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LIS 529

DH Project Consultation

### **The Black Gotham Archive**

Carla Peterson, an English professor at the University of Maryland, created the Black Gotham Archive website as a supplement to her 2011 book titled *Black Gotham : A Family History of African Americans in Nineteenth-Century New York City* which details the lives and relationships of New York City's black elite, including Peterson's own family. The website serves as a digital archive connecting users to primary sources that were used in Peterson's book such as photographs, newspapers, and letters. Two unique features on the website are Peterson's family tree and a map listing specific locations that are mentioned in the book which are meant to help facilitate users' understanding of the subject matter. The Black Gotham Archive began out of Peterson's fellowship with the Maryland Institute for Technology in the Humanities where MITH members helped Peterson with web development and design. The following is a link to the Black Gotham Archive: <https://archive.blackgothamarchive.org>.

As the book title suggests, the primary subject of the archive is the history of black New Yorkers during the 1800s. This subject encompasses many topics given that the lives of these individuals are deeply intertwined with other historical events, locations, and non-black New York residents. These subjects include the founders of New York (aka Gotham), the Haitian Revolution, the Civil War, the Draft Riots, local government, and many more. Since Peterson began creating her book by tracing her family history, a genealogical component is added as another layer to the overall subject matter. She details the lives of her ancestors who were part of

the black aristocracy in New York and often owned local businesses and played significant roles in academia.

Luckily, Carla Peterson specifically outlines her intended audience and the goals of this project in the Black Gotham Archive and her personal blog. She states that the archive is meant to inform researchers, school teachers, New Yorkers, and tourists. Another audience member that I think could be added to this list are DH researchers who want to expand their understanding of DH work. The digital archive was built using Omeka which is a content management system that makes it more accessible for archivists to preserve information. This is a common tool used in DH and being able to view an implementation of it will definitely be of interest to DH researchers. Peterson states in the archive that one of the original goals with her book *Black Gotham* was to fulfill a generational wish to have her family's history and lives preserved. The scope naturally expanded from this into a larger goal of describing what life was like in New York from 1805 to 1895 from the perspective of black Gothamites. The goals for the digital archive align with the book but it also aims to give users a more interactive look at the book and Peterson's research.

Despite the archive being based on some of the more privileged black New Yorkers, this does not mean that they lived without blatant discrimination. It was because of the determination of Peterson's family and other members of the black elite to preserve their legacies that this archive was able to be made. By observing New York City through this generational lens, it also shines a general light on the black community during this time who did not have the ability or access to preserve their own history. Additionally, this information is often excluded from most American History curriculum and we need more DH projects like this to inform people about black history.

## **Strategy**

### **Content**

Since Peterson has done a great job researching for *Black Gotham* and the Black Gotham Archive, I wanted to focus more on modern resources that were updated before 2011 when her book was published. Instead of starting out by searching the UW Libraries for relevant information, I first took a look at the [list of Black DH projects](#) compiled by the [CCP](#) where I found the Black Gotham Experience and the Examination Days by keyword searching “New York” and “Gotham.” I chose to do this because I know that library collections and many publishing houses tend to exclude or minimize the history of people of color. Therefore, I wanted to locate DH projects that were created by black researchers in order to get a more accurate and respectful overview. There was another project on this list that I would have liked to use called Black New Yorkers, but the site had a lot of broken code which, unfortunately, made it impossible to use. The Examination Days project also had a problem with broken links, but I was able to locate what collection the archive was a part of and added that to the source list below.

Staying with New York City organizations, I took a look at the New York Public Library which houses the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture. I looked at the SCRBC research guides and found one on African American Genealogy and thought it would be useful for Peterson, especially since it was last updated in January of this year which means there might be new tools that Peterson didn’t previously have access to. Wanting to find more research guides, I searched “New York black history research guide” on Google and found the New York-Researching: Slavery in New York guide from Fordham University which had a lot of open access collections. Under the Public History Projects section in the guide, I found the Slavery and Resistance in NYC (1626-1865) DH project which shared a lot of similarities with the Black

Gotham Archive. This project helped form the basis for the technology recommendations listed below.

