

An Evolution of Community Engagement within an Academic Library:

A Look at How Libraries Transform
Communities, and How Communities
Inform Change



Alston Cobourn and Heather White
ECU Paraprofessional Conference 2024

An aerial photograph of a residential neighborhood, likely Sycamore Hill, showing a mix of brick buildings, trees, and a river with a bridge. The text is overlaid in the upper center.

Beyond Bricks and Mortar
Revisiting the Sycamore Hill Neighborhood

"Beyond Bricks and Mortar: Revisiting the Sycamore Hill Community," shares a missing piece in the history of the displaced community that was located adjacent to the historic Sycamore Hill Missionary Baptist Church, on the land that is now Town Common.



This project illustrates that a community is much more than the bricks and mortar used to construct its homes. The photographs and narratives featured show how the ties that bind are found in human connections.

Houses on West First Street with Sycamore Hill Baptist Church in the background. This area is where Town Commons is now located.
Joyner Library Digital Collections



In the early 1960's, Greenville City officials initiated a plan to revitalize areas of the city, also known as "urban renewal."



Options featured mixed use plans including both public and private investments. In the case of Greenville, this also meant a public park on the land next to the historic church.



1 DEPARTMENT STORE

2 MOTEL/RESTAURANT

3 PUBLIC PARKING OR COMMERCIAL

4 ARMORY OR COMMERCIAL

5 RETAIL AND OFFICES

6 SUPER SERVICE STATIONS

7 PRIVATE DOWNTOWN APARTMENTS

8 TOWN COMMONS PARK

9 CHURCH





\$2000 grant & a lot of support from coworkers

Working under a tent, at the corner of Evans Street and 1st Street, we met former residents on the grounds of Town Common.



Why Then?

It was particularly timely as the Greenville City Council discussed a planned memorial near the former location of Sycamore Hill Missionary Baptist Church, now part of Town Common.





Town Common, Greenville's most visible civic space, sits on 20 acres of open space. Located at 105 East 1st Street, this centrally located resource is unique in that it is located between the Uptown Central Business District and the Tar River.

- Park Features:
 - Greenville Toyota Amphitheater
 - Town Common Inclusive Playground
 - 1500' Esplanade along Tar River
 - Town Creek Bridge & South Tar Greenway
 - Paved Walkway and Benches
 - Boat Access
 - Millennium Sundial



The Town Common Master Plan



On Dec. 27 and 28, 2016, former Sycamore Hill community members and their descendants were photographed as close possible to the sites of their former homes.





A professional photographer worked with the former residents to locate the area that would be the most meaningful for them to be photographed.





<https://www.witn.com/content/news/Before-It-Was-Town-Common-448430953.html>

Before It Was Town Common

Before It Was Town Common

EXHIBIT TELLS STORY OF FORMER RESIDENTS

WITN
witn.com

70° 6:42

News

Temperatures near 90 on Thursday; Mid 70s Friday



DIGITAL COLLECTIONS

*Thousands of images, texts, and
audio/video from ECU's diverse collections
and beyond.*

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Sycamore Hill Baptist Church

Sycamore Hill Baptist Church on First and Greene Streets in Greenville before the fire that nearly consumed it in early 1969.



"Well, I was raised here in the
area up until I was about 12 or 13
years old. During that time that
when the redevelopment came in
with the cement houses close
to top up property. There wasn't
an option to not take that kind of
deal. I remember a man came
to the house, I was my
grandmother's house, and he
was being to her some money
made on either of about \$2000 for
the house. And she looked at him
and said "Do you really think I
should sell after twenty-eight
years of living for a 2000?
"

by Regan









African American Cultural Trail

Greenville - Pitt County

Launch Celebration

Wednesday, October 27 • 4:00 PM

Sycamore Hill Gateway Plaza
201 W 1st St • Greenville



Explore the African American Cultural Trail of Greenville-Pitt County on a self-guided walking tour!

The African American Cultural Trail of Greenville-Pitt County was created to celebrate the rich history and recognize the many contributions that African Americans made to the growth and development of our city and county. The trail allows you to experience the lives, stories, and history of our area's early black educators, medical professionals, cultural leaders, and residents.

<https://www.facebook.com/CityofGreenvilleNC/videos/the-african-american-cultural-trail/2923776324554730/>



SYCAMORE HILL GATEWAY PLAZA
MEMORIAL

AFRICAN AMERICAN CULTURAL TRAIL OF GREENVILLE-PITT COUNTY



National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) through the American Rescue Plan Act of 2021

- \$10,000 grant with broad guidelines
- Community Based Project
 - Offered workshops to teach oral history interview skills
 - Distributed affordable recording equipment and basic archival supplies; 12 kits

Documenting the Black Farmers of Eastern North Carolina

- Recognized gaps in our collection
- Post reconstruction Jim Crow laws
 - Loss of land
 - Sharecropping/tenant farming
 - Unfavorable legislation they couldn't fight due to voter suppression.
- Ending of the Black Farm Agent program
- 1980 Lawsuit. Found that USDA routinely discriminated against Black farmers.
- 1999 Class action lawsuit. USDA admitted discrimination between 1981-1997, but each claimant had to prove they were discriminated against to receive \$50,000 and loan forgiveness.
- 2021 4 Billion debt forgiveness for minority farmers. Halted due to a countersuit by White farmers.

