# "Meaning in the present": Understanding Sustainability for Digital Community Collections

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**ABSTRACT**

Living independently of mainstream institutions, digital community archives and digital humanities collections confront systemic barriers to medium- and long-term viability. Their sustainability tends to be undermined by shifts in technologies, resources, and communities over time. Because these collections contain irreplaceable and invaluable evidence of communities and histories that are underrepresented in cultural institutions, their fragility compromises the completeness and equity of our collective digital heritage. Partnerships between institutions and community-based collections often founder over a lack of shared understanding: of the expertise each partner brings to the table, of the scope and extent of mutual commitments, and of what sustainability even entails for a given project. This paper reports preliminary outcomes of a case study of the *Lakeland Digital Archive*, exploring how Lakeland's community understands *sustainability* in the context of their digital archive, as part of a broader study of community-centered sustainability strategies for digital collections.

**KEYWORDS**

Sustainability; digital preservation; digital community archives; digital humanities; cultural heritage

## INTRODUCTION

A vibrant, scattered profusion of curated cultural collections live outside of libraries, archives, and museums. Independent digital humanities projects and digital community archiving initiatives provide unique or original evidence of groups and histories that are underrepresented in mainstream institutions. Without institutional backing, these collections also confront major barriers to medium- and long-term viability as the underlying technologies and the surrounding communities themselves shift over time. The vulnerability of digital, community-centered collections undermines the completeness and equity of our collective memory. Sustainability efforts and partnerships often founder on a lack of shared understanding: of available expertise (e.g., Flinn, 2011), of necessary commitments, and of what sustainability entails for a given project.

This paper focuses on this last, transcendent problem: among and between communities and institutions, the term *sustainability* bears nebulous, sometimes conflicting meanings, thwarting conversation and progress toward shared solutions. We report preliminary outcomes of a case study of one digital community archive, the *Lakeland Digital Archive*, described below. This case study is part of the Community Sustaining Digital Collections project, investigating how communities in various contexts interpret and implement sustainability strategies that foreground community ownership, needs, and values. A comparative, multi-case study of digital community archives and digital humanities collections, this project aims to identify community-centered sustainability strategies for digital collections living outside of cultural institutions. This paper takes a step toward that objective by exploring how participants understand sustainability for their archive.

**Lakeland Digital Archive**

Lakeland is a 130-year-old African American community adjacent to the University of Maryland (UMD) in College Park, near Washington, D.C. Under urban renewal in the 1960s, much of the neighborhood's landscape was demolished, displacing nearly two-thirds of residents. For the past decade, Lakelanders—historical and current residents and their descendents—have worked to collect and preserve their history. The Lakeland Community Heritage Project (LCHP), a small organization of volunteers at the core of this effort, has gathered thousands of historical records from the community, along with oral histories and other documentation. In 2018, building on an existing community-university research relationship, LCHP embarked on a partnership with the Maryland Institute for Technology in the Humanities, along with faculty and students in UMD's American Studies department and College of Information Sciences, to prototype a digital community archive. With a dedicated team of approximately a dozen people (about half from Lakeland and half from UMD), the digital archive is currently in development.

**PRIOR WORK**

Community archives develop around nuclei of shared identity, memory, and purpose—around localized histories and places, significant events, ethnicities and races, gender identities and sexual orientation, etc. (Welland and Cossham, 2019; Flinn et al., 2009; and others). Digital humanities collections, on the other hand, arise from the curatorial practices of scholars (Poole, 2017; Cooper and Rieger, 2019; Palmer, 2004) and take myriad forms, from digital archives and databases to interactive maps and multimedia monographs. Despite their differences, these broad categories of collection share important characteristics: communities and teams create them to meet their own immediate needs; they often hold original or unique cultural evidence, often of underrepresented groups and histories; they are usually built by small teams of technologists and researchers with sporadic funding; they are often maintained independently of mainstream institutions; and for all these reasons and more they experience significant challenges to long-term viability (Stevens et al., 2010; Flinn, 2011; Smithies et al., 2019; Fenlon 2020).

