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# Re-locating Meaning in Heritage Archives: A Call for Participatory Heritage Databases

Angela M Labrador, *University of Massachusetts Amherst*

Elizabeth S Chilton, *University of Massachusetts Amherst*



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# Re-locating Meaning in Heritage Archives: A Call for Participatory Heritage Databases

Angela M. Labrador<sup>1</sup> and Elizabeth S. Chilton<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Department of Anthropology, University of Massachusetts Amherst. USA.

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## Abstract

While the use of online digital archives is increasing in the various heritage-related fields, there are significant problems with traditional digital heritage databases. First, these databases often revolve around collecting and presenting information provided by domain experts and do little to engage end users in the interpretative process. In doing so they centralize the meaning making process and limit authority and, thus, access to non-expert users. Second, they presume a single, knowable community or heritage audience; and third, they presume a single interpretation of an information object, or at least a consensual interpretation from a larger, static group of stakeholders.

While online digital archive use is growing, there is a crisis of heritage access. Today, public engagement with heritage can be characterized as a consumption of highly commodified cultural products, which appeal to a pervasive nostalgia and impede meaningful connections between people and their cultures. One response to this crisis and the related need for stated and shared principles is the ICOMOS Charter for the Interpretation and Presentation of Cultural Heritage Sites (Ename Charter). Most relevant to this paper, the Ename Charter includes principles intended to (1) encourage inclusiveness among stakeholders and associated communities, and (2) encourage “the development of technical and professional standards for heritage interpretation and presentation, including technologies, research, and training.”

We suggest that a heritage database that decentralizes the meaning making process, supports multiple and disparate interpretations of information objects per user, and facilitates user-mediated interaction regarding information objects offers an alternative to traditional heritage databases and comes closer to meeting the Ename Charter’s principles. In this paper we explore the social effects of this crisis of heritage access, draw upon post-modern turns in the field of archival management, and examine several case studies of other participatory archive models. We distinguish our project by repositioning the meaning making process as distributed, defying categorization, and ultimately ephemeral. Finally, we analyze how participatory archive models may address the crisis of heritage access while at the same time allow for the safeguarding of authenticity in the Ename Charter sense.

**Key words:** *digital archives, heritage*

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## 1 Introduction

The papers in this session seek to address the role of digital technologies in the formation of techniques for dealing responsibly with public heritage à la the recently ratified Ename Charter. The aim of the Charter is to “define the basic objectives and principles of site interpretation in relation to authenticity, intellectual integrity, social responsibility, and respect for cultural significance

and context.”<sup>1</sup> Principal #2 of the Ename Charter concerns “Information Sources” in the interpretation of heritage sites, which include digital archives.<sup>2</sup> In this paper we take one step back, and address the issue of creation, interpretation, and presentation of heritage *data*

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<sup>1</sup> Ename Center for Public Archaeology and Heritage Presentation, “Ename Charter Initiative,” Ename Center, [www.enamecharter.org/initiative\\_0.html](http://www.enamecharter.org/initiative_0.html).

<sup>2</sup> ICOMOS International Scientific Committee on Interpretation and Presentation, “ICOMOS Charter for the Interpretation and Presentation of Cultural Heritage Sites,” [http://www.international.icomos.org/charters/interpretation\\_e.pdf](http://www.international.icomos.org/charters/interpretation_e.pdf).

using digital technologies. The use of digital technologies, particularly the use of techniques such as GIS, websites, blogs, and digital databases, have been undertheorized in archaeology, and rarely have the social impacts and social contexts of these technologies been the focus of serious scholarly analysis. In this paper we take one small step in that direction by examining (1) the ways in which databases have traditionally been viewed as context-free, “objective” tools for researchers, and (2) the lessons that can be learned from looking at non-academic, genealogical databases, which serve in many ways, as the ultimate artifact of public heritage.

