1. Project Summary

The Harriet Beecher Stowe Center in Hartford, CT, was awarded NEH’s Humanities Collections and Reference Resources Foundations support to plan and pilot digital access and preservation for the Center’s nationally significant collections. The project grew out of the Stowe Center’s desire to meet the expectations of today’s researchers for access to digital resources, update content and metadata to reflect contemporary standards, and bridge collections to programmatic needs more fully realizing our mission. This project came at the right time for the museum – having successfully completed an NEH-funded interior renovation and reinterpretation of the Stowe House in 2017, the Stowe Center was poised with new leadership to undertake planning for collections digitization as an institutional priority.

2. Project Origins and Goals

The Harriet Beecher Stowe Center’s nationally-important collection is housed onsite and is made up of more than 13,000 published works, 195,000 manuscripts, 12,000 images, 5,000 graphic materials, and 8,500 artifacts. Current access to the collection is limited to onsite research appointments and Stowe House tours, through loans to other museums, and limited online finding aids. Expanding access to digitized materials, updating content and metadata, and connecting collections to programming and curricula would allow the Center to realize its 3-part mission: preserve and interpret Stowe’s Hartford home and the collections, promote vibrant discussion of her life and work, and inspire commitment to positive change.

The primary goal of the Digitization Planning Project was to have a full assessment of needs and action steps required to implement the digitization process for the Stowe Center’s collections. Effectively planning for such a project meant bringing together scholarly evaluation of the collections, technical advice, and guidance on the management of a digitization project and sustainable products. In order to accomplish this goal several steps were undertaken:

- Humanities scholar reviews to prioritize mission-related collections;
- Educate staff on digital content and establish workflows for digitization implementation;
- Develop collegial connections with state digital repositories to address long-term digital preservation, secure storage, and open access;
- Bridge collections to serve programmatic needs both internally and externally;
- Compile the final Collections Digitization Plan from scholar assessments, focus group feedback, staff pilot activity results and recommendations;
- Approach public and private foundations, and individuals for funding support for the implementation process as outlined in the Plan.

Once the Stowe Center collections are digitized, a comprehensive resource will be made available to the public creating global access to these important humanities collections through
the creation of digital content available online. Collections will be better preserved as digital access lessens the need for direct object handling.

The intended audience for this planning project included humanities scholars and educators, Stowe Center cultural partners and stakeholders, and Connecticut digital repository managers. It was their interest, ideas and recommendations that directly informed project methodology, workflows, and online presentation for implementation.

This planning project built on research conducted in 2019 when preparing the NEH Humanities Collections and Reference Resources Foundations application. Staff contacted those who have excellent knowledge of Connecticut’s cultural heritage digital resources, including Adrienne St. Pierre, Collections Manager at the Barnum Museum, Gregory Colati, Director of University Archives, Special Collections and Digital Curation at the UConn Library, and Elizabeth Rose, Ph.D., Executive Director of the Jewish Historical Society of Greater Hartford. From these conversations staff learned that 1) UConn’s CT Digital Archive (CTDA) expanded its infrastructure to provide a statewide aggregator and serves as a preservation repository maintained by the university, and 2) the Connecticut League of History Organizations (CLHO) had built Connecticut Collections, a Collective Access statewide database, common portal and collections management system. The two platforms are in the process of linking, providing robust state repository infrastructure and sharing. In addition CTDA content is migrated into the larger Digital Public Library of America (DPLA), ensuring discoverability at the national level.

Foremost in the collections are materials directly related to Stowe and her prominent family. While there are other substantial collections of Stowe and Beecher related materials at The Huntington, Harvard’s Schlesinger, and Yale libraries, HBSC’s collection is the largest and comprehensive, from personal papers to furnishings and ephemera. These materials include three rare Uncle Tom’s Cabin manuscript pages; an 1851 letter Stowe wrote to Frederick Douglass asking for his help describing a plantation; two account books of a black business owner in Hartford dated 1810 through 1820; a rare oversized Census of Black Hartford dated between 1803 and 1805; and large theatre advertising posters and broadsides for Uncle Tom’s Cabin stage productions exaggerating racial caricatures. Such documents are nationally important for understanding the social impact of slavery, the historical and literary significance of Uncle Tom’s Cabin, and the continued legacy of racism in America.

Additional collections relate to Stowe’s culturally significant Nook Farm neighborhood in Hartford, Connecticut, inhabited by a tightly knit community of intellectuals, political leaders, artists and reformers. Their correspondence, photographs, art, and ephemera illustrate an elite, idyllic lifestyle focused on activist discourse.

Increasingly important to understanding the construction of racial ideology in the United States are collections related to popular culture interpretations of Uncle Tom’s Cabin. While Stowe conceived her titular character as a Christian martyr, the phrase “Uncle Tom” is more widely recognized today as a term for a race traitor. Stowe Center collections illuminate this transition through a variety of material and visual culture items that capitalized on the deep popularity of Uncle Tom’s Cabin through spin-off merchandise such as handkerchiefs, vases, wallpaper, and other items for the home. The Harry Birdoff Collection of posters and theater bills documents the prominence of “Tom Shows,” plays or musicals which traded on the novel’s popularity. Many of these shows were essentially minstrel shows that employed racist caricatures and stereotypes
of black people. The Stowe Center collection documents these productions from the 1850s through 1950s.

3. Project Activities, Team, & Participants

The project activities included 1) multi-day onsite evaluations by humanities scholars, 2) technical consultations with librarians and digital repository managers, 3) facilitated focus groups with educators and researchers, and 4) digital repository data entry pilot test. These actions culminated in reports from the individual consultants, staff, and focus group feedback that were compiled and synthesized by the lead digital librarian into a comprehensive digitization plan.

The project team consisted of Stowe Center staff working with an advisory team of seven professionals with exceptional knowledge and expertise in curatorial, archival, academic humanities, library information service, and digitization areas.

Due to the worldwide Covid-19 pandemic and enforced travel restrictions, communication between the advisory team and staff was managed electronically via email supporting remote collaboration, as well as virtual conference calls. Onsite collections assessment travel visits were extended beyond the original grant period and occurred in August 2020 and June 2021 when state travel mandates and infection rates allowed. Management of the project was the responsibility of Elizabeth G. Burgess, Project Coordinator who has directed other grant projects, including multiple NEH grants.

Onsite Assessments

Staff selected humanities scholars with knowledge of its priority collecting areas, three of which previously conducted research for their publications at the Stowe Center.

- August 11-13, 17-19, 2020, onsite assessments of:
  - Abolition/anti-slavery archival materials by Dr. Tess Chakkalakal, Peter M. Small, Associate Professor of Africana Studies and English and founder of “Harriet’s Writing Room” at Bowdoin College;
  - Uncle Tom’s Cabin-related manuscript, graphic, ephemeral, photographic and material culture items by Dr. dann j. Broyld, Associate Professor of Public History and African American History at Central Connecticut State University; and
  - Stowe’s created art and related manuscript and print materials, an untouched research area by Dr. Julia Rosenbaum, Associate Professor of Art History and Visual Culture, Bard College.

- June 14-16, 2021, onsite assessments of:
  - Beecher and Stowe family personal papers by Dr. Ashley Reed, Assistant Professor of English at Virginia Tech University; and
  - Beecher and Stowe family material culture, personal library and photographic materials by Dr. Katherine C. Grier, Professor of History Emerita, University of Delaware. Using a rubric assessment tool for prioritizing objects to be digitized, Grier and Burgess honed six thematic ‘primary source sets’ each with exemplary examples.

Each scholar used existing analog inventory and catalog records as well as earlier collection assessments, noting ineffective functionality. At the end of each assessment day virtual meetings were held so scholars could disseminate findings and consider connections; staff and Collections Committee members were invited to participate and vibrant discussions followed.
Scholars each produced a report containing a discussion of the research value of collection materials including uniqueness, an assessment of their scope, the quality and diversity of potential research topics and themes, and their overall value to humanities research. The scholars also reviewed existing metadata and Library of Congress Subject headings for potential “modernization” where applicable; recommendations for diversity and inclusion, race, gender, legacies, privilege, equities, and justice terminology, addressing the shift in cultural history.

Focus Groups
To better understand potential end-user needs, staff facilitated two half-day focus groups comprised of local and state humanities users, scholars, K-12 and university educators, state curriculum and school administrators to determine how humanities content is best presented and used in the classroom. Participants were asked a series of 5-6 questions around online content and contextual expectations, multi-disciplinary and thematic use, and local, regional, and national narratives, while viewing collection images prioritized by scholar assessments.

- February 4, 2021: Virtual focus group led by Beth Burgess, Director of Collections & Research and Amy Hufnagel, Director of Programs & Visitor Experience; with Liz Devine, West Hartford Witness Stones Project; Doug Casey, Executive Director of CT Commission for Education Technology; Liz Mancini, Social Studies Chair at Middletown High School; Rebecca Furier, CT Humanities Teachitct.org consultant; and Shayla Nunnally, Professor of Political Science and Chair of the Africana Studies Program, University of Tennessee Knoxville.
- August 25, 2021: Virtual focus group led by Beth Burgess, Director of Collections & Research, with Amy Hufnagel, Director of Programs & Visitor Experience; Jeff Partridge, Professor of English and Hartford Heritage Project chair, Capital Community College; Jeffrey Ogbar, Professor of History and Director of the Center for the Study of Popular Music, UConn; Tom Scheinfeldt, Associate Professor of Digital Humanities, UConn; Chris Hager, Professor of English, Trinity College; Felicia Bevel, Assistant Professor of History, University of North Florida; Rosa E. Soto, Professor of English, William Paterson University; and Leanne Zalewski, Associate Professor of Art History, Central Connecticut State University.

Technical Consultations
Librarian Dr. Elizabeth Rose advised staff in a review of statewide digital repositories/platforms and advise on the discoverability and long-term preservation of materials. Dr. Rose is also Connecticut League of History Organization’s ConnecticutCollections project lead and spoke to the benefits of the statewide online collections repository. Michael Kemezis, Repository Manager for Connecticut Digital Archive/UConn offered his advice and recommendations to the Stowe Center as well. Rose and Kemezis reviewed the need for updating and creating manuscript collection finding aids in either Encoded Archival Description (EAD) or Encoded Archival Context-Corporation, Personal, Family (EAC-CPF). A review of how description levels will be interdisciplinary in both CTDA and Connecticut Collections occurred.

Digital Repository Pilot Test
- In order to determine future digitization implementation workflows, staff conducted a test run by entering just under 100 diverse collections items into Connecticut Collections repository. Staff began by first participating in an informational webinar on how to use the Collective Access platform. Staff also looked to recent field work and publications addressing the shift in cultural history, such as the Archives for Black Lives in

When entering collections records, staff used modernized subject headings recommended by archivists, digital librarians, and the field, to synthesize data entry workflow, and link materials to collections of all types and lots as applicable. Finally, staff determined that Connecticut Collections would also be used in its collection management function, replacing the existing Past Perfect now outdated system.

- Ongoing August 2020 – October 2021, Beth Burgess, Director of Collections & Research conducted data entry and review both remotely and at the Stowe Center.
- October 2021, Burgess used the advisory team’s reports and recommendations from the field to update and expand collections descriptions and contemporary subject headings to refresh existing finding aids.

4. Project Outcomes

Final Product
The planning project’s final product is a Collections Digitization Plan, compiled by lead advisory team member Elizabeth Rose, that will be implemented in phases as described below. The purpose of the Plan is to integrate the recommendations of the five scholars who assessed different parts of the Stowe Center’s collections in 2020 and 2021, along with the K-12 and university educators, curriculum builders and administrators who participated in focus groups about the needs of collection users, in order to outline the next steps in the Stowe’s Center Digitization Plan. This report also includes recommendations for collections management and digital repositories. In wide-ranging conversations about the best ways to share the Stowe Center’s valuable collections with different users, scholars and educators generated a number of different creative ideas for interactive and thought-provoking presentation of digitized material related to Stowe and to Uncle Tom’s Cabin, as well as the importance of developing “primary source sets” on particular themes for classroom use.

It is important to plan this work in several phases, since the basic foundation of selecting, digitizing, and cataloging material from the Stowe Center’s collection - the primary focus of this current project - needs to be created before more creative and ambitious digital projects can be built upon that foundation.

- Phase I: Digitizing and cataloging material in Stowe Center’s Connecticut Collections database system, with attention to appropriate metadata that will enable connections across the collection. This phase will also include a trial of several thematic collections sets for classroom use, presented on either the Stowe Center’s or a partnering website.
- Phase II: Build a separate public portal to provide creative and interactive ways to discover themes and material from the Stowe Center’s collection. This will link to items and collections on the Connecticut Collections database system but will provide more interpretive context and framework that is particular to the Center’s materials. This portal will include more thematic collections sets for students and teachers at different levels to explore.
• Phase III: Work with other archival repositories to create a Harriet Beecher Stowe portal primarily aimed at researchers and scholars. Repositories, historic sites, literature societies with Stowe collections, connections, and scholarship would partner for an inclusive one-stop online platform, in the tradition of the Willa Cather Archive https://cather.unl.edu/ or Walt Whitman Archive https://whitmanarchive.org/.