## **Technology**

Peterson states in one of her [blog posts](#) that she struggles with technology and that most of the technological work for the digital archive was done through collaboration with members of the MITH. Therefore, I wanted to make suggestions that I knew were either relatively easy to use or were familiar to the MITH staff. There were two main additions that I wanted to make for the Black Gotham Archive: an interactive map and an interactive family tree. Starting off with the easier of the two, I immediately looked to StoryMap JS since I had seen it used in class. The time spent creating the prototype was less than two hours and most of that was searching the archive to find relevant records, which I imagine would be easier for Peterson to do. This did lead me to realize that the archive needs some sort of search and filter option because I had to search through the entire archive each time I wanted a specific record. There was a post made by Peterson that states one of the future goals for the archive was to add an interactive map with Neatline, a storytelling software that works directly with Omeka. Unfortunately, I didn't see this post until much later in the prototyping process, so I'm still focusing more on StoryMap JS. The second recommendation, an interactive family tree, was much more complicated than I initially thought. At first I considered using D3.js, an open source data visualization software that I have used before, but it is very programming heavy which would fall out of bounds for Peterson. I then moved to Tableau because I knew it was a data viz software that many academic libraries offer. Luckily, I found a suitable [tutorial](#) by Eric Parker on how he used Tableau to make a family tree. The process wasn't necessarily easy and I had to directly build off Parker's Tableau worksheet and datasource, but given that the University of Maryland's Libraries offer workshops

on how to use Tableau, I think there is a specialist either at the Library or with MITH that can help further the prototype. Since the Tableau worksheet required an excel worksheet, I chose to house everything in a GitHub repository to make it directly accessible.

## **Resource Recommendations**

### **DH Projects**

- [The Black Gotham Experience](#): This project was started by historian and artist Kamau Ware as a walking tour to educate visitors about the experiences of black people in New York during the 19th century. It has since expanded into a larger network where talks, books, and exhibits have been published in person and online. If Peterson hasn't already looked at this organization, I would recommend that she go on one of the tours and check out BGX's video titled "[Fighting Dark](#)" which goes into detail about the Draft Riots and life for black Americans during the Civil War.
- [Examination Days: The New York African Free School Collection](#): This archive was created by the New York Historical Society to educate visitors on the New York African Free School, which is a major topic in the Black Gotham Archive. Two features that might be useful for Peterson are the [AFS Biographies](#), which includes individuals like Alexander Crummell and James McCune Smith who are both mentioned in the Black Gotham Archive, and the [related resources section](#). The website has a "Browse the Archive" tab, however, it appears to be broken since nothing loads in. Further searching revealed that the archive can be accessed through the NYHS's online catalog with [this](#) link.
- [Slavery and Resistance in NYC \(1626 - 1865\)](#): This DH project was created by Mariame Kaba and uses StoryMap.js. It highlights a lot of the same places that Peterson marks in the

archive, such as the Five Points, the African American Relief Hall, and the African Free School, and is an example of how the Black Gotham Archive could revamp their map.

## **Research Guides**

- [The African American Genealogy research guide](#): This guide was published by the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture which is part of the New York Public Library. The purpose of the guide is to help users track down the genealogy of African Americans that were taken to the US through the Atlantic Slave Trade.
- [New York - Researching: Slavery in New York](#): This is a research guide published by Fordham University Libraries. I was able to find multiple sources that related to the Black Gotham Archive, such as the Slavery and Resistance in NYC project listed earlier and a memoir on Pierre Toussaint.

## **Technology/Functionality Recommendations**

### **Functionality**

While the Black Gotham Archive is excellently curated and incorporated into a [narrative structure](#), searching the archive directly is not possible at this time. Users can browse the archive through tags, but they are pretty limited, and there is no way to filter through the results. The archive isn't that big, so it's not unreasonable to search the entire catalog to find something specific, but it would significantly increase the archive's functionality if a search and filter option were made available. The website was created using Omeka and it looks like there are [tutorials](#) that exist to help add searching capabilities to an Omeka site.