While cultural institutions have partnered with community-based digital projects in different capacities, these partnerships remain rare. Community collections resist the most prevalent institutional models of stewardship, in part because their overriding value is autonomy (Flinn, 2011; Zavala et al., 2017). In addition, institutions with both the relevant purview and the capacity for supporting digital community collections are scarce. A growing literature of empirical research on sustainability for community archives has identified an array of factors in and opportunities for sustainability in various contexts (e.g., Lian and Oliver, 2018; Jules, 2019; Froese-Stoddard, 2014; Newman, 2011; Wagner and Bischoff, 2017), including the need for peer support networks for community archives (Caswell, 2017) and alternative funding and partnership models for communities and institutions (Stevens et al., 2010). In parallel, a growing set of practical tools and guidance helps communities of all kinds sustain their own digital projects (e.g., Langmead et al., 2018; Skinner, 2018). A widespread challenge for communities that are seeking to sustain their own collections and a common stumbling block for community/institutional partnerships is the lack of shared understanding of the precise definitions, entailments, and implications of *sustainability* in the realm of digital cultural collections (e.g., Eschenfelder et al., 2016): how do the requirements of sociotechnical maintenance and preservation vary across contexts, and what facets of sustainment are absent from our usual discourse? Our work aims to expand on prior work with empirical investigation of how communities variously understand *sustainability* in the context of digital collections.

**METHODS**

This case is one of a set of comparative case studies of community-based projects. Evidence sources in each case include interviews, participant-observation, and documentation (e.g., Slack spaces, technical documentation, and meeting notes). We are currently continuing data collection on all cases in parallel with iterative cross-case analysis. Interview transcriptions and observational memos are subject to qualitative content analysis, based on a coding scheme developed inductively in correspondence with research questions. All interviews were independently coded by three coders, who then discussed their codes in order to come to consensus. This study has conducted 13 interviews across all cases to date; but this preliminary analysis considers just the 8 interviews that have been conducted in the Lakeland case, with Lakelanders and the archive development team. We have been engaged with this case through interviews and participant-observation in weekly meetings, at digitization workshops, and in other community events since 2019; while the findings are preliminary, they are steeped in substantial experience with the case, resulting in a rich preliminary dataset. In the preliminary outcomes below, participant names and identities are obscured, and participants are referenced by a three-character participant code, e.g., "L01".

## PRELIMINARY OUTCOMES

The community is far from monolithic; participants did not express a single, unified vision for the archive's sustainable future, but the visions they articulated have commonalities. The community expects to maintain ownership and control over how the digital archive is represented and contextualized. They hope to grow the archive's collection indefinitely and widen avenues for engagement for broader audiences. They intend to maintain a strong central organization, the LCHP, to speak for the archive and engage its constituents. They seek to leverage the archive as a foundation for active social and political efforts and aim to engage peer communities and institutional partners in different aspects of the archive's sustainability. These preliminary results elaborate how participants understand the sustainability of the archive, in particular how their understanding of sustainability relates to the maintenance and growth of social connections within and beyond the community.

### Archive sustainability and community sustainability are inextricable

When asked to articulate their vision for the sustainability of the digital archive, community members tended to foreground the community and its future over the artifact of the archive itself. Most participants described the sustainability of the archive as interwoven with the future of the community in tangible ways. Their understanding of the sustainability of the digital archive does not focus on the mere persistence of the files or web presence, but on community wellbeing and relationships to other communities. Several participants related the archive's sustainability to its capacity for maintaining and nurturing social connections within the community. One participant noted that while the archive served to keep memories alive across generations, the archive alone would not suffice—a socially engaged community surrounding the archive was imperative (L02). The participant clarified that the effort to keep memory alive "wasn't just about an archive. It was about a whole bunch of people relating around the archive and the organization of LCHP itself" (L02). A few participants described the historical Lakeland community as one vibrant with social interconnections maintained through gatherings and social groups of all kinds. For example, one participant noted: "we had vital lives, we had social lives, and we had our churches, and we had our—then they weren't called community centers—but we had our social gatherings… we even had juke joints...Everything that the world has, you know, we had as a Black community also" (L03). Another described how one group—the last graduating class of Lakeland's high school, which was the area school for African American students during segregation—maintained their relationships over 50 years later through trips, reunions, and newsletters, noting "it's a lot that held us together" (L05). While these social maintenance efforts happened outside of the archive, participants related them to the archive's purpose. For example, Participant L05 described how LCHP and the archive's core development group reached out to members of Lakeland's last class for archival contributions: "the community reached out to us, and we were appreciative of it. ...Having a collection of pictures and artifacts and other items, it made a difference. ...If you know us, you know we have an active group." (L05).

