



The Resilience Project: Centering St. Augustine's Black Heritage Online

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Introduction

In Spring 2020, the Saint Augustine Archival Society, an informal association of museum and archive workers in the city, grappled with the dual pandemics of COVID-19 and racial injustice. In the wake of George Floyd's murder and the world-wide demonstrations, a central question emerged: as stewards of history, how could we better amplify the city's Black heritage and support the sites that interpret local Black history? What resulted was *Resilience: Black Heritage in St. Augustine*, a year-long collaborative project that involved the participation of over 14 different institutions in Northeast Florida.

Throughout 2021, participating institutions explored ways to incorporate more Black history into their programming. The project was not funded formally; some organizations sought grants to support their programming while others pooled talent and resources to keep virtual programming free and accessible to the community. Creative solutions using open-source software allowed the *Resilience* partners to connect community members with new resources.

This type of public remembrance has precedence in St. Augustine. In 1964-1965, St. Augustine's 400th celebration became a flashpoint of civil rights activism, mainly due to its segregated nature. The 400th celebration centered the city's Spanish heritage and wrote out its equally lengthy Black history. Fifty years later, members of the St. Augustine 450th Commemoration avoided repeating the mistakes from the past with the production of *Journey: 450 Years of the African-American Experience*, a temporary exhibition at the Visitor Information Center, which presented "the important role African-Americans played in the historical and cultural development of America."¹

Resilience has created digital products that will remain available to community members, students and scholars for years to come. In a city with a monumental impact on the African American history of Florida and the Southeast region, *Resilience* has helped to elevate the community's awareness of an important piece of the heritage we all share.

Digital Disruption in History-Telling

St. Augustine's recorded histories focus largely on its Hispanic roots. Though this is a significant part of the city's and Florida's story, a European and white-centric focus leaves out the stories of the any diverse members of the community, especially those of Black St. Augustinians. *Resilience* intended to disrupt the existing dominant narrative by making space for Black history to shine. However, the COVID-19 pandemic loomed ever-present over *Resilience*, forcing many planned in-person events and exhibits to pivot online. Despite this additional and unexpected challenge, the project partners found ways to create meaningful and lasting impacts by fostering conversation and connection through digital tools.

To bring together the many threads of Black history interwoven into the city and scattered across the internet, *Resilience* collaborators created a website utilizing the free, open-source software WordPress. The website began as a way to centralize the project, but soon became a comprehensive starting point for anyone interested in learning more about local Black experiences. It features institutions and places to visit, archives and collections, educational resources, and a calendar of virtual and in-person events.

Additionally, *Resilience* collaborators looked inward examining their collections and institutional stories for previously excluded or ignored BIPOC voices. This work resulted in the creation of a complimentary digital collection by Flagler College Proctor Library. Using the free and open-source software Omeka, 11 of the collaborating institutions uploaded artifacts from their collections. While the project concluded at the end of 2021, *Resilience's* WordPress and Omeka sites are intended to live on, continually being edited and added to for the foreseeable future.

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Thinking Outside "The Museum"

Even before the onset of the pandemic, GLAM professionals understood that many people do not feel like they belong and are uncomfortable in traditional museum and library spaces. A significant consideration in our planning of the project was how to best connect our efforts with visitors from diverse backgrounds in a meaningful way. While COVID-19 certainly created new problems and uncertainties for each institution, it also presented us with the opportunity to try something new.

We wondered: would forming partnerships with one another create a bridge for new audiences? Could we introduce our community to the larger *Resilience* project by taking authentic museum experiences outside the walls of our buildings? Several institutions collaborated with one another in myriad partnerships to create virtual programming and try to bring the museum to the community virtually, but two particularly successful examples stand out due to the wide involvement of *Resilience* partners and the innovative strategies implemented to connect with and bring history to the community in new and unique ways.

Example 1: The St. Johns County Public Library System recorded a series of virtual interviews and museum tours with various *Resilience* partners throughout the year for the library's website and social media pages. In *Local HERstory: Women of Lincolville*, viewers toured the *Women Who Made a Difference* exhibit at the Lincolville Museum and Cultural Center. The video tour included examples of related books available to borrow through the library in an effort to further connect community members to local history resources. These museum tours were among the library's most viewed adult virtual programs in 2021 and remain available on YouTube.

WASHING AWAY HISTORY

Washing Away History: Changing Tides at Fort Mose
Thursday, July 1, 5:30 p.m.
Fort Mose has gone from a hidden settlement to a key site in St. Augustine. Our virtual panel of scholars and heritage workers will discuss Fort Mose's changing role in St. Augustine's historical narrative.

Washing Away History: Digging For The Future At Fort Mose
Thursday, July 22, 5:30 p.m.
What happens when archaeological sites are threatened? Join our virtual panelists for a discussion on the past, present and future of archaeology at Fort Mose.

Presented By:

RESILIENCE | UF George A. Smathers Libraries UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA | Lincolnville Museum and Cultural Center | FLORIDA MUSEUM ST. AUGUSTINE PROCTOR COLLEGE LIBRARY UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA

Example 2: Governor's House Library and Lincolville Museum and Cultural Center, with support from George A. Smathers Libraries at the University of Florida and the Florida Museum of Natural History, presented *Washing Away History*, a two-part panel series hosted through Zoom. The panel series explored the past, present, and future of Fort Mose with renowned specialists from the fields of archaeology and history across North Florida and the South. 300 virtual attendees tuned in to Zoom to watch the panels live, while the recordings on UF George A. Smathers Libraries' YouTube channel have garnered more than 560 combined views.



Creating Digital Spaces, Not Monuments

Our three digital sites, the Facebook page, the Omeka digital exhibit, and the WordPress website, prioritize some of the core values identified in developing the *Resilience* project: reflexivity, access, and community. Unlike a physical monument, which is fixed in time and place, our digital spaces remain open to continuous inquