



## *American Archivist Reviews*

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<http://reviews.americanarchivist.org>

### **ArchivesSpace Revisited**

<http://archivesspace.org/>

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The Frank and Virginia Williams Collection of Lincolniana is an archives and museum collection featuring artifacts, pamphlets, books, and manuscripts.<sup>1</sup> When I began my current position in early 2020, I had limited experience processing collections. Unlike other institutions where I had worked, artifacts in my current unit are cataloged using the guidelines provided in *Cataloging Cultural Objects: A Guide to Describing Cultural Works and Their Images*.<sup>2</sup> Initially, the Frank and Virginia Williams Collection of Lincolniana used an older version of the legacy database Filemaker Pro. While working remotely during the COVID-19 shutdown, I studied artifact cataloging and better acquainted myself with the collection legacy database. Over time, our version of Filemaker Pro became more unreliable and eventually crashed. In the quest to find a new management system, my unit explored shifting cataloging to ArchivesSpace.

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<sup>1</sup> "The Frank and Virginia Williams Collection of Lincolniana," Mississippi State University Libraries, 2021, <https://www.library.msstate.edu/williamscollection>, captured at <https://perma.cc/X2L8-SEW8>.

<sup>2</sup> Murtha Baca, Patricia Harpring, Elisa Lanzi, Linda McRae, and Ann Whiteside, *Cataloging Cultural Objects: CCO; a Guide to Describing Cultural Works and Their Images* (Chicago, Illinois: American Library Association, 2006), <https://vraweb.org/resourcesx/cataloging-cultural-objects/>. For more on CCO, please see C. P. Mastley and R. P. Semmes, "Honest Abe: Applying CCO Standards to Improve Discovery and Access of the Frank and Virginia Williams Collection of Lincolniana" (poster presentation, Society of American Archivists and Council of State Archivists Annual Meeting, Chicago, IL, 2020).

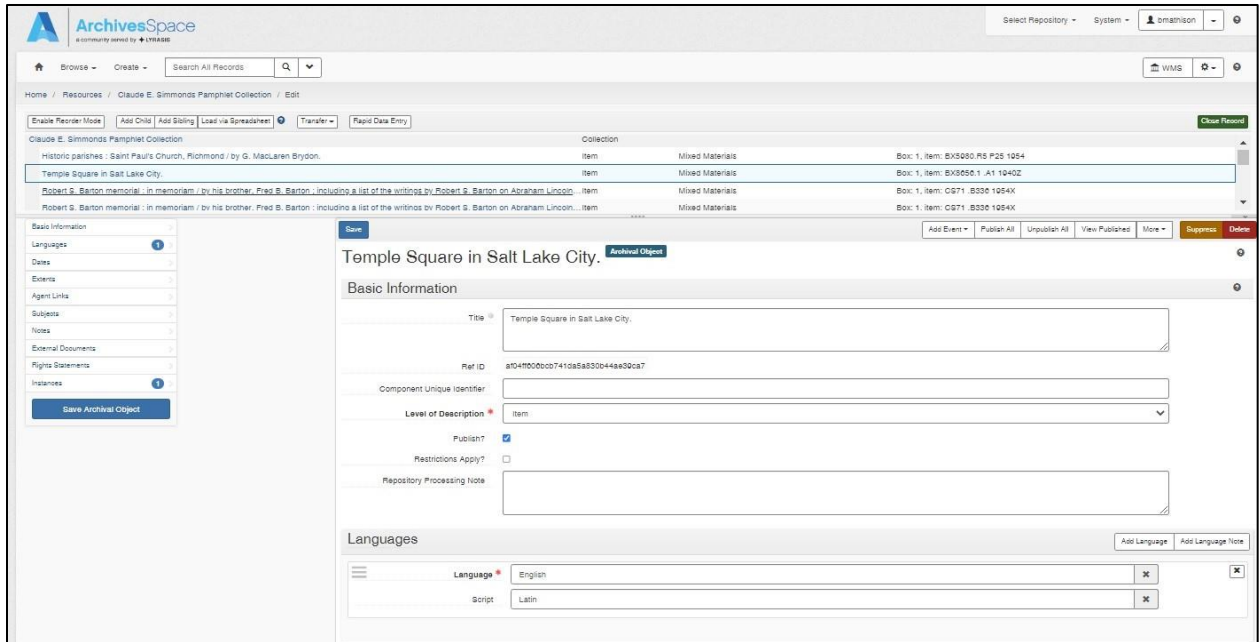


Figure 1. ArchivesSpace User interface.

