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Participatory Community Archiving to Preserve and Sustain North Georgia Appalachia's Language, Literacy Practices, and Histories

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Abstract

This case study presents Swappin' Stories, a community-based archiving event that serves as a model for public and participatory archiving. The event aimed to address gaps and misrepresentations of Southern Appalachia by gathering the voices, artifacts, and stories of Towns County residents. By centering local narratives, it sought to foster a sense of community identity and offer an authentic portrayal of North Georgia, distinct from the narratives shaped by popular media and political figures. This case highlights the potential of community-driven archives to reclaim and reshape regional histories.

Introduction

On a cool summer morning we, the authors, gathered as a team to share breakfast, prepare for the busy day, and enjoy our view of the sun rising over the Appalachian mountains that run through Towns County, GA. "There's not a deficit of knowledge," Presley explained, "There's a deficit of easily *accessible* knowledge." Lindsey nodded in agreement, "In that absence people like J.D. Vance become a spokesperson for Appalachia, but his experience is his experience. He can't paint an entire region with the same brush." The conversation, just two weeks before J.D. Vance would be named as Republican presidential candidate Donald Trump's running mate for the 2024 election, considered the weightiness of what we were embarking on that day: a participatory community archiving event that sought to collect, digitize, and preserve Appalachian histories, languages, and literacy practices for North Georgia.

Digital archive collections tied to place are common within libraries, archives, and museums (Ahlfeld, 2021). Small-scale, open-source backed projects create educational resources and enhance collaboration, especially in the context of place-based education (Ingram-Monteiro & McKernan, 2022). Localized projects bring together physical, digital, visual, and aural elements to craft interactive archives that engage in historical storytelling and democratize access to historical knowledge (Tebeau, 2013). For example, Beel and Wallace (2020) cocreated a historical archive with a rural Scottish community to capture, preserve, and digitize a historical narrative of cultural heritage built and sustained among community members. While challenging, the work resulted in a growing expertise among community members who better understood and took ownership over maintaining a historical sense of place and community identity.

Libraries are also sites for collaboration with community partners. Lamb (2019) describes how partnerships "expand the scope" of projects and "have a broader impact" (p. 61). This is particularly true when designing archives that require civil discourse to understand multiple, competing narratives of community heritage. Attuning our work to the local community ensures oral histories and archiving aren't

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"disembodied from its geographical and historical contexts" but have a rootedness in place that makes the oral histories "more vital and explanatory" (Tebeau, 2013).

Developing these relationships takes patience and persistence that start at the individual level and with active community members' interests (Ballard & Bertram, 2023). Often, small scale archival projects, particularly in rural areas, become more closely aligned with family genealogy (Nash, 2003/2020). Family historians often employ narrative templates and present-day moral judgments when constructing their ancestors' stories; these practices have been shown to build historical consciousness and empathy (Shaw & Donnelly, 2021). Small scale community archiving is a starting point to growing deeper community connections while building radical empathy—a stepping stone towards the larger scale goals of building a sense of place and community identity.

In this case study, we detail Swappin' Stories as a community-based archiving event and translatable model for public and participatory archiving. This event sought to fill absences and misrepresentations of Southern Appalachia with the voices, artifacts, and stories of Towns County residents; and ultimately, to build a sense of community identity that tells its own narrative of North Georgia, one not shaped by popular media and political figures.

Collaborators with a Cause

Swappin' Stories demonstrates a confluence of community-based interests resulting in innovative collaborations between university archives, library information systems, educators, and a county historical society to intentionally digitize, preserve, and sustain Appalachian histories, languages, and literacy practices in Towns County, GA.

