varied as the participants:

*“Gives people a sense of belonging.”*

*“People are looking for roots and connection to family and place.”*

*“To understand where you came from.”*

*“Perspective on who people are and what they can do.”*

*“Preserving the past for future generations.”*

*“To preserve memories.”*

*“To preserve family history for my children.”*

*“To share history with others.”*

*“To learn about people from the past you could never meet.”*

*“To educate family, friends, and residents of their history.”*

*“To learn from the past.”*

People from public libraries, genealogical societies, historical societies, and local museums were joined by graduate students, graphic designers, and library patrons from the general public at these workshops. Presented by partnerships between public libraries and institutions of higher education, these workshops covered basic social and technical procedures for launching, building, and sustaining community-based digitization programs, ranging from digital libraries of local historical material, blogs, wikis, videos, social networking sites, and other means of representing and sharing community and family memory online.

As people become interested in researching their family histories, they also become interested in looking into local history. Family and local history go together, especially in services provided by public libraries. Innovative models are being developed by public libraries to meet this growing informational need, such as:

- Denver (Colorado) Public Library's *Creating Your Community* initiative (<http://creatingcommunities.denverlibrary.org/>). This project knits together a public library, municipal government, educational institutions, and historical societies around the creation of a participatory digital local history.
- Allen County (Indiana) Public Library's WeRelate genealogy wiki (<http://www.werelate.org/>). This project unites the public library and the Foundation for On-Line Genealogy, a Utah-based nonprofit, around the creation of an ever-expanding database of genealogical information.
- Local History Group of South Chicagoland (<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/localhistorygroupofsouthchicagoland/>). Formerly the Metropolitan Library System local history group, this body brings together librarians, archivists, historians, and other interested individuals interested in building, supporting, and sustaining local history projects.

As these examples show, innovative projects require partnerships that go beyond the walls of libraries, bringing together supporters of local and family history from related institutions and from the general public. As technologies change, public libraries can be at the forefront of change in developing new ways to help people find and share information about personal, familial, and local heritage.

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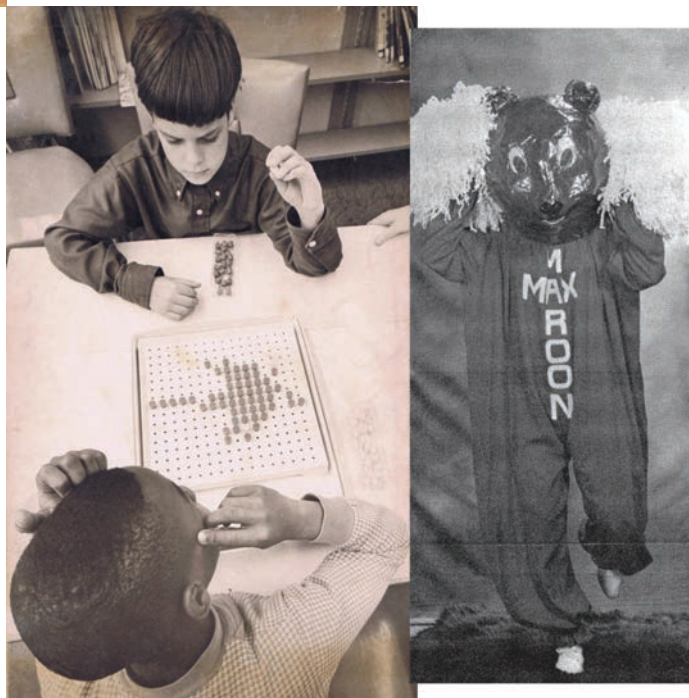
eBlackCU intern Adrian Rochelle (right) works with members of St. Luke C.M.E. to identify local history photographs in summer 2011.

## IT'S SOCIAL, NOT JUST TECHNOLOGICAL

The Digital Local and Family History workshops emerged out of the two-year eBlack Champaign-Urbana (eBlackCU.net) collaborative digitization program. In the eBlackCU project, students, faculty and staff from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign partnered with local community groups, institutions, and citizens, including public libraries, to develop a publicly accessible digital library on African-American history in the Champaign-Urbana area. This project also produced digital exhibits, computer classes, public meetings, digital oral history events, and other public programming initiatives. Out of these projects, a manual was developed on how to build and sustain digital local and family history projects for use by other communities. This manual, available in draft stage at <http://manual.eBlackCU.net>, forms the basis of the workshop series run in spring 2012. A final version of the manual will be released in summer 2012, and will include both text and audiovisual tutorials and resources on developing digital local and family history programs.