Rethinking Traditional Approach to Oral History

Community Based Project

- Gave tools to community partners and individuals to capture their own stories
 - Peer to Peer
 - Question templates to get them started
- Modified agreement form-they retained ownership
- Made donating OHs optional
- If donating thoroughly explained legalities and possible uses. Made intentions clear.
- Allowed them to remove content from the interview if they chose
- They kept equipment
- Offered resources: RAFI-USA Farmers of Color Network

Partners

Eastern North
Carolina Village
and Farm
Museum
“Juneteenth
Celebration”
Celebrating
Willie Hawkins



<https://library.ecu.edu/2022/06/22/project-for-remembering-black-farming-families-in-enc/>

Bobby and Lola Thompson

- Owners of Thompson Farm, Grimesland, NC
- 4th generation



Interview with Lola at family cookout

Crossroads: Change in Rural America

- NC Humanities Grant for Crossroads: Change in Rural America Exhibit Grant
- Document Latinx farmworkers in Eastern NC
- Pivot to collecting oral histories from Latinx ECU students



Documenting COVID-19 in Eastern North Carolina



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The COVID-19 pandemic affected our lives in similar and different ways, be it mentally, physically, financially, or otherwise. As the world grasped how to cope with this virus, we have been forced to adapt to a new normal.

East Carolina University's Academic Library Services and Laupus Health Sciences Library collected submissions from members of the university campus as well as Pitt County and Eastern North Carolina residents that documented their experiences during the pandemic. These experiences are important to us and our shared local history. Future researchers will be better able to understand how the pandemic affected East Carolina University and the Eastern North Carolina region because of their contributions. You can browse the submissions through this site.

- East Carolina University Academic Library Services

[Next](#)

East Carolina University
Academic Library Services
East 5th Street Greenville, NC 27858-4353
(252) 328-4176
[Contact US](#)

<https://collections.ecu.edu/os/s/ecucovid19/page/about>



Documenting COVID-19 in Eastern North Carolina

Why We Began This Project

- We saw a need
- Document the pandemic for the historical record
- Rapid Response Archiving*
- Benefits future researchers
- Opportunity to give people a voice

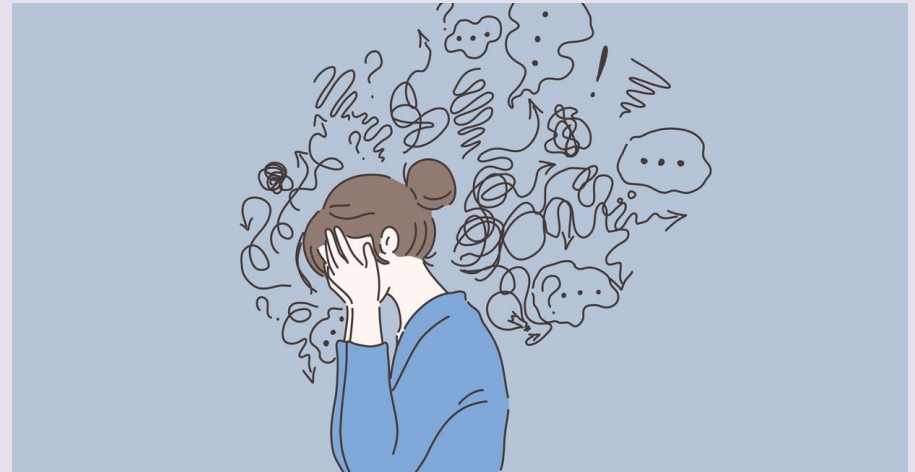
*"A Journal of the Plague Year: Rapid Response Archiving Meets the Pandemic."

<https://doi.org/10.1177/1550190620986550>; "Participatory Description and Metadata Quality in Rapid Response Archives." <https://doi.org/10.1177/1550190620981038>



Emotional Toll on Donors

- “No one owes their trauma to archivists”
- Important to acknowledge
- Be sensitive
- Be prepared with resources



Ethical and Legal Considerations

- Personal privacy
- FERPA
- HIPAA



Promotion of the Project

- Utilize existing media channels for campus and wider community
- Outreach to instructors for class assignments
- Outreach for collaborations with other libraries and archives
- Community groups, marginalized groups
- Members of the community whose first language isn't English





<https://www.witn.com/2020/07/17/ecu-documents-local-experiences-living-with-pandemic/>