Lindsey, a native of Hiawassee, GA, former Towns County public school teacher, and a literacy scholar met Leah, a professor of literacy education interested in Appalachian language and literacy practices, at a national research conference. Lindsey noticed Leah's name amongst the crowd of researchers when she saw Georgia listed as the state of residence. She introduced herself by stating, "I know my nametag says Texas," she explained meaningfully, "but I am from Northeast Georgia, in the mountains. I am Appalachian." This chance meeting quickly took root and germinated into a partnership exploring recent research showing Appalachian language and literacy practices are present (Donehower, 2003; Hasty & Childs, 2021; Foxfire, n.d.; Wolfram, 1984) yet their representation in archives and archivable texts is limited or absent (Anderson et al., 2014). Desiring to preserve the history of language and literacy in North Georgia, Lindsey and her childhood friend from Towns County, Presley, a metadata librarian at the Georgia Institute of Technology, launched a systematic literature review to identify where North Georgia's Appalachian histories, languages, and literacy practices were permanently archived. From that work, they found major gaps in archival efforts and a new mission bloomed: a community-based response.

The integration of community archiving into libraries is an intentional movement to preserve diverse historical narratives, particularly with marginalized voices (Ahlfeld, 2021). Appalachia is one such marginalized voice within literature, media, and archives. Scholars suggest this is due to stereotypes of illiteracy (Peine et al., 2020), classism (Powers, 2002; Webb-Sunderhaus, 2016), or Appalachians choosing a protective silence (Tennant, 2022). Lisa Parker (2010) explains:

> I have whitewashed my South Appalachian to an understandable hue, put those regional words in jars with lace lids, breath held, for the scholarly nods. That approval is almost enough to tolerate knowing that between what I am and what I write something is rotting (p. 20).

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The first goal for the collaborative became opening the jars that Towns County residents may keep their language, literacy practices, and histories preserved in.

Remembering fondly their middle and high school experiences with history teachers who took them to historical sites throughout North Georgia, Lindsey reached out to the current Towns County Historical Society (TCHS) president to join the growing collaboration. He then reached out to a former local history teacher, Jerry Taylor, now the Towns County historian and immediate past president of the TCHS. In these initial meetings, Jerry and Tyler, shared that Towns County is currently the most underrepresented county in the state in terms of digital archiving. This led to key questions for the collaborative team to consider: What would it look like to create a permanent digital archive to preserve the histories, languages, and literacy practices of North Georgia's Appalachian region? And furthermore, what would we do with those artifacts once they were preserved? The second goal for the collaboration became collecting, digitizing, and preserving Towns County history to address its status as the least represented county in the state.

Finally, we continued to wonder if we could intentionally curate the community archive not just for preservation, but for use aligned with the school and community educational standards. At that point, Lindsey, brought in her cousin Kerri, an English teacher in Towns County Public Schools, completing our team (Table 1). This intentionally considered the future project as multigenerational: preserving the past in the present with the intention of teaching and shaping the future of the county.

Table 1. Team Members for Swappin' Stories

Team Member (By Introduction)	Affiliation and Title	Roles
Lindsey Walker	Doctoral Candidate Texas Woman's University	• Recruit and lead collaborative team • Collect donor forms • Lead oral history interviews
Leah Panther	Associate Professor of Literacy Education Mercer University	• Primary investigator for grant funding and program evaluation • Train and supervise research assistants and volunteers • Liaison with university archives and program site
Presley Dyer	Metadata Librarian Georgia Institute of Technology	• Create metadata system for artifacts • Quality control of digitization • Maintain metadata
Tyler Osborn	President TCHS	• Advertise event and disseminate results • Recruit volunteers • Lead site-based corroboration team visits
Kerri Abernathy	Middle School English Teacher Towns County Public Schools	• Lead folklore and map stories data collection • Develop and implement

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Representing various affiliations with a shared interest in preservation of Appalachian history, languages, and literacy practices, we began meeting regularly to design a collaborative project. This work began by clearly articulating our individual and shared goals:

1. **Collect, digitize, and preserve Towns County history**: Address the pressing concern that it is the least digitized and preserved county in the state.