### **Interactive Map Prototype**

Since one of the goals of the Black Gotham Archive was to show the social geography of black New Yorkers during the 19th century, making the static map in the archive more dynamic

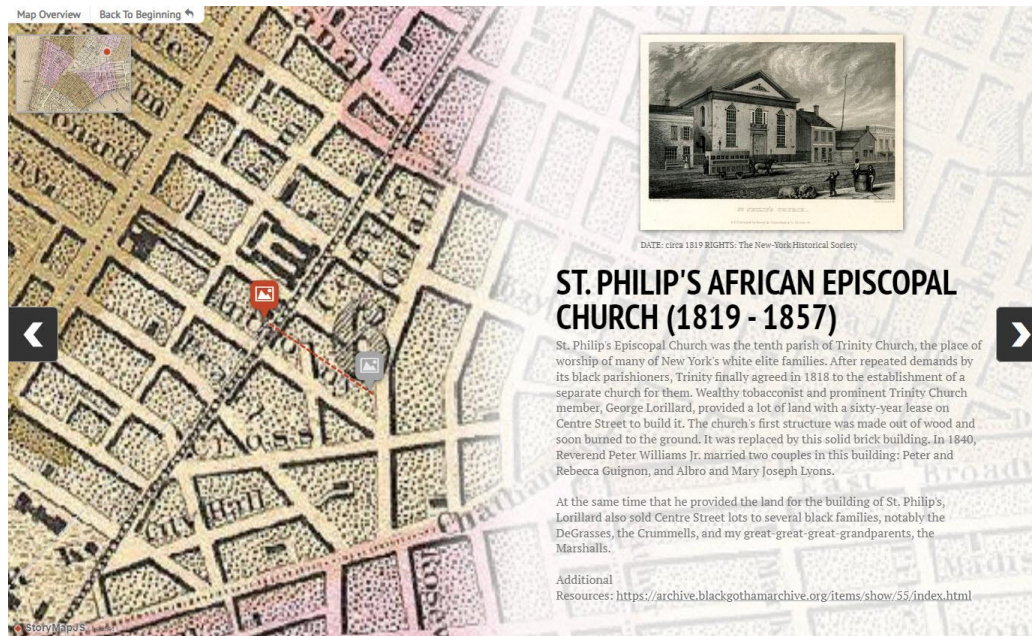
will add another level of interactivity to the website. A prototype showcasing this option was made using [StoryMap JS](#) which is an open source story mapping tool created by the Knight Lab at Northwestern University. [This](#) is the link to the prototype and there are also screenshots below showing specific parts of the map.

StoryMap JS has default background templates, however, they represent modern day maps which wouldn't work for the archive. Therefore, I needed to use a georeferenced map of New York in the 1800s. The Programming Historian has a [tutorial](#) detailing how to do this with [MapWarper](#) (note: the tutorial has broken links when directing users to MapWarper so you will either need to use the link provided in this report, or manually search MapWarper on a search engine). The next step was to add a pinpoint on the map that matches a location on the Black Gotham Archive static map. Once this pin was added, a corresponding record from the archive was copied and pasted into the provided text box. After doing this process two more times with different locations, we can view the preview version that users visiting the archive would see (Figures 1 and 2). StoryMap JS has an option to embed the map in a webpage making it easy to incorporate into the archive.