Community Outreach: AMEXCAN

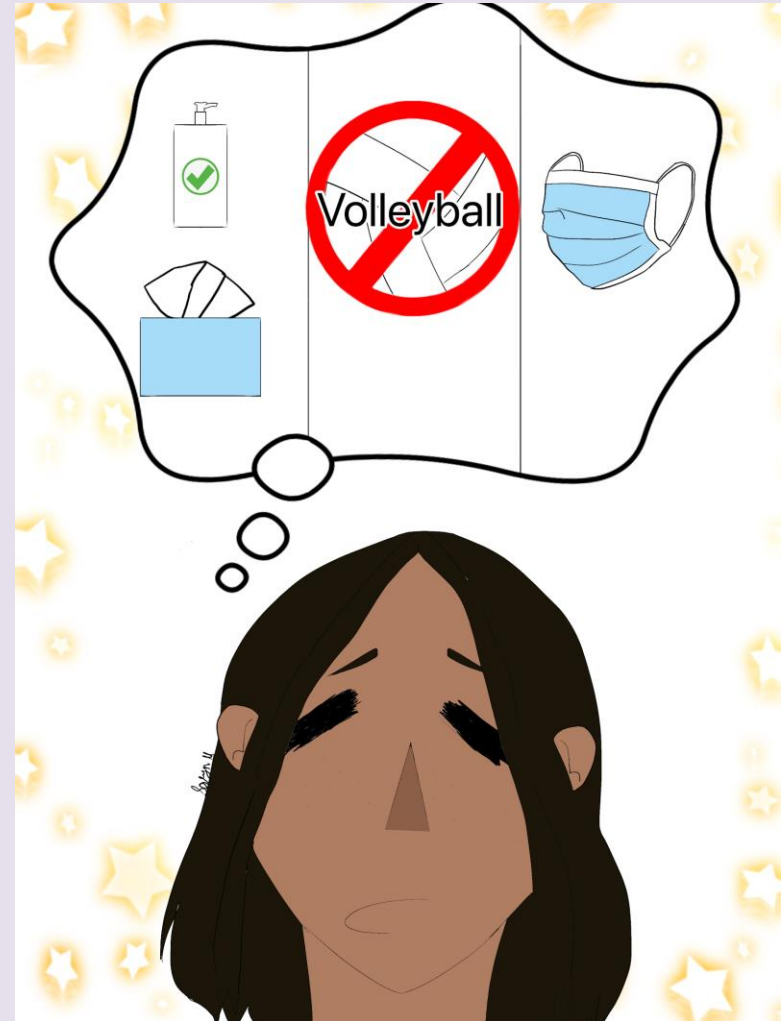


- AMEXCAN: Association of Mexicans in North Carolina
www.amexcannnc.org
amexcan@amexcannnc.org
- NC Latino COVID-19 Task Force
 - “...aims to facilitate the collaboration of small community organizations throughout the state to help mitigate the effects of Covid-19 and advocate for the Latino population through access to resources such as vaccines.”

Response

- **482** submissions
 - Personal reflections from community members, ECU staff, students, and departments, and local organizations
 - Photographs
 - College of Allied Health message
 - Slides from a psychology lab study
 - Oral histories from spring honors seminar

12.5 year old's personal reflection





Trauma Informed Community Archiving at ECU's Main Campus Library

- Library Improvement Goal: Curate and create Trauma Informed Community Archiving Resources needed to improve services within Joyner Library

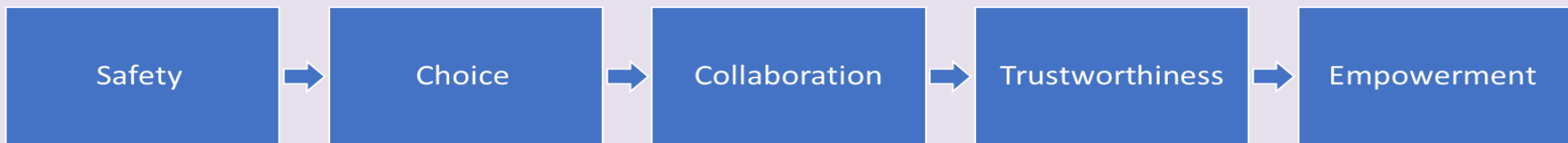
Addressing Trauma in Archives

- Specialized training in trauma informed practice
 - “Trauma-informed practice is a strengths-based approach for organizations that acknowledges the pervasiveness of trauma and the risk and potential for people to be retraumatized through engagement with organizations such as archives and seeks to minimize triggers and negative interactions.”

Archival & Engagement Practices

- To transition the library's community archiving work beyond archival neutrality, towards recognizing institutional power and challenging systemic oppression
- ○ To discuss how trauma-informed approaches to managing archives are a useful model to consider for professional practice.
- ○ To transition the library's community archiving work beyond archival neutrality, towards recognizing institutional power and challenging systemic oppression

5 Core Principles



Lessons Learned

- Best results when specific groups are targeted or when you ask for specific things
- Personal relationships are key
- Promotion must be ongoing
- Long-haul type project
 - Follow-up must be ongoing and will extend past end of grant
 - Relationships will extend beyond end of grant
 - Processing collected materials takes time
- Assign tasks and create timelines
- Content warnings

Questions? Comments?

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