2. **Preserve Appalachian language, literacy practices, and histories**: Making the results of preservation accessible for language, literacy, history, and educational scholars, and meaningful for school and community-based educators.

3. **Support the TCHS**: As a volunteer-led organization dependent on donations, we sought to build a foundation that demonstrates the society is a viable organization well poised to receive capital funding, grants, and investments for a research room and archival space.

To meet these goals, we launched Swappin' Stories, a weeklong project aimed at strategically meeting these key goals drawing from the strengths of our collaborators and community.

Preparing for Swappin' Stories

Preparing for the one-week event centered on learning, locations, and advertisement.

Learning. To begin, team members visited various archives and libraries that support archives, including the Georgia Archives, as a way of studying digitization, getting support in purchasing and training on new equipment, and building the metadata structures that would ensure we weren't just digitizing but setting up systems for long-term preservation.

Location. With materials and knowledge in hand, we wanted to identify the most appropriate location to invite the public to the event. We sought to find a central location within the county that would provide easy access for all community members, including identifying a space that was Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) accessible, had a variety of noiseproof spaces for audio recording, and, if possible, was low-cost. McConnell Baptist Church volunteered their space, located on the main street of Hiawassee in the center of Towns County, for free.

Advertising. We began advertising and created a press release that was turned into a newspaper article (The Towns County Herald, 2024). We leveraged social media platforms, including groups related to Towns County, Towns County history, and North Georgia, and presented at historical society meetings and the Chamber of Commerce website. In order to ensure we were reaching the target audiences from whom we hoped to collect oral histories and artifacts, we also set up a local toll-free number that could be called for folks to set up appointments to come in with materials to be archived, or they could simply drop in with walk-in appointments made on the spot.

In response to questions from community members posed during meetings and on social media, we went one step further to create an overview video that demonstrated the process of archiving so community members would know exactly what to expect on the day of the event.

Community Archiving

The project took place over the course of a week (Table 2) with three days devoted to the public facing archiving event. Given the importance of being communally located and collaborating throughout the week, we planned to gather daily for shared meals to prepare for each day and debrief from the day's events. This created a long, intensive week, but allowed each team member to be present and focused on the project throughout the week.

Table 2. Swappin' Stories Schedule

Day 1	• Breakfast and planning meeting • Set up of location • Testing of technology • Training the team • Several invited guests arrived to practice the archiving process • Shared dinner to debrief
Day 2	• Metadata work time • Lunch and planning meeting • Public event from 1:00 p.m. to 7:00 p.m. • Shared dinner to debrief
Day 3	• Metadata work time • Lunch and planning meeting • Public event from 1:00 p.m. to 7:00 p.m. • Shared dinner to debrief
Day 4	• Team One: Metadata work time • Team Two: Curriculum creation and archival research • Team Three: Site-based visits and home visits
Day 5	• Team One: Metadata work time • Team Two: Curriculum creation and archival research • Team Three: Site-based visits and home visits
Day 6	• Breakfast and debrief • Assigning continued roles and responsibilities • Planning for future

The first day was reserved for setting up the archival spaces with technology, signage, and materials. After testing the equipment, volunteers from the TCHS were brought in for training. Training included moving through the process once from the point of view of guests, and then a second time with systematic training and practice with each room, technology, and process. Then, several specially invited guests were invited to attend the event one day early as our test cases. This allowed us to move through the process slowly and identify questions, gaps, or additional needs. While extensive literature exists on how to recruit and train volunteers in archival spaces (e.g., Taylor, 2016), we were dependent on self-selected volunteers that were essential to the community-based and participatory nature of the program. Crowdsourcing is a popular approach with

volunteers in physical and digital spaces transcribing, correcting, classifying, tagging, contextualizing, and even supplementing artifacts with their own materials, experiences, and knowledge (Graf, 2024). Our volunteers as active Historical Society members and community residents often did just that: bringing their own materials for archiving, adding to oral histories, and adding contextualizing information to artifacts that were donated.