**Figure 1.** Screenshot of the Black Gotham Archive StoryMap JS prototype home page





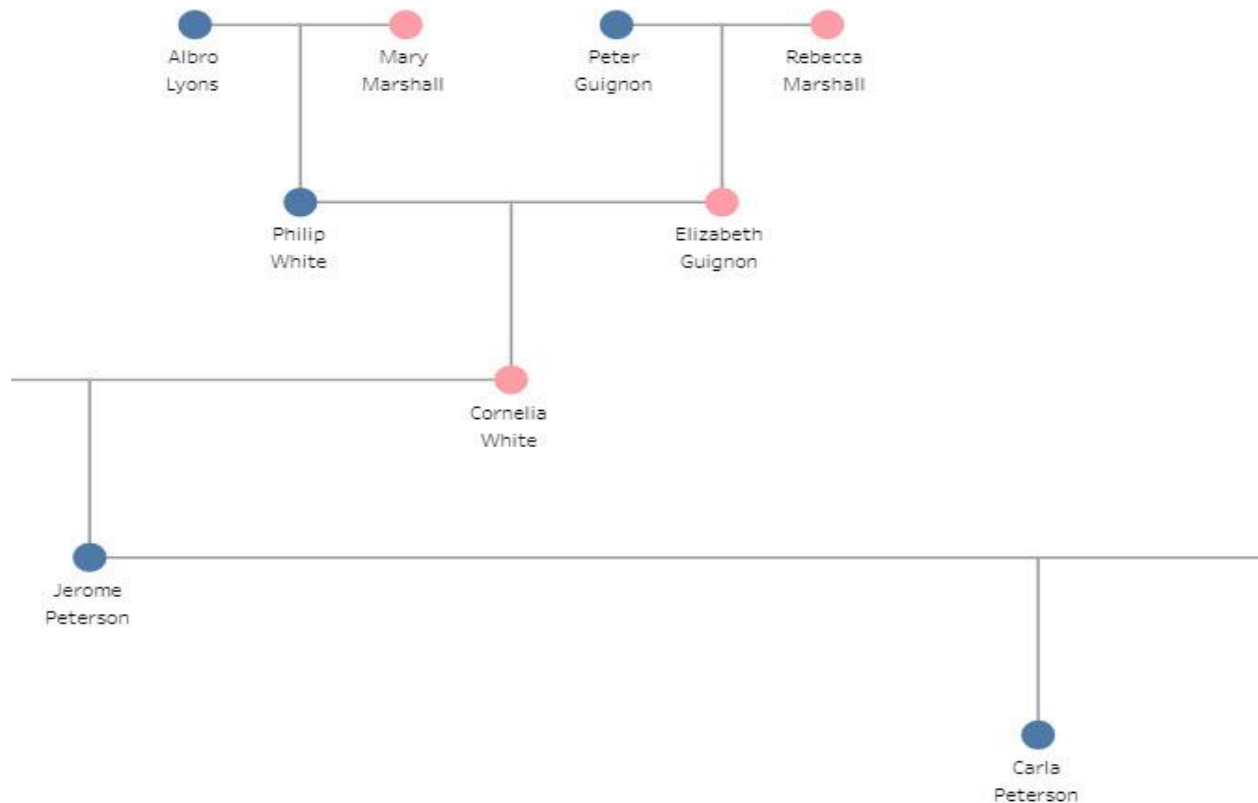
**Figure 2.** Screenshot of the Black Gotham Archive StoryMap JS prototype on a location

### Interactive Family Tree Prototype

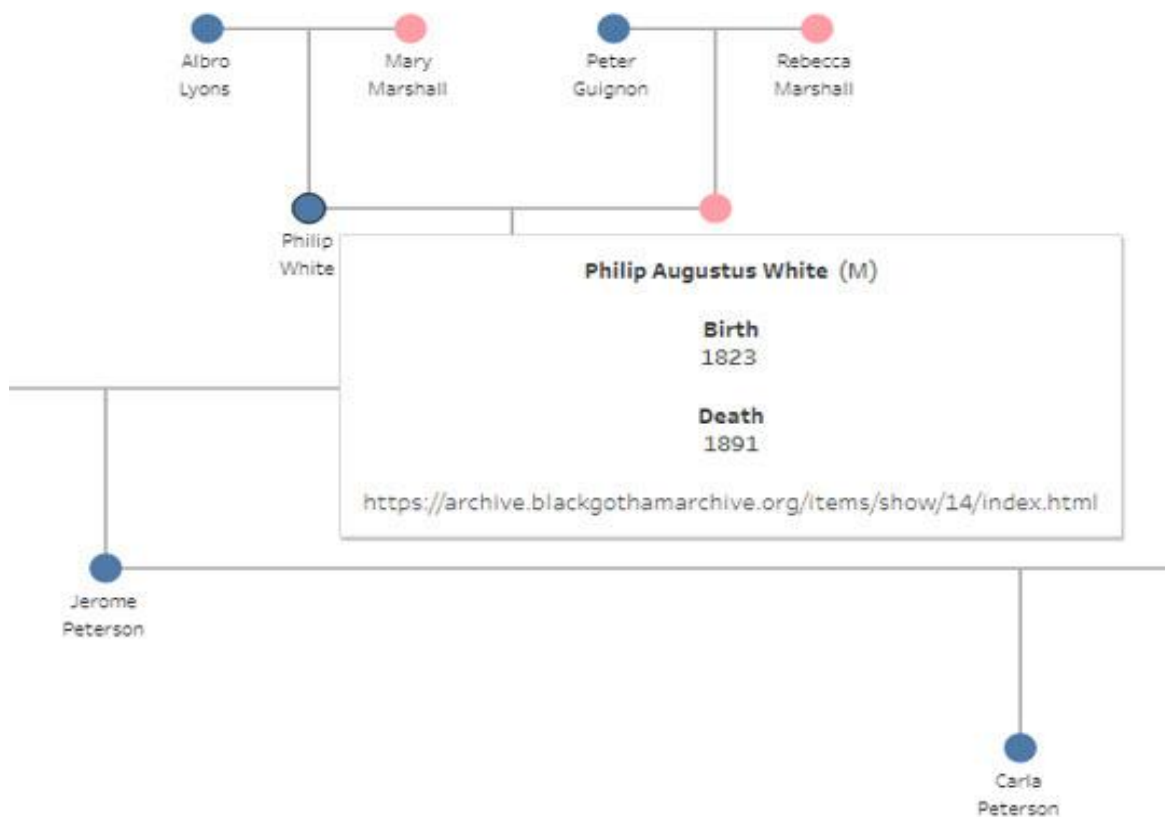
Another feature that I thought would make it easier for users to connect with the members of Peterson's family was to make the family tree interactive and connected to the archive. The idea behind this is that users can click on family members or hover over their names and see whether these individuals have corresponding records in the Black Gotham collection. The prototype to accomplish this was built using Tableau and [this](#) is the link to the published version of it. It is based on Eric Parker's tutorial mentioned in a previous section where users can click on family members to see when and where they were born. I downloaded Parker's Tableau worksheet and excel workbook to pick up where he left off instead of starting from scratch (with Parker's permission). Getting the datasource to show Peterson's family tree required deleting data fields and specific entries in both the "People Info" and "Paths" sheets. I also added a field called "Archive" which holds the URLs of records that correspond to the family member. I only constructed part of the family tree, as seen in the figures below, and someone with further



