

The Project

- In August 2019, as a student at Wayne State University's School of Information Sciences, I began my practicum internship at the Charles H. Wright Museum of African American History in Detroit, MI. My mentor, Michelle McKinney, the museum's archivist-librarian and education specialist, selected a collection for me to process, with the intention for us to conduct an oral history with the collection donor. Throughout the course of the semester I digitized over 400 photographs and documents and co-facilitated an oral history interview with collection donor Devi Ward Erickson over video conference.
- The oral history was an essential component to this project, as it allowed us to connect with the last living member of the family represented in the collection. Her candor and openness not only provided rich context for us to draw from when completing metadata for the collection, it also shed a complex light onto the collection, that behind the happy veneer of her family's photos lie the effects of generational trauma and systematic racism.

The Collection

- In 2019 the museum received an incredibly precious, rare, and personal collection of family photos and documents from donor Devi Ward Erickson. The collection's materials date back to the 1830s and depict the struggles and successes of an African American family who migrated from a life of slavery in South Carolina to a life of prosperity in Adrian, Michigan.
- Included in the collection:
 - Several original bills of sale in which Devi's ancestor, Rachel Sightler, was bought and sold along with her son Benjamin
 - Over 400 photographs (including several tin types)
 - A directory of Black owned businesses in the city of Adrian
 - Records related to the three homes and barbershop business that the family owned.
- The collection, incredibly complete and preserved, shows the family in moments of accomplishment and togetherness, giving an intimate view of Black life primary in the 1890s-1930s.



Slave transaction papers for Rachel Sightler and her son Benjamin.

The Tools

Google Photos

- As I scanned the photographs and documents, I uploaded a copy of each one to a Google Photos album shared between myself, donor Devi Ward Erickson, and archivist Michelle McKinney.
- In the months leading up to the oral history, Devi was able to view the photographs in real time as they were being scanned. She was able to leave comments on photos, and during our pre-interview meetings we would discuss her memories and impressions together.
- This shared album was invaluable during the final oral history interview, as we were able to share our screen and look at the photos together as if we were in person. Having this visual reference helped Devi to recall faces, names, and stories and even allowed us to make some genealogical discoveries.

- Tips for Using Google Photos with Donors:**
- Permissions** allow control over who can view, upload, and comment on photos.
 - Drag and drop** feature for rearranging the order of photos within the album.
 - AI tools** such as facial recognition are available
 - HOWEVER these tools often misidentify subjects, especially BIPOC.
 - Limited metadata** functionality, best use case is for quickly sharing images for viewing.



Google Photos album, shared with collection donor



Candid shot during oral history interview, with two audio recorders in front of computer. On screen: Devi Ward Erickson (collection donor); In person: Michelle McKinney (archivist), Colleen Cirocco

Zoom

- Our collection donor regularly uses Zoom as part of her business and offered to record the oral history interview from her account. Since COVID-19 has started affecting our workplaces, video conferencing option may be available to your organization, but if not, keep in mind that recordable video conferencing may likely require a paid subscription.

- Tips for Video Conference Oral Histories:**
- Practice** - we held three pre-interview meetings to discuss the collection and plan for the interview. These meetings allowed us to get to know each other, get comfortable using the equipment, and practice saving the videos and seeing how they would be stored.
 - Plan for hiccups** - During our interview two of our three recording devices failed. Devi's internet connection went out, which she was using to record the video, and one of our audio recorders ran out of batteries. Luckily, I was audio recording on my iPhone (using the Voice Memos app), which is now the only complete record of the interview.
 - Buddy system** - Having two interviewers helped immensely, as we were able to have ample coverage to handle both conducting the interview as well as troubleshooting technology issues.
 - Mute button** - As you likely know from video conference meetings, it is best practice to mute your microphone when you are not the active speaker, as it will reduce echo/background noise for the other person, and in this case, for the recording as well. However, dead silence on the other end may make your narrator uncomfortable. This can be mitigated by knowing a keyboard shortcut for mute and interjecting when appropriate and by expressing empathy through nonverbal communication.

The Next Steps

- With the collection digitized and a nearly 2-hour interview recorded and transcribed, Michelle and I plan to continue working together to in hopes of making this collection available as the Wright Museum's first online exhibition.