The next two consecutive weekdays we held the public facing participatory archiving event between 1:00 p.m. to 7:00 p.m. to allow ample time for people with different schedules to attend. When a community member entered the space, they were greeted and had a central space where they could sit to begin working on paperwork. During the intake, the release form

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was explained, which clarified that any artifacts brought in would leave with the community member and remain their property. We were only creating a digital copy that could be used by the Historical Society and Kennesaw State University for public education and research. The items were also examined to ensure they were in good repair, were not copyrighted, and were of interest to the Historical Society.

We invited each community participant to limit what they brought to 10 items, with a preference for print-based items. This was to ensure ample time during each appointment to give a full history of the most meaningful items that were brought in for preservation. Each community member was also invited to complete an inventory intake form (Figure 1), including information such as their name, a title for the item, the type of item, the subjects, and a brief description. The intake volunteer offered transcription accommodations for community members upon request. This helped expedite the metadata process.

Once these forms were completed, participants were led to a room for archiving purposes. We had three rooms set up to take community members for archiving. Each room had two to three volunteers (Figure 2). The participant would sit at a small table next to a microphone equipped with a pop shield to create a high-quality recording of their oral histories. They also had space on the table for their items and inventory sheets, which they would hand over to one of the volunteers.

Each volunteer had a computer that assisted in recording and saving the digital data. Additionally, there was an external hard drive in each room to back up the digital data, and either a flatbed or overhead book scanner to record images of the items. We also supplied each room with gloves for handling the items and glass cleaner for in-between scans. One volunteer would scan the items and record the metadata along with the audio. The second volunteer would help with additional tasks, such as doing the physical scanning, cleaning, completing a print version of the metadata, or posing the oral history interview questions.
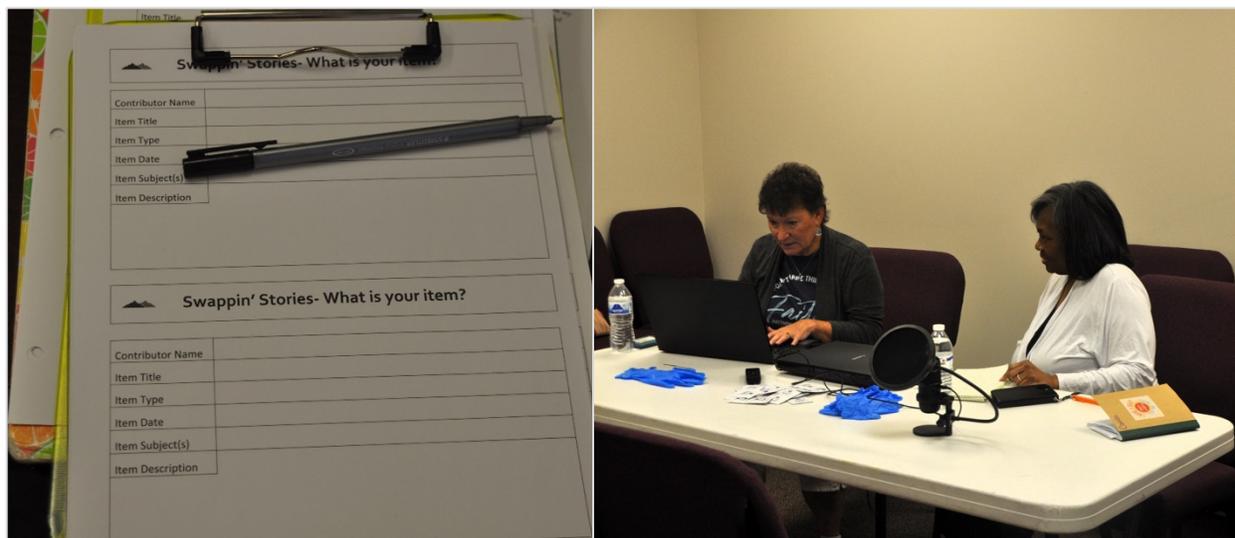

Figure 1. (left) The inventory form helped collect and corroborate metadata for ease of data management. **Figure 2. (right)** Each archiving room was a small conference room prearranged to ensure high quality digitization of artifacts and oral histories.

