



Creating the Curator: Teaching and Learning Exhibition Development for Special Collections Librarians and Archivists

by Jessica Lacher-Feldman, MA, MLS, CA

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Archivists and Special Collections Librarians have a great deal in common with their colleagues in museums. We all work in the realm of cultural heritage—collecting, preserving, and making available rare and unique materials for a broad audience. There is an increased emphasis on finding ways to collaborate and come together in our allied professions.¹ Though there are commonalities in these professions, one marked area where we diverge is in the realm of exhibition development. Unlike graduate students in museum studies, archivists and special collections librarians have not historically received in-depth training in graduate school to become exhibition curators or developers. Graduate students have had limited exposure to what exhibition work is like and how to take it on both theoretically and practically. And while exhibition work often is a part of what archivists and special collections librarians do, it has historically been marginalized as a function of archival work. Archivists often learn on the job, with limited tools, skills, and support. Filling an exhibit case is often an afterthought, something that needs to be done, but is approached without any planning, vision, or skill. This lack of training has led to ongoing challenges to develop professional looking exhibitions in archives and special collections libraries.

Appreciating the Power of the Exhibition Format

Because I worked in a few different capacities in a large state museum over several years, I was exposed to exhibition work firsthand, as well as to the relentless visitors who interacted with the exhibitions, engaging in what

I considered “spontaneous learning.” Because of these experiences with museum visitors, I saw the power of the exhibition as a tool to inspire, intrigue, educate, and inform individuals. While at that time I had no pedagogical training in museum studies, I later learned that this notion is directly in line with what is known in the museum field as “informal learning.” This idea remained with me when returning full-time to graduate school to pursue a Master’s degree in Library Science with a concentration in Archives and Special Collections. While serving as a graduate student intern and as a part-time archival assistant during graduate school, I had opportunities to develop small exhibitions in two archival repositories, taking the lead from supervisors, and at the same time, noting their general discomfort and lack of enthusiasm for exhibition work. It seemed that this work was often a mandate from some higher authority, and was not something that was valued, understood, or appreciated.

In the year 2000, a perfect opportunity presented itself, and I joined The University of Alabama faculty as the Public and Outreach Services Coordinator for the W.S. Hoole Special Collections Library. This role was to oversee reference services in a busy academic special collections, as well as to assume the vague and amorphous “outreach” role. This can really mean anything that relates to how we interact with our public, ranging from students, faculty, and staff within the university itself, to the broader community beyond the campus.

Using my longtime interest in exhibitions as a catalyst, exhibition work became a major component of my role at the

Hoole Library. Through observation, experimentation and research, I began to develop expertise in creating effective, attractive, and meaningful exhibitions. The skills that I developed ran the gamut from graphic design, to time and project management, to planning, light carpentry, and more. Over the course of 13 years at The University of Alabama, I curated dozens of exhibitions, large and small, while simultaneously developing best practices, training students, and gaining knowledge on how and what to exhibit in archives and special collections libraries. This work was a natural component of the “public and outreach services coordinator” role, providing the opportunity to promote collections, create collaborations with teaching faculty, students, and the community, and to highlight interesting and compelling stories from library holdings. Over time, and through advocacy for the importance and significance of exhibition work, the idea of exhibition development became more sanctioned and programmatic within the library and across the university libraries as a whole.

As these interests developed, it became clear just how much was missing from the canon of archival studies in the realm of exhibition development. Very little scholarship or practical instruction on exhibition development existed that was geared specifically towards archivists. The Society of American Archivists, the leading professional association in the archival profession, produced a handbook in 1980 entitled *Archives and Manuscripts: Exhibits* by Gail Farr Casterline. The handbook was certainly helpful in its time, but fast forward nearly three decades and the vast advances



Grandmaster Caz, Ben Ortiz, DJ Afrika Bambaataa, Katherine Reagan, Ernie Panicioli, members of the Hip Hop Collection Advisory Board at the opening of Now Scream: The Cornell Hip Hop Collection Exhibition. Ithaca, NY, April 2013. Courtesy of Katherine Reagan, Cornell University Libraries.