Tableau experience would be required to fill the rest of it. One problem to note is that the URLs don't direct users to the archive when they're clicked. There are ways of getting this feature to work, however, I was unable to accomplish this with the prototype. Like StoryMap JS, Tableau gives users the ability to embed the data visualization into a webpage.



**Figure 3.** Screenshot of Peterson's family tree using Tableau



**Figure 4.** Screenshot of Peterson's family tree using Tableau with the detailed tooltip showing a URL to the archive

### **Reflection**

Although Peterson gave me a lot to work with, especially in her blogs, what would have helped me the most is to talk with her about her information needs. I felt very comfortable with the technology side of things, but trying to determine whether a DH project or a research guide provided her with new knowledge was tough. For instance, there was a good amount of overlap between the Slavery and Resistance in NYC (1626 - 1865) project and the Black Gotham Archive which makes me wonder whether Carla Peterson and Mariame Kaba were ever colleagues or in contact with each other. I also would have wanted to know more about the strategy she had when researching her genealogy and finding records so I could figure out

whether I could find more primary sources. Besides this, I think I covered the topics relatively well even though I hadn't chosen the content focus. The recommendations were all either recently published or updated which means Peterson might not have been able to use them before writing her book.

I talked about this a little in the strategy section, but I came across a good amount of DH projects that were no longer being maintained and filled with dead links. This was frustrating because sometimes the subject matter was exactly what I needed. I also found that there were a lot of limitations when it came to technology as well. Starting out, I thought it would be easy to find some sort of family tree tool that had features to make it interactive. While there were a lot of free websites where I could create a family tree, none of them gave me the option to add further details that I could then embed to the website. I have a lot of programming experience so I did find some options that I knew could create exactly what I needed, but the amount of time spent coding this would be unfeasible for the researcher, library staff, or me. That's what led me to Tableau because I knew it was a standard data visualization tool that some librarians and data professionals could help with. I was still surprised to find that not that many people had been making family trees in Tableau, but all I needed was one tutorial to get me on the right track.

Adding these interactive features to the Black Gotham Archive would mean that Peterson and her collaborators would need to make sure that they continuously maintain the website. Although StoryMap JS and Tableau are great tools, they won't be supported forever and a management/preservation plan should probably be created in order to keep the archive from becoming another dead DH project. I would also love to see a collaboration between the Black Gotham Archive and the Black Gotham Experience because they cover many of the same topics