Figure 3. Kerri records the oral history of a community member while Presley records metadata and a volunteer scans the artifacts and adds additional information to the inventory sheet.

Each participant was asked about every item they brought in for four purposes. This was first to record metadata about the item, second to understand the history surrounding each item, and third to clarify and understand the connection between that item and Towns County history. Finally, fourth to audio record and hear authentic examples of Appalachian language and literacy practices in action (Figure 3). During each session, the items and artifacts that were brought in became, first and foremost, a digital copy or version that was then connected to metadata—information that would help tag and locate the item and make it easily findable to others who were looking to understand the history of Towns County, Appalachian language and literacy practices, historical events, or geographic features. Most importantly, each of these items was fully humanized because they were tagged with an audio recording and

transcript that provided an oral history to further contextualize the item.

University Archives. It's important to understand that digitization does not mean preservation. Once digital sets of items were collected and aligned with metadata, the next step was to establish a permanent, publicly accessible space for preserving these artifacts. Kennesaw State University has a vested interest in preserving North Georgia histories and the executive director of Museums, Archives and Rare Books in the University Archives and Special Collections agreed to create a special collection for Towns County. This collection, still in process as of printing, will feature a welcome banner, searchable entries arranged by contributor, and subpages with the oral histories explaining and contextualizing each artifact.

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Figure 4. The interactive county map and one community member sharing her stories of place names.

School and Community Education

At our community archiving event, we invited local community members to share stories and content that went beyond what would be publicly available in the archive. Instead, these contributions will be preserved exclusively for the local school system to sustain Appalachian language, literacy practices, and histories, helping to build a strong sense of community identity and belonging. One station focused on Appalachian folklore, where participants could record their favorite county stories, old wives' tales, and unique "Appalachia isms." Another feature of the event was a room with a large, laminated map, displaying unnamed roads, bodies of water, and community names in red (Figure 4). Community members were encouraged to interact with the map by adding additional place names, sites of interest, and personal memories using dry-erase markers. To further capture a sense of community place, we provided audio and video recording stations where attendees shared "name stories"—such as how "heir line," a property boundary between two siblings, was misinterpreted to become "Airline Road," even though the county has no airport. This interactive approach gave community members a unique opportunity to preserve their stories, fostering a collective memory while contributing to a deeper understanding of local history.

School-Based Connections. Building on the recordings from the Appalachia folklore station and the map room, Leah and Kerri worked to develop meaningful curricular resources. First, they curated text sets around common concepts and themes that align with state educational standards while also providing a strong local connection. This grew into a revised middle level English curriculum that weaves Appalachian language, literacy practices, and histories into each unit. Every unit features local texts, including digital artifacts, folklore recordings, map room videos, and works from Foxfire, local poets, authors, and creators. For example, a Georgia middle grades English language arts standard requires students to "deconstruct words using etymology, Greek and Latin roots, root words, and affixes." Drawing on local name stories, we developed a dictionary of Cherokee words and root words to help students uncover the meanings behind county place names (Figure 5).

Community Education. We also contributed to community education efforts with the TCHS in several impactful ways. First, we created a photo wall featuring unidentified historical images to engage the community in identifying and documenting their content. Throughout the public event, we updated the wall with a variety of photographs from the TCHS collection, some of which had been published in *The Pictorial*

Cherokee (Tsalagi) Roots

(setting students up to be language and place detectives)

Cherokee (Tsalagi) Root	Pronunciation	Meaning
Yona	Yo-nah	Bear
Wahya	Wah-hya	Wolf
Hawiya	Hah-wee-yah	Meat
Nuna	Noo-nah	Potatoes
Ata	Ah-tah	Young girl
Dalonige	Dah-lo-nee-gay	Yellow
Tsisqua	Chee-s-quah	Bird
Equoni	A-quo-nee	River

Figure 5. The Cherokee dictionary is available for students to investigate local place names.