in desktop publishing, graphic design software, and other areas relating to exhibitions made it clear that something else was needed to address the needs of archivists and special collections librarians. Those interested or mandated to develop exhibitions in their repositories needed real help. Over several years I developed skills in teaching what I had learned, and developed ideas that made exhibition work less of a challenge. Though my own hands-on experiences, I developed not only a growing interest in the process of exhibition development, but also a deep desire to share that knowledge and experience with others. While I had no permanent exhibition staff at The University of Alabama, I did however have an eager rotating fleet of graduate assistants from the University of Alabama’s School of Library and Information Studies, as well as undergraduate student workers, and interns from areas such as History and American Studies. We learned from each other, and it was immensely satisfying to share with them these opportunities to create thoughtful and thought provoking exhibitions.



Teaser exhibition for upcoming major exhibition on the 100th Anniversary of the Smith-Lever Act, celebrating Cooperative Extension. The exhibition features rare documents, published materials, photographs, and a touch-screen monitor with oral histories. Courtesy of Leah Jewett, LSU Libraries Special Collections.

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Teaching Exhibition Development to Archivists

Stemming from those experiences, and in response to the lack of available resources for people who were challenged by exhibition work, I developed a workshop entitled, “An Introduction to Archival Exhibits.” Since 2006 eight versions of this workshop have been presented at annual meetings of the Society for American Archivists and at other venues. The class, which has grown and developed over the years, includes a wide range of issues relating to exhibition development, including the theoretical and historical underpinnings of exhibition work, exhibition philosophy, and where it fits within the larger scheme of archival work. We discuss the development of exhibition ideas, exhibition planning, best practices, and techniques for creating effective exhibition labels. We cover other ancillary but critical components of exhibition work such as outreach and education, public programming, promotion, and marketing. The workshop focuses largely on giving archivists and special collections librarians the confidence that they need to go forth and develop exhibitions in their own repertories.

The primary audience for these workshops has been trained archivists working in many areas of the profession, including archivists in colleges and universities, both large and small. Participants also include corporate archivists, staff members at historical societies and other local or regional repositories, and students in graduate school for library and information studies. Many of the attendees still keep in contact, and share with me their successes and questions as they continue to work in this area.

The Development of a Manual

From the one-day workshop came the idea for a book on exhibition development in archives and special collections libraries. I saw the book as a teaching tool much like the workshop, but something that could be used and kept as a resource in the library. The book project took several years to complete, and in August of 2013, *Exhibits in Archives and Special Collections Libraries* was published by the Society of American Archivists. (Information on the book is available at <http://saa.archivists.org/store/exhibits-in-archives-and-special-collections/3333/>).

Using the workshop as a foundation, *Exhibits in Archives and Special Collections Libraries* offers the reader the essentials of exhibition development, policies, procedures, and best practices. The book also provides some mini case studies, as well as three larger case studies, each tackling a challenging exhibition topic, namely the Three Mile Island disaster, the issue of slavery and its legacy in a Southern community, and the Stonewall riots of 1969. Each of these case studies provides first-hand insights about how these challenges can be addressed

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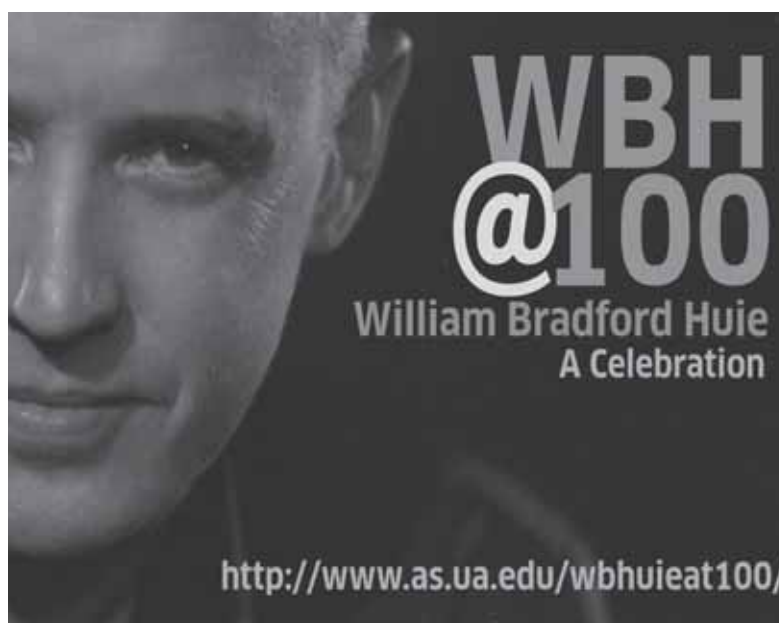
including the use of space, the method of telling the story, and the use of archival materials in the exhibition setting. One particular case study included in the book, “Let the Records Show: Discovering the Valley’s Black Community in Slavery and Freedom” was written by Mike Bunn, the then History Curator of the Columbus Museum in Columbus, Georgia. This particular example bridged the gap between archival exhibition work and museum exhibition work, focusing on the loan of controversial documents, their use, the exhibition process, and the broad range of outcomes that resulted from the exhibition. The numerous mini case studies are integrated into the text and offer practical applications as they relate to the theoretical work and specific topics discussed within the book.