## 2 Background

As Paul Ricoeur writes, archives are collections of documented testimonies, or “declared memories,” which take both written and unwritten form.<sup>3</sup> He characterizes these archived testimonies as “silent orphans” — separated from their authors and subject to stewardship by identified professionals who labor at the archival process: the “setting aside, putting together,” and marking up of these testimonies in their new context.<sup>4</sup> This new context of the archive masquerades as a physical space full of authoritative observations of the past. But the archive is more than a physical space; it’s also a social context that hosts the production of historical knowledge.<sup>5</sup>

While archaeological databases are often not thought of in the same breath as “historical archives,” for purposes of this paper, they are one and the same. Both are comprised of “silent orphans,” demand professional intercedence, assume authority over its stewards and users in the present and future, and are the results of shared historical contexts and desires to effect collective memory. The new approach to heritage as promoted by the Enane Charter and today’s presenters, frames “heritage” in a more holistic way—integrating categories such as material and

immaterial, collective and individual, and past and future in one concept. Thus, our use of the term “heritage archive” is meant to include all databases of this range of heritage testimonies: written records, documented oral testimonies and creative expressions (such as music and performance art), as well as material culture.

## 3 Theorizing Heritage Databases

From a data architecture standpoint, heritage archives are comprised of at least two layers: the objects themselves, which carry sensual meanings; and the metadata, which hold the interpretive meanings ascribed by the archivist during the archival process. The act of entering information about an artifact into a database is in itself an interpretive exercise. The sanitation of the first layer is wrought by the objectification of the second in order to produce the myth of the archive as the “externalization of collective memory.”<sup>6</sup> Historically, the amassing of archives during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were part of a larger process that materialized memory and reframed the memory process as the ward of historians and archaeologists in service to national memory. Thus, embedded in the architecture of the archive is the residue of this process, which has become the subject of Foucaultian “archaeologies” among contemporary theorists.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, the development of the archival process as method not only shaped what was intended to be remembered in the future, but also *how* memory was to be formed.<sup>8</sup>

If museums and national archives epitomized “modern memory palaces”<sup>9</sup> perhaps the digital representations of these holdings are our post-modern memory palaces. Yet, do our current digital archives truly transform the modern memory palace of the physical archive? Or are they outmoded replicas in a new medium?

<sup>3</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 166.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 169.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 167.

<sup>6</sup> Patrick H. Hutton, *History as an Art of Memory*. (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1993), 151.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 149.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 149-150.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 150.

While library scientists and professional archivists have been quick to adopt and theorize the new digital media, even going so far as to imagine “Library 2.0,” there has been less movement from mainstream archaeologists on theorizing “Archaeological Collections 2.0” (with CAA participants usually representing the minority!). Even while archivists were first to transition to hypertext and then to XML<sup>10</sup> and some archaeologists can model their data using Dublin Core standards, the user interfaces of digital heritage archives continue to emulate the physical archives of the modern era in three pertinent ways.

First, digital heritage archives still follow the modern archival process in that professional “experts” choose what is to be included, design the sets of data, and code the metadata with little engagement with end users. In so doing, the digital archive reproduces the objectification process of historiography and reified in the physical archive wherein the archival artifact “assumes authority over its” audience.<sup>11</sup> Professional database developers are asked to “make a database” for a collection as if it were a static interpretation-free product to be produced (analogous to “doing” GIS). This centralizes the meaning-making process, makes knowledge appear neutral and objective, and limits authority and access to non-expert users, often in the name of improved user access.

Second, digital heritage archives still presume and/or endorse a single interpretation of an information object, or at least a consensual interpretation from a larger, static group of stakeholders. For example, while the extremely popular Wikipedia content delivery model does seem to offer a revolutionary knowledge authoring and delivery system, the model of information consumption is the same old encyclopedia. Often in digital heritage archives, the physical card catalog entry or the single museum placard has merely been marked up in a new digital form using a new standard. While there may be moves to negotiate the content of the metadata record, it remains a single commentary, often in the third-

person, and typically limited to formal, descriptive attributes that stand in for the sensuality of the material artifacts it describes.

Third, many digital heritage archives presume a single, knowable audience, which has traditionally been modeled on “the researcher.”<sup>12</sup> This user group is expected to appreciate the archival process and to approach knowledge objects as “data.”<sup>13</sup> Yet, while much lip service has been paid to engaging the “public” with archaeology, the point of engagement is typically focused on the process of excavation or the passive mode of museum-like display and education, and not on any interaction with the archaeological database as a database. The general public are treated as interlopers in archaeological databases, who can’t be trusted with some of the metadata that archaeologists guard (i.e. site location), and who still need to approach archaeological data through state gatekeepers or to observe material culture from the other side of the velvet rope. Digital heritage archives need to be somehow “dumbed down” or “sexed up” for the general public with interpretation and knowledge delivery so structured that it’s now pitched as “virtual reality.”<sup>14</sup> What if non-“expert” heritage archive users were acknowledged as imaginative information seekers willing, able, and wanting to create their own meanings? And what if this meaning-making process was more formally accepted as part of a *new* archival process, the creation of a self-consciously created new memory palace?