Once I started using ArchivesSpace, I found its user interface to be unimposing and efficient; it is user-friendly while offering considerable functionality. Entries in ArchivesSpace are organized hierarchically with several levels of description to choose from including repository, collection, series, and artifact.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> For definitions of these terms, please see Society of American Archivists (SAA), *Dictionary of Archival Terminology*, “Repository,” <https://dictionary.archivists.org/entry/repository.html>, captured at <https://perma.cc/M7HE-5DE7>; SAA, *Dictionary of Archival Terminology*, “Collection,” <https://dictionary.archivists.org/entry/collection.html>, captured at <https://perma.cc/QVC7-5FKM>; SAA, *Dictionary of Archival Terminology*, “Series,” <https://dictionary.archivists.org/entry/series.html>, captured at <https://perma.cc/7T9A-YHHV>; and SAA, *Dictionary of Archival Terminology*, “Artifact,” <https://dictionary.archivists.org/entry/artifact.html>, captured at <https://perma.cc/AP7N-BSZW>.

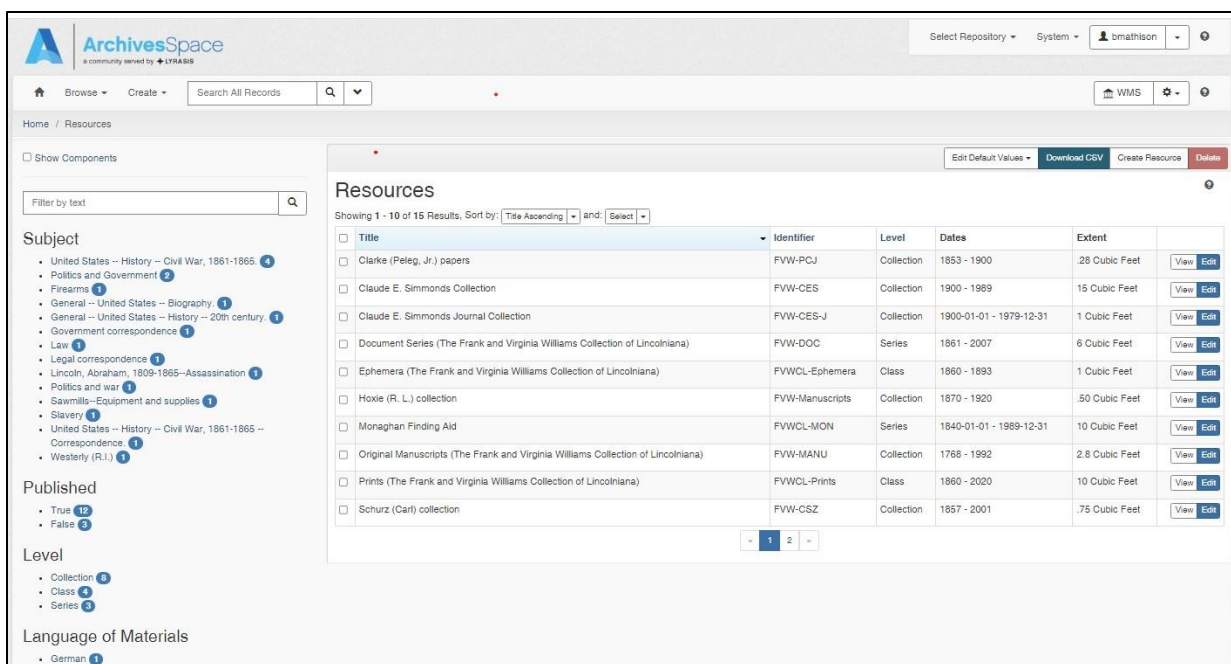


Figure 2. ArchivesSpace Resources interface.

At the collection level, users can create finding aids with ease. ArchivesSpace also allows users to create multiple resources within the same repository. When inputting multilevel resource records, users can employ the rapid data entry function, which allows them to automatically fill specific fields. Given the large number of projects at my institution, we often utilize this function because it expedites the data entry process. Additionally, ArchivesSpace allows institutions to set different user privileges so there is less risk of data errors. For example, some users do have the option to delete entries while others do not.