Figure 6. The unnamed photo wall became a gathering place for metadata and conversation.

History of Towns County (Towns County Chamber of Commerce, 1992) without identifying details.

Each photograph was placed in a protective sleeve, and participants were encouraged to provide metadata—such as who, what, where, and why—using transparent Post-it note tabs that could be applied directly to the images without causing damage (Figure 6). This interactive wall became a gathering spot for community members waiting for their turn in the archiving process, as well as for those who wished to contribute but didn't have items to archive. Positioned in a central hallway, the space naturally facilitated rich conversations and storytelling that captured local history, language, and literacy practices. A volunteer was stationed at the photo wall to encourage community members to visit the storytelling booth and record the meaningful stories and insights that emerged from these interactions.

Second, to support the TCHS the research team continued their work postevent for three additional days. This allowed time for Presley to work on the metadata for public archive artifacts, for Leah and Kerri to work on school-based use of the artifacts, and for additional team members, led by Lindsey and Tyler, to find additional corroborating information about the oral history interviews and artifacts. This took several forms including visiting a range of sites mentioned in the oral histories to capture visuals that enhanced the stories, completing oral history interviews via home visits to those who couldn't travel, and completing archival and digital archival research to identify existing historical artifacts that verify participants' stories. These efforts were important for corroborating and building historical narratives about Towns County that could be shared beyond Appalachia.

For instance, a brick was donated to the TCHS during the archiving event, with the donors explaining it had been made by enslaved

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persons in Towns County. They shared the story of how the brick came into their possession. The research team visited the site the brick was said to have originated, identifying it as a former stagecoach stop owned by a prominent family. An oral history interview with a local historian specializing in Black history confirmed longstanding accounts of enslaved persons working at the site. Further archival research, including the 1860 census, revealed that 62 enslaved persons had been recorded in Towns County. This verified the historical narrative tied to the donated artifact through a combination of site visits, oral histories, and archival research, challenging the previously dismissed narratives of Black history and enslavement within the county.

Conclusions and Looking Forward

The participatory archiving event brought together 25 community participants, collected 18 oral histories, digitized 445 items for permanent preservation, secured two donations to the Historical Society, documented 10 folklore stories, captured 30 place stories, and unearthed several previously unseen photographs and documents. The potential impact of these contributions is immense. Penrose's (2020) 25-year study of historical interpretation at the Anne Frank House demonstrates the powerful connection between visitors and history when authentic objects, selective texts, photographs, and videos are used to create a meaningful narrative. The museum's storytelling practices, particularly the integration of Anne Frank's writings, forge a personal connection between visitors and historical events. Similarly, as Eskin (2018) noted, when engagement is sparked by a physical object, the audience becomes "invested in the object . . . and the humans who made and consumed it" (p. 39). From enriching the local school curriculum, to expanding community education events, to inspiring future collaborations, the work has the capacity to shape and sustain the county's historical narrative, community identity, and belonging.

As we continue shaping the digital archive, school curriculum, and community education around these historical narratives, we remain mindful of both accuracy—"the extent to which a text's representation is consistent with available evidence"—and authenticity—creating "an impression of accuracy" or belief "that a representation captures the past" (Saxton, 2020, p. 127). Given that previous accounts of North Georgia's Appalachian region have been shaped by stereotypes and erasures, this work is especially purposeful. Rooted in the authentic histories, languages, and literacy practices of the community, it ensures that these narratives are crafted by the community, for the community, and will be sustained beyond the community.

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Presley Dyer is the metadata librarian at Georgia Tech Library

Tyler Osborn is the president of the Towns County Historical Society

Kerri Abernathy is an educator at Towns County Public Schools

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