In those studies that do seek to engage with a community, the results are surprisingly anticlimactic. For instance, Affleck and Kvan’s recent article in the *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, details the attempt to engage a

<sup>10</sup> Elizabeth Yakel, Seth Shaw, and Polly Reynolds, “Creating the Next Generation of Archival Finding Aids,” *D-Lib Magazine*, 13, no.5/6 (2007), 1.

<sup>11</sup> Ricoeur, *History, Memory, Forgetting*, 169.

<sup>12</sup> Isto Huvila, “Participatory Archive: Towards Decentralized Curation, Radical User Orientation, and Broader Contextualization of Records Management,” *Archival Science*, no. 8 (2008), 17.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> For a more nuanced discussion of this point, see Neil Silberman, “Beyond Theme Parks and Digitized Data: What Can Cultural Heritage Technologies Contribute to the Public Understanding of the Past?” in *Interdisciplinarity or The Best of Both Worlds. Selected papers from VAST2004*, ed. K. Cain, Y. Chrysanthou, F. Niccolucci, D. Pletinckx, & N. Silberman (Budapest: Archaeolingua, 2004).

virtual community with the creation of a digital heritage archive about Hong Kong.<sup>15</sup> While the authors designed their community-contributed archive to accommodate decentralized metadata production about a range of heritage material and promoted socially mediated negotiations of interpretative meaning, overall they found participation to be low.<sup>16</sup> The authors remind us that you can't "force" community – especially virtual ones<sup>17</sup> – you can't expect that "if you build it, they will come," even if you're inviting users to participate in the building process.

## 4 Engaging Users

So, who *are* the users of digital heritage archives and what models *are* actively engaging these users? Comprehensive surveys of heritage archive users are a recent phenomena but suggest a shift in user profiles as archives have become digitized and more widely accessible. Adams' 2007 report on the users of the US National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) traces its changing user profile over the past 30 years.<sup>18</sup> According to Adams, there are two primary groups of users of NARA content: those "involved in 'original' research projects" (i.e. academics) and "those who seek archival materials as a source in their quest for any kind of factual or personal information," who Adams calls, "information-seeking users."<sup>19</sup>

Until 1997, the majority of users of NARA's electronic archives were social scientists engaged in "research data use" and familiar with computer-based access to and manipulation of aggregates of records.<sup>20</sup> These users were the main impetus for

NARA to continue digitizing records in the early years, and also influenced how NARA modeled their electronic content delivery systems.<sup>21</sup> In fact, the structure of these early digital archives made meeting information-seeking users' demands difficult; that is, tracking down specific pieces of information was harder than capturing a subset of data to determine patterns within social scientific research settings. Perhaps a characterization better than "informational use" vs. "research data use" would be that "informational" user requests are datum focused rather than data focused. The "informational" user is searching for the proverbial needle in the haystack while the "research" user is interested in the shape or aggregate qualities of the haystack.

Today, the information-seeking user far outnumbers the "research"-oriented academics, yet they often use the same sources. Even before personal computing emerged on the scene, Adams reports an increase in user requests from "information-seeking users".<sup>22</sup> For example, the author relates an experience in 1990 when she was contacted by a veteran who had just found his own name on the Vietnam Veterans Memorial and wanted to find the source of this rather astounding "fact".<sup>23</sup> This shift towards finding the personal needle in the archival haystack reflects a larger social anxiety over the relationship between individual memory and collective memory as well as how the archival process and its media have shaped how individuals remember, and how digital technologies mediate users' expectations for access to collective memory.

## 5 Genealogy & "Family Tree 2.0"

This shift is best represented by the emergent majority of digital archive users at NARA and elsewhere: genealogists and family historians. This user community is accessing digital records in astounding numbers. In 2003, NARA unveiled its new online user interface, Access to Archival

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<sup>15</sup> Janice Affleck and Thomas Kvan, "A Virtual Community as the Context for Discursive Interpretation: A Role in Cultural Heritage Engagement. *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 14, no. 3 (2008).

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 275.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 275.

<sup>18</sup> Margaret O'Neill Adams, "Analyzing Archives and Finding Facts: Uses and Users of Digital Data Records. *Archival Science*, no. 7 (2007).