Unlike other digitization tutorials, these workshops emphasize *social resources* for digital local and family history. Social resources refer to things like volunteerism, the willingness to donate technical equipment and technical know-how, and the willingness to donate local and family history information and memories into collaborative projects. A belief guiding this project is that the tools needed to build digital local and family history projects are increasingly all around us. We need to figure out how to mobilize the resources of our communities and families to build a renaissance of cultural heritage in which no voices are left out. For example, supporting community digitization projects in Champaign-Urbana required the purchase of very little equipment. Using preexisting multipurpose photocopiers at the University of Illinois and a local high school, and flat-bed scanners at a local church, we were able to digitize tens of thousands of pages of local historical material on a relatively small budget.

“Digital representation is fast becoming the norm as the information society continues to develop.”



In this image from the eBlackCU digital library, local history information is being brought together and shared in new ways. Photo courtesy Champaign County Historical Archives and Champaign Central High School.

“Digital representation is fast becoming the norm as the information society continues to develop. Our project, eBlackCU, is a case study of how this can be done for the historical and cultural heritage of an urban African-American community. This methods manual will enable us to share our project with others who want to launch a digital memory project. A grant from the Illinois Humanities Council is enabling us to hold workshops in different local communities to begin this process. Our basic partner will be the local library,” said Professor Abdul Alkalimat, who serves as principal investigator of this grant-funded project.



## SHARING METHODS AND RESULTS

The workshops are organized around six steps:

- **Getting organized** — how to mobilize people and technology in your community around digital local and family history.
- **Finding the information** — determining what types of information your project will focus on and beginning to identify where that information exists.
- **Digitizing the information** — technical steps needed to digitize and aggregate diverse information sources, including print, photographs, audiovisual, born digital, and artifactual.
- **Sharing the information with others** — developing ways to begin sharing digitized information, both online and in face-to-face settings.
- **Building a digital library** — developing a digital library for all the information gathered, using free, open-source tools like Omeka (<http://omeka.org/>).
- **Building collaboration & sustainability** — embedding digital local and family history projects into the ongoing lives of communities to ensure their sustainability.

## FILLING A FUNDING GAP

The need for this type of workshop came from a realization that in times of declining budgets, support for digitization and for cultural programming around local and family history in public libraries is at risk. The Illinois State Library (ISL) has been unable of late to provide funding for digital imaging grants through its Library Services and Technology Act (LSTA) funding, a source which in the past provided support for public and college libraries to launch digitization projects. In this economic climate, local and family-based projects need to find resources within their social networks to build and sustain online local and family heritage. It is the hope of this initiative that these workshops, and the online manual that results from them, will be of use to individuals interested in doing this type of work.

From February through May of this year, workshops and presentations have been held at the University of Michigan; Kankakee Community College (co-sponsor Kankakee Public Library); Indiana University-Indianapolis; University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign; Danville Area Community College (co-sponsor Danville Public Library); Eastern Illinois University, Charleston; University of Illinois, Chicago (in conjunction with the eChicago 2012 conference); and Carbondale Public Library. The purpose of these workshops is to spread knowledge about how to “do” digital local and family history in this new environment, to hear from people about the issues they are confronting, and to fine-tune our online manual to support these types of initiatives in the future. ■

Anyone interested in learning more about these workshops or the online manual is welcome to e-mail project director Noah Lenstra at [nlenstr2@illinois.edu](mailto:nlenstr2@illinois.edu) for more information, with a special invitation to public librarians trying to develop new ways to share and preserve local and family history.



Participants in “Digital Local and Family History” workshops held in spring 2012; from top left, clockwise, Indiana University-Indianapolis, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, Kankakee Community College, Danville Area Community College, and University of Michigan. Not pictured: Eastern Illinois University, University of Illinois at Chicago, and Carbondale Public Library.

**Author’s Note:** The workshop series is a project of the GSLIS’s Community Informatics Research Laboratory with financial support from the Illinois Humanities Council and additional support from the university’s Office of the Vice Chancellor for Public Engagement. Professor Abdul Alkalimat and Assistant Professor Kate Williams oversee the workshops, led by Noah Lenstra, a PhD student in the program and author of this article.