

# Exploring Personhood: Using Narrative to Teach Archival Literacy and DEI

Carol Street, Undergraduate Research Archivist, University of Kentucky Libraries

## Introduction

Undergraduates in the Learning Lab internship program at the University of Kentucky Special Collections Research Center took their research from theoretical to real life through their recent experience at one of the city's historic African American cemeteries. The assignment given to each of them was to research two people buried at the cemetery, find all the archival and secondary source information available, and construct a narrative for each person.

## About the Learning Lab

The Learning Lab at the University of Kentucky Libraries is an inquiry-based, paid internship program that provides undergraduates opportunities to learn core principles about archives, process an archival collection, and conduct primary source research based on a collection. The internship spans the full academic year and can also be taken for up to six credits under EXP396. To successfully fulfill the requirements of the program, students will need to process an archival collection, create a finding aid, create a research question regarding their selected collection, conduct research, and disseminate their research in the form of a conference presentation (poster or oral) or published paper. The cohort of 10-12 students meet once a week to discuss weekly learning objectives, such as archival theory, provenance, security, arrangement and description, and primary source research methods. The fall semester is dedicated to preparing interns for the archival and primary source literacy skills they will need when they embark on their own research project.

## Archival Literacy & Primary Source Literacy

The Society of American Archivists/ACRL define primary source literacy as the combination of knowledge, skills, and abilities necessary to effectively find, interpret, evaluate, and ethically use primary sources within specific disciplinary contexts, in order to create new knowledge or to revise existing understandings. Archival literacy is the competence in or knowledge of archival terminology, organization, and reference tools. The interns, most of whom have never conducted archival research on their own, typically have little to no archival literacy and/or primary source literacy skills. They need to quickly ramp up their skills in both archival literacy and primary source literacy if they are to successfully complete their internship objectives. Incorporating the lure of the narrative allows the archivist to introduce a familiar topic (a biographical narrative) into the unfamiliar terrain of primary source research. Selecting names of those for whom secondary sources have not been written about means that students will need to actively search historical newspapers, census records, archival collections, and county records. Students are comfortable understanding the types of information they need to construct a biographical narrative, such as birth and death dates, parents and siblings, education, marriage, children, employment/career, and geographical locations where all of this took place. They just don't know all of the places where they can look.

## Research Process

Students learned how to navigate archival finding aids, digitized newspaper platforms, census records, and genealogy resources. They quickly found records that were challenging in a modern context, but gave them a glimpse into the everyday difficulties of being Black in the American South in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Many of the men and women they researched were formerly enslaved, so students saw how records prior to 1865 were very scarce and then how each person rebuilt their life outside of the structure of slavery but within deep racial divisions.

During the final week of the assignment, the cohort met at the cemetery to talk with the cemetery historian, Yvonne Giles, and to clean the gravestones of those they had spent the previous three weeks researching. This experience allowed students to reflect more fully on each person and to connect physically with the life they were honoring. Students also developed appreciation for the hard work of dedicated cemetery volunteers to preserve its history and maintain the integrity of the historical property. Students came away from this experience energized about researching history and respectful

Fig. 1: During a break from cleaning headstones, undergraduate interns talk with cemetery historian Yvonne Giles at the Lexington African American Cemetery #2 to discuss the individuals they researched. Image courtesy of Carol Street.

## Student Outcomes

Each student enhanced their archival literacy and primary source literacy skills as a result of using narrative to drive the assignment. They also came to care deeply about the people they researched. The project created individual connections to history that are impossible to replicate from a book or in a lecture. Confronting everyday historic injustices deepened student empathy and raised their understanding of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI). One student said the research enabled him to see these historical figures as real people with real lives, not just names in a database.



*"I feel like the trip really brought the meaning of archives to life."*

—Gracie Burrows  
Learning Lab intern  
Physics major

*It's important to give people personhood."*

—Charles Logan,  
Learning Lab intern  
History/Anthropology major



Fig. 2 & 3: Interns Grace Burrows (above left) and Maylee Skovron (above right) cleaning gravestones. Images courtesy of Carol Street.

## Acknowledgements

Assignments like these are only made possible through community partnerships and it is with much gratitude that I thank Yvonne Giles and Mark at the Lexington African American Cemetery #2 for their time, knowledge, and passion for history. This research sought to honor all of the lives discussed and gain understanding through their experiences.