5. Project Evaluation and Impact

Project evaluation occurred in each activity and built from one to the next so that staff could maintain project focus on its primary goal: build a plan to digitize collections. Starting from scholar assessment recommendations built out of priority collections, staff created focus group presentation and questions around high-ranking items to provoke discussion on themes of 19th-century race, gender, and economic inequities. Educator reactions and feedback from the first focus group informed revised questions for the second. Staff incorporated focus group feedback and revised and inclusive subject headings as recommended from the field when piloting records into the statewide digital repository.

Several discoveries were made in the form of recommendations during this digitization planning project that impacted staff’s understanding of online access and discoverability:

• Understanding audiences for digitized collections spans from general to students and academic researchers, present contextual information for individual or groups of items in layers for deeper exploration. Never show digitized objects without base-level captions. Offer shared authority options.
• Use broad metadata search terms (like shapes, colors) for increased accessibility within humanities and arts searches.
• Contextualize problematic/stereotypical/racist objects with as much text as possible. Presentation should include consideration of emotional labor and reactions in viewing items. Also link to broader theme context and include pop culture representations so audience understands how the Stowe Center’s item is a part of larger history. Define racist historic terms still being used. Consider disclaimer/warning pop-ups as user clicks deeper into problematic content.
• Grouping different types of collections - objects with documents, photographs, etc. - thematically as a curated online exhibit would be useful to educators. Create deep connections, visually and contextually, between the suite. Uncle Tom’s Cabin is a prime example of how primary source evidence, across media types, can provide interdisciplinary connections through a theme.
• Multi-disciplinary and sensory presentation approach appeals to K-12 educators for ease of collaboration.

Staff was able to pilot various activities and recommendations through existing and unplanned programming:

• Reformating 1,500 Harriet Beecher Stowe letter transcripts from Microsoft Word to Adobe PDFs to share with Oxford University Press’s Collected Works of Harriet Beecher Stowe editors, limited online sharing via Dropbox.
• Scanning and formatting 150 documents written by and to Mary Hall (1843 – 1927), Connecticut’s first female lawyer and suffragist, for a patron request.
• Selecting Black history collection materials prioritized by scholar assessments for our annual Stowe Prize fundraising program with winner Dr. Eddie S. Glaude, Jr. in
conversation with Dr. Jeffrey O. G. Ogbar, UConn History. Pop culture and stereotypical memorabilia as evidence of the Black lived experience provided context for Glaude’s *Begin Again: James Baldwin’s America and Its Urgent Lessons for Our Own.*

https://www.harrietbeecherstowecenter.org/media-gallery/#stowe-prize-2021-video-broadcast

- “Learning by Looking: Reading a Post-Civil War Photograph” a TeachIt.org lesson plan developed by Amy Hufnagel with Beth Burgess, incorporated a collections photograph with contemporary and historic writings. TeachIt.org is a collaborative program of CT Humanities and the Connecticut League of History Organizations.

Lastly, all participants expressed interest and excitement before, during and after the project’s completion. They understand that the Stowe Center’s investment in digitizing its collections has a great opportunity to impact audiences of all kinds who would use these digital assets. Many noted this digitization implementation is timely given the cultural and political environment we find ourselves in. Getting to the truth of our past using primary sources offers a new lens on our present society.

6. **Project Continuation and Long-Term Impact**

With the Collections Digitization Plan in hand, the Stowe Center is poised to fundraise a multi-phased and multi-year digitization implementation project. Staff has researched funding sources and created a timeline, submitting its first application in December 2021. Third-party proposals from digital capture services and cataloging record migration consultants for phase I have been requested. Our goal is to complete phase I fundraising in 2022 for implementation in 2023. Phases II and III would follow suit.

Our project’s planning activities will serve as a model shared with other smaller to mid-sized institutions and cultural heritage organizations. Staff will present at conferences and programs.

Collections Digitization is a Stowe Center strategic imperative, a high priority project in its Long-Range Preservation Plan slated for 2020 through 2025. Our commitment to meeting 21st-century digital expectations will continue to progress as implementation phases are executed. Audience evaluation will remain crucial to understanding and staying on top of current needs.