Looking to the Future

The future of exhibition work in archives and special collections libraries looks bright. This is due to several factors: the further merging through collaboration of the allied cultural heritage professions; increased value placed upon innovative outreach; and recognition of the power of an exhibition to attract users, donors, and “fans” to one’s repository. My book has been incorporated into graduate courses in Archival and Library and Information Studies, serving as an indication of this shift towards embracing exhibition work as an important and even vital component of what archivists and special collections librarians do. Online exhibitions allow for our work within the repository to live on beyond the closing date of the exhibition itself and beyond the walls and exhibition cases in our libraries and archives. Some repositories have created or altered positions within their archives and special

collections libraries that have primary responsibility for exhibition work within the library.

One such repository with such a position is my own, the Hill Memorial Library at Louisiana State University. Having joined LSU in June of 2013 as the Head of Special Collections, one of the many attractive aspects of my new repository and new role is that there has historically been an emphasis and appreciation for the value of exhibition work in our special collections library. The staff roster includes a talented and dedicated full-time exhibitions coordinator. A historic building and three areas for exhibitions make the opportunities for exhibition work even more significant and notable. And while it has been difficult to hang



Promotional postcard for exhibition and events for WBH@100, a celebration of the 100th anniversary of the birth of author, William Bradford Huie. Designed by Jessica Lacher-Feldman.

End Note:

¹ ALA/SAA/AAM Committee on Archives, Libraries, and Museums (CALM) was formed: “To foster and develop ways and means of effecting closer cooperation among the organizations; encourage the establishment of common standards; undertake such activities as are assigned to the committee by either of its parent bodies; initiate programs of a relevant and timely nature at the annual meetings of one or more parent bodies either through direct Combined Committee sponsorship or by forwarding particular program plans to the appropriate unit of one or more parent bodies for action; and refer matters of common concern to appropriate committees of ALA, SAA or AAM.” Retrieved June 21, 2014 from http://www.ala.org/groups/committees/joint/jnt-saa_ala

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From the exhibition, *Let the Records Show: Discovering the Valley's Black Community in Slavery and Freedom*, Columbus Museum, Columbus, Georgia. Courtesy of the Columbus Museum.

up the exhibitions curator hat (though opportunities to co-curate an exhibition have already presented themselves and will continue to do so), it is gratifying to have the opportunity as an administrator to support and nurture an already robust exhibitions program: moving it into the future, attracting more visitors, users, potential donors, and friends and giving them the opportunity for “spontaneous learning” in our historic special collections library. The next frontier in exhibition development is already being explored and exploited. We are working towards building that virtual world where exhibitions can live and thrive in digital format. And while many repositories have tackled this affiliated task, there is much to learn about how the exhibition can

translate from brick and mortar to bit and byte.

My need to feel more comfortable and better equipped to create successful exhibitions led to my own research and in turn to my teaching and writing for my archivist and special collections librarian colleagues across the United States and beyond. It is through the exploration of the theoretical and the practical; the development of a creative, critical curatorial eye; and the process of practice, experimentation, critique, and assessment, that exhibition work can become part of the professional toolkit for every archivist and special collections librarian in the field. ✨