ADMINISTRATIVE ASPECTS

**Purpose:** The purpose of the Public Library of Cincinnati and Hamilton County’s (PLCHC) digital library is to house, preserve, exhibit and provide access to culturally significant materials, including images and text objects.

“Our Library has worked for the past seven years to create digital versions of important and rare documents for researchers. We are excited that… the amount and diversity of available documents will significantly expand and our ability to protect locally important historical documents will be greatly increased.”

- Kimber Fender, Eva Jane Romaine Coombe Director of the Public Library of Cincinnati and Hamilton County (OPLIN 2013)

While the digitization of materials has been in progress for over seven years, the digital library website, at least in its current form, has been available since 2014.

**Mission and Goals:** The mission of the digital library component of the PLCHC is to provide users with open access to rare print materials of local significance.

**User Community:** The community served by the PLCHC digital library are the citizens of Cincinnati and Hamilton County, historical researchers and curious outsiders. Since access to the digital objects is free and open through the digital library website, anyone can view them online.

**Partnerships and Affiliated Institutions:** For the past three years, PLCHC has been in partnership with the Cleveland Public Library, Columbus Metropolitan Library, and Toledo-Lucas County Public Library on a statewide digitization project. The partnership is part of a digital initiative enacted by the Ohio Public Library Information Network (OPLIN). The goal of the Digitization Hubs project is to “expand, standardize, and coordinate the digitization programs located in Cleveland, Columbus, Cincinnati, and Toledo, and to develop a statewide program for digitizing and accessing materials of local and state importance” (OPLIN 2013).

The Preservation Lab is a collaborative project of the PLCHC and the University of Cincinnati Libraries to preserve and circulate rare materials of cultural significance (Preservation Lab n.d.). The website for the Preservation Lab contains a blog with conservation and digitization news: 

http://thepreservationlab.org/the-news/

**Funding:** In 2013, PLCHC received $189,464 ($56,600 from OPLIN and $132,864 in federal Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) LSTA funds from the State Library of Ohio) to fund their digitization project over a period of three years (OPLIN 2013). The funds were used to purchase digitization equipment.
COLLECTION CONTENT

Collection Development Policy: There is no collection development policy specific to the digital library department, but the policy of the PLCHC system provides that items considered for selection must meet the criteria of quality of content, cost, appeal, format, local interest, and relationship to the existing collection. In addition to PLCHC’s general collection development policy, considerations for preservation of materials include cost (including item value and cost of preservation), intellectual content, intrinsic value, historical significance, uniqueness, and storage and environmental capabilities.

Scope of Digital Collections: The PLCHC’s digital collection contains nearly 9 million items that range in date from the Middle Ages to present time.

Types of Objects: The items in the PLCHC’s digital collection are existing primary resources and include still images and text materials. These visual objects include items such as “social directories, family and regional histories, property tax assessments, street directories, descriptions of Cincinnati landmarks, neighborhoods, institutions, historic events and biographies of prominent citizens” and much more (OCLC 2015).

Collection Themes: Themes of PLCHC’s digital collections include local history, genealogy, nature studies, business, arts, and memorabilia.

INFORMATION ORGANIZATION

Metadata Standards: The CONTENTdm platform employs Dublin Core standards for metadata. PLCHC’s digital library uses the metadata elements title, creator, subject, description, publisher, contributor, date, type, format, identifier, and rights.
Digital libraries that provide access to cultural heritage objects “need to document a wider variety of item attributes in their metadata than need to be documented by their colleagues developing STEM digital libraries, and to pay particular attention to documenting the persons and places in their metadata” (Zavalina 2013). As an exhibitor of mainly cultural heritage objects, PLCHC digital library successfully enhances item discoverability by providing in-depth descriptive detail.

**Vocabularies:** Records of digital items in PLCHC’s collection contain Library of Congress Subject Headings (LCSH) and the Dublin Core Metadata Element Set (DCMI).

**Content:** Materials are organized by collection. Each collection has a homepage with a brief description of the scope and content of the collection and a list of relevant topics. Collection homepages also feature thumbnail images with samples of collection materials.

**COLLECTION STORAGE AND PRESERVATION**

The majority of the PLCHC’s digital collection are physical objects that have been digitized.