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

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<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.



Databases (AAD), and while only 24% of the 72 million records available via AAD are identification records of individuals, 94% of the 1.6 million valid queries run during its first two years of use were of these very records.<sup>24</sup> Initially, AAD support staff experienced an increase in support requests from AAD users, but by 2005, these support requests had significantly dropped, which Adams interprets as reflecting a change in *how* users access archives from an “interpersonal exchange” between the archivist and user to a new “user self-service mode.”<sup>25</sup>

This shift signifies two important and related phenomena. First, drawing upon Pierre Nora, the genealogical community of today is resultant of the paradox that as collective memory is “exteriorized” in public institutions such as churches, national archives, museums, and libraries, individual memory becomes more deeply “interiorized” and made private and personal.<sup>26</sup> While Victorian era genealogy was characterized by documentation of aristocratic lineage and ascendancy for prestige and property, today’s genealogical subject is the everyman, its focus is autobiographical, and its source material is based upon documentary research gleaned from archives.<sup>27</sup>

Ironically, the very storehouses of eighteenth and nineteenth century national memory are also the sources through which twentieth and twenty-first century individuals seek to “recapture” their personal memories. This can be ascribed to the initial function of public archives, which fragmented collective memory as originally embodied in oral testimony and material culture, so as to become recoverable only through the piecing together of these archived fragments.<sup>28</sup> This irony reflects the impact that the archival

process has had on shaping how collective *and* individual memories are formed. Public heritage archives are precedents of and for collective *and* personal memory. The archival process is all about intervening in the future at present, as all artifacts “interfere,”<sup>29</sup> shaping not only what will be remembered, but also how. Related to this is how the digitization of archives has increased the access to archives as sources for building personal memory in a seeming “user self-service mode.”

New technologies have developed to meet this new market niche, cleverly labeled “Family Tree 2.0” by one journalist.<sup>30</sup> Most notable are online genealogical services that combine family tree building software with direct access to digital archives and the burgeoning service of DNA testing within an overall social networking framework. While the object of genealogists’ quests have been belittled as nothing more than nostalgic yearnings for historicized personal identities, the motivations for performing genealogical research are multiple and no less meaningful even if based on nostalgia.

Family historians and genealogists partake in research for a variety of reasons: in order to reconnect with a perceived continuity with ancestral value systems and traits, to enable intergenerational transference of cultural memory, to learn more about or redefine one’s ethnic identities, to find living relatives, to experience the pleasure in hunting down and partaking in the search for ancestors (of one’s own or others’), to find deceased relatives that may be included in one’s religious afterlife, to learn more about hereditary diseases, and to contribute to local histories.<sup>31</sup> And these motivations may coexist, overlap or change based upon the experience itself. Genealogical research has the power to both deepen understandings of personal and collective identity as well as alienate the researcher from collective memory. And while, on the surface, it is individualized and seemingly obsessed with the

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 30.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 31.

<sup>26</sup> Hutton, *History as an Art of Memory*, 150-151.

<sup>27</sup> Jeanne Kay Guelke and Dallen J. Timothy, “Locating Personal Pasts: An Introduction,” in *Geography and Genealogy*, ed. Dallen J. Timothy and Jeanne Kay Guelke (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008), 5.

<sup>28</sup> Kevin Meethan, “Remaking Time and Space: The Internet, Digital Archives and Genealogy,” in *Geography and Genealogy*, ed. Dallen J. Timothy and Jeanne Kay Guelke (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008): 104.

<sup>29</sup> H. Martin Wobst, “Style in Archaeology or Archaeologists in Style,” in *Material Meanings: Critical Approaches to the Interpretation of Material Culture*, ed. Elizabeth S. Chilton (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1999).

<sup>30</sup> Douglas MacMillan, “Family Trees 2.0,” *Business Week Online*, June 19, 2007, 23.

<sup>31</sup> Guekle and Timothy, “Locating Personal Pasts,” 2-3.

personal autobiography, it is immersed in the social concepts of geography, demography, citizenship, ethnicity, tourism, and diasporic movements.<sup>32</sup> Thus, like any heritage pursuit, genealogical research can be elitist and exclusionary, and/or democratic and inclusionary.