After a user makes revisions, ArchivesSpace notifies them if any required fields are left blank. While the auto-check function is not perfect, it is a helpful tool for users. Once finding aids are complete, they are made accessible online. ArchivesSpace produces clean and crisp finding aids that patrons and researchers can utilize.

ArchivesSpace has many strengths; however, it also comes with challenges. Once the user creates entries within a given collection, these entries can be difficult to move, import, or export. In my experience, the only way to move entries is to delete them and reenter as needed. This requires significant time when working on large collections. Once finding aids exist for a collection, the PDF export function can be hard to navigate. While the export function is easy to locate, I have often created finding aids that ArchivesSpace would not export. While ArchivesSpace does provide an error message when this happens, the system does not readily identify the reason for the issue, making it difficult to correct. Without the ability to promptly produce a PDF, patrons can have trouble locating materials within the collection. There are also issues with the PDFs that ArchivesSpace produces. Finding

aids must be published to be viewable, yet ArchivesSpace does not clearly identify what is published versus unpublished. In terms of importing data from other programs, such as Microsoft Excel, we have also occasionally experienced problems.

ArchivesSpace can also be inflexible, with limited options for field customization. While users can create general notes, this does not adequately meet the needs of my institution. It would be helpful to have a customizable template that includes fields such as current location, inscriptions, and materials and techniques. Metadata for Lincolniana artifacts are structured according to CCO, so the lack of customization options has proven problematic. Ultimately, we opted to seek out another platform to store our artifacts metadata.

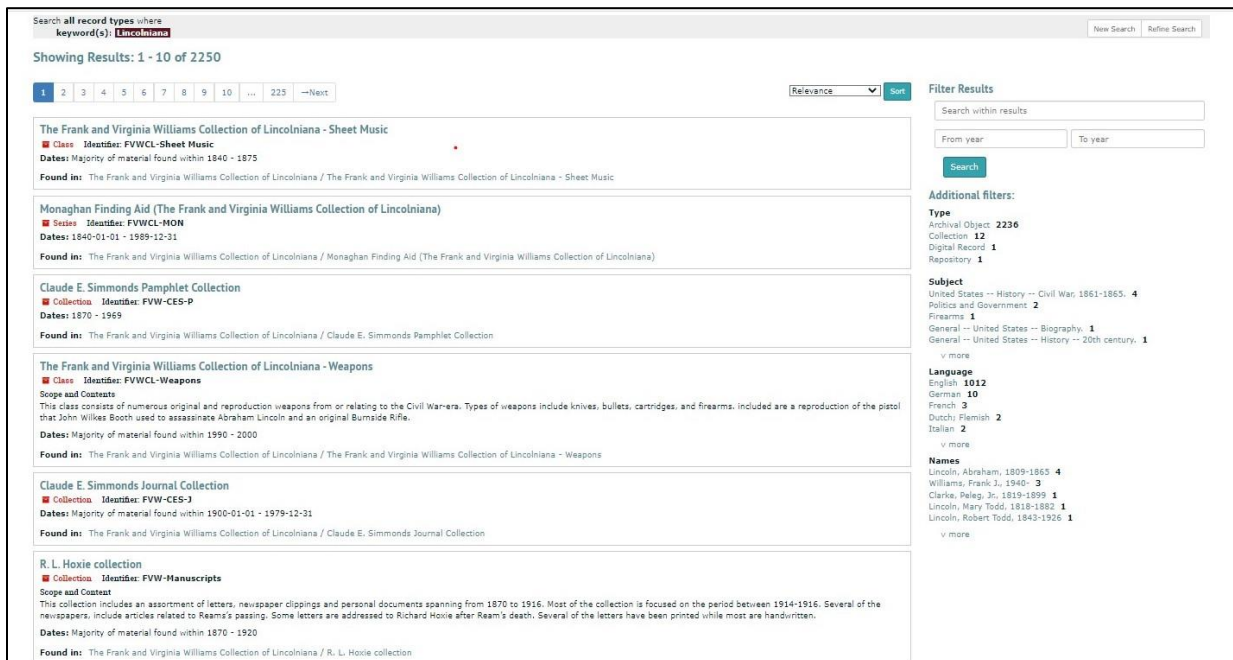


Figure 3. Published finding aids viewable by the public.

ArchivesSpace is a strong content management system. It works best when processing manuscript and document-based collections. In short, it trades simplicity for flexibility. So, despite its drawbacks, ArchivesSpace still has much to offer.