Connections between the community and the archive's sustainability extend beyond the maintenance of social ties to other factors in community wellbeing. Several participants related the archive's sustainability to its potential to serve as a foundation for active political and social efforts, ranging from urban development decisions to racial and restorative justice initiatives. When asked to describe how the archive might become sustainable, one participant (not a Lakelander but a member of the greater College Park community and the archive development team) described how "a sustainable archives...has more meaning in the present, for present action", specifically observing that the archive's documentation of the impacts of past transportation, land use patterns, zoning, and development policy standards could helpfully influence decisions about ongoing development in the local area (L04). This participant saw the sustainability of the archive as unfolding through an active role in "resurrecting the original idea of Lakeland," by informing development efforts to mitigate the effects of physical barriers like high-rise architecture and train tracks, which divided and displaced the original Lakeland community during urban renewal, and which now separate the community from surrounding neighborhoods and local amenities (L04). In the context of a city-wide strategic planning initiative that is currently underway, another participant related the archive to the Lakeland Civic Association's efforts to bring the community's voice to bear on the city's strategic plans. This participant noted that the aim of collecting and preserving the history was in part to provide "a basis for attempting to formulate future plans" (L08). Because of Lakeland's history, the idea of the archive being sustained as a tool for political and social change focuses on issues of racial equity and justice. The same participant noted that a goal of the archive is, in part, "making sure that past racial inequities are not perpetuated" (L08).

### Sustaining the archive helps sustain other communities

From all participants there emerged a notion of the archive as a center or hub for a widening pool of concentric and adjacent communities: not only the historical Lakeland community and its descendants, but current residents and

neighboring communities, the University of Maryland, the city of College Park, Route One Corridor communities, etc. Several participants saw the archive's yet unrealized value for these communities as a sustainability key: "It's not just Lakeland history, it's College Park history. And if it's College Park history, then it's obviously University of Maryland history as well" (L07). One participant saw the archive as a platform for promoting social causes with benefits beyond Lakeland: the archive's potential to "keep the idea of racism on the table" would be "a boon to Lakeland as well as to the greater College Park community" (L08). Several participants envisioned the archive as the hub of active outreach. One participant imagined reaching out through the archive to the University community—an "incoming UMD student of color seeing the archive and saying, 'Okay, let me try to get off campus housing in this community so I can work closely with them over four years'" (L06). Another indicated that the archive might gain traction toward sustainability through increased connections with other local civic associations through events hosted in Lakeland (L04).

**Visibility and impact as sustainability risks**

More than one participant expressed the (perhaps counterintuitive) concern that the archive might become too visible or impactful, and thereby undercut its own sustainability. This concern stems from their aspirations for the archive's contributions to activism, a fear that groups in power will attempt to discredit or silence the archive "because of the light it shines on the harm done to the Lakeland Community" (L06). The quoted participant also acknowledged a contrasting, well established sustainability risk, that "lack of interest and upkeep is always a concern when you have an archive or organization...that's volunteer-run" (L06). Nonetheless, they observed a wax and wane cycle for all things political, including the archive: public interest and support for the archive may wax in times when racial justice initiatives are palatable to powerful institutions or majority groups, but they are prone to wane when politics shift or when majority groups grow fatigued of the issues at stake. Participants expressed concern that the archive might be "swept under the rug" if surrounding communities "might not want to see that every time they go on the College Park website, or drive through Lakeland" (L06).

**DISCUSSION AND FUTURE WORK**

The community's definitions of *sustainability* are variable and nuanced; and these variations and nuances may bear significant implications for maintenance, preservation, and institutional partnerships. For example, how do maintenance and preservation decisions enable or constrain a community's capacity to leverage their own story as a tool for ongoing decision-making and activist efforts? In addition, each of the partial sustainability measures described above depends on the endurance of an active community around the archive. Such endurance is hardly certain for any community, especially one that has experienced diaspora; this represents another facet of the mutual reinforcement between archive and community sustainability. Future work will tie emergent findings about the meaning and entailments of sustainability to specific technical and organizational implications for community archives, digital humanities projects, and institutional partners.

Participants' conception of archive sustainability—as tightly interwoven with the sustainability of the community itself—is at odds with the prevailing preservation paradigm of institutional collection. While a growing number of voices call for shifts in the ethos and orientation of institutions toward active engagement with external communities (Caswell and Cifor, 2016; Cook 2013; Flinn, 2011), the practice remains uncommon. As communities ranging from historically place-based communities (like Lakeland) to the distributed teams behind academic digital humanities projects engage in conversations about their own sustainability, this work aims to contribute a more nuanced picture of what sustainability means in different contexts. Ongoing data collection and cross-case analysis will examine a broad range of sustainability issues emerging from preliminary outcomes, such as project structures and cultures, workflows, technical implications, and expanding our sense of alternative models of partnership with cultural institutions. By exploring community definitions of *sustainability*, this work aims to help communities set maintenance and preservation priorities for digital collections, articulate their value for partners and funders, and help communities and institutions negotiate equitable partnerships to sustain a more diverse cultural record.

**ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

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Paper accepted to 84th Annual Meeting of the Association for Information Science & Technology 2021

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