## 6 Lessons Learned

As such, what lessons can FamilyTree 2.0 software offer to heritage archivists, and especially, archaeologists who want to encourage the latter forms of engagement? The swell of interest in online genealogical research, we believe, has created some of the most forward-thinking examples of, what Huvila has called, participatory archives. Sites such as Ancestry.com, Geni.com, and 23andme.com feature social networking components that are popular features of Web 2.0 applications. However, Ancestry.com perhaps best represents the widest range of features that provide inspiration for heritage archivists to counter the traditional tropes of centralized, authoritative, “authentic” meaning-making and access; singular, knowable research communities; and singular interpretative frameworks.

Ancestry.com combines a subscription service to a plethora of heritage archives with family tree-building software. Users submit queries in heritage archives and link search results to individual nodes, or “leaves,” in their family tree. Thus, the meaning of search results is not objective, but relational in the Ancestry.com model. A 1922 census data record, from the user’s point of view, holds little inherent value, unless she can relate it to an individual. And if a user wishes to save a document, but is not sure how it “fits” in her tree, she can save the result in her “shoebox,” which serves as a pre-sorting catchall for records that the individual does not know how to categorize.

The user’s family tree is both an evolving native ontology and personal archive. The ontology that the user defines, has little inherent value to other users, thus offering a lesson on the ephemeral,

subjective, and somewhat arbitrary nature of ontologies in general. Records from the public archives become related to user-defined terms that are, themselves, archived and presented as such. Furthermore, family trees and their nodes are open for annotation with other forms of media including user-contributed photos, stories, audio, and video. Thus, the family tree holds more than a provenienced pedigree, but becomes a repository for family history in a fuller sense. Ancestry.com also features a Web 2.0-based search interface that automatically filters based upon users’ ontologies. In other words, once a user defines “Mary Jones,” research “hints” appear, which the system defines as being possibly meaningful to the node. The more metadata the user has associated with the node, the more refined the search becomes.

Furthermore, the personal search for family history becomes potentially less isolating with the addition of social networking, in which users can invite others to contribute knowledge to trees and establish rules for alerting other members about their research interests. Whereas some “participatory history” sites publish individual testimonies and reflections, only voluntarily shared ontological terms are revealed to other users in these FamilyTree 2.0 models. That is, the meaning of the relationships between native ontology and public archive is kept private, and sharing that meaning is left to the discretion of user-mediated interchanges. While Adams’ survey of digital NARA records supposes that archival access has shifted from a user-to-archivist exchange to user self-service, perhaps what we are finding is another option altogether: user-to-user. That is, users may not be asking professional archivists where to find their personal needle in the national haystack, but they certainly are turning to other users to request help with locating information about ancestor X, signifying a recognition of shared heritage pursuits that still may respect differences in significance. Here the meaning-making process is socially mediated – the inherent contradictions between personal histories are not presented as public multiple narratives, but are encountered as moments of contact during contiguous heritage quests with multiple intersections of shared nodes.

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<sup>32</sup> Guelke and Timothy, “Locating Personal Pasts,” 2.

## 7 Conclusions

To conclude, the relational process of connecting public archive and personal memory within FamilyTree 2.0 software provides us with a model for access to and engagement with both tangible and intangible heritage resources. When used in this way, digital archives embody the metaphor of “vessels of significance” as the building block for theorizing meaning in heritage.<sup>33</sup> Within this framework, the values of heritage remain individualized, but the need and “quest” for valuing is understood as shared. Users find common ground not so much in their specific personal memories but in the shared processes of creating and marking them.

As such, these tools may address a conundrum identified by Gustavo Araoz when he stated: “Because much of the new heritage is dynamic in nature, the vessel for its significance IS the process of change, which brings heritage conservation to an apparent oxymoron: the need to protect and preserve change.”<sup>34</sup> Collective memory is therefore not a single narrative to which we must align our personal memories, but a “vessel” with the emphasis upon democratic memory making and remembering within the present, rather than the traditional trope of past-perfect memorializing or “preservation.” Thus, to embody the kind of access and inclusiveness advocated for in the Ename Charter *and* to meet this seeming conundrum of preserving change, perhaps the acknowledged goal of participatory heritage archives should be not to freeze-frame the memory object as an authoritative, evidentiary document in our collective memory storehouse, but to in fact stimulate and value our changing personal relationships to collective memory.

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<sup>33</sup> Gustavo Araoz, “Lost in the Labyrinth: Mapping the Path to Where Heritage Significance Lies” (presented at Ename International Colloquium on the Future of Heritage, Ghent Belgium. March 21-24, 2007).

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.



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