**Preservation:** The physical items that generated the digital objects in the library undergo preservation treatment by the Preservation Lab team and are stored in archival enclosures.

**Digitization:** While the Preservation Lab website contains pages describing the handling and treatment of materials, not much information regarding the digitization of these objects is disclosed.

**File Formats:**
- **Still Images/Text:** pdf, jpg, cpd

**COLLECTION ACCESS**

**Software:** The PLCHC digital library is run using CONTENTdm, a proprietary software offered by the Online Computer Library Center (OCLC 2015).

**Search Usability:** The search functions of the digital library are generally intuitive and easy to use. The landing page of the site displays a list of PLCHC’s digital collections with a brief summary of their contents. While it is handy to have a complete list of the digital library’s collections, it may be overwhelming for users to be confronted with so much information on the home page. As Marshall Breeding put it, “rather than try to anticipate every possible situation on the top-level pages, you should ensure that all that information can easily be discovered” (2014).
On the landing page users have the option to use the search bar page or to select Advanced Search'. If users wish to view a listing of all of the items in the collection with more detailed information, they may click the ‘Explore the Digital Library’ tab.

**Search Results:** Search results are sorted in order by relevance and are displayed in a grid format. The user has the option to sort the results using a different element, such as title, subject, description and date created. Details listed in the result previews include thumbnail image, title, subject, collection and date.
Search Features: Using the Advanced Search tool, users can search for multiple terms in multiple categories simultaneously. The categories include title, subject, description, creator, type and format. Users can also select the Boolean operators ‘AND’ or ‘OR’. Users can decide whether they want to search for ‘all of the words’, ‘any of the words’, ‘none of the words’ or ‘exact phrase’. The user can add as many fields as they like.
Users can narrow their results by using the sidebar on the search results page. Narrowing search results is an important function, as “users of visual information typically—not always—start searches broadly and narrow down as needed, such as when the context or need becomes clearer and/or further specified” (Albertson 2015).

Item Display: Items are displayed in an image viewer with which users can resize or rotate each image. Descriptive metadata elements are listed under the image. The ability to resize the objects helps to enhance visibility for visually impaired users. The text content of text objects is also listed in the item metadata, which is helpful for materials that are difficult to read.
Privacy: The PLCHC uses Comodo High Assurance SSL data encryption to protect the privacy and security of its users (PLCHC n.d.).

Accessibility: While the PLCHC home website provides information regarding assistance for special needs individuals, the digital library site does not appear to offer any specific services.

PLCHC’s digital library uses the CONTENTdm platform, which is not fully interoperable with screen reader software for visually impaired users. A recent usability study in which a blind user browsed another CONTENTdm collection using a screen reader proved the student had significant difficulty navigating different object types and linked metadata (Walker 2015).

TECHNICAL AND SERVICE ASPECTS

Access: The materials in the PLCHC’s digital collection are free and open for public viewing. Users also have the options to print, download or share the objects on a number of social media platforms.

Assistance: The CONTENTdm platform offers a “Help” feature with tips for searching and a ‘Contact Us’ page for email assistance. While for the most part the search interface is fairly intuitive, it would be beneficial to users of the digital library, especially those that lack tech experience, to have additional help services, like pathfinders, or FAQs. User guides are especially recommended; “even experienced researchers now need training in searching… [as] search interfaces are indeed not keeping pace with the quantity of content now available in databases, and with the current needs of users” (DeRidder 2014).

Though the digital library does have a collection of Finding Aids & Inventories specific to PLCHC’s digital collections, it is not very prominently displayed on the site. Because the Finding Aids & Inventories collection is nestled with the rest, users may overlook it and not realize that finding aids are available.

For virtual assistance “Conventional communication tools are not able to deliver the flexibility and collaborative functionality necessary to effectively collect and resolve user feedback” (Constantino 2011). In addition to providing users with more effective assistance, collaborative tools would allow PLCHC’s digital library to collect useful data related to the functionality of its web platform.

It should be noted that the PLCHC’s home website does offer chat, e-mail and text assistance, but these features are not available on the digital library website.

Copyright Policy: The digital library does not seem to have a clear-cut copyright policy. Instead, the copyright element of each item description reads, “Please contact the Public Library of Cincinnati and Hamilton County for information regarding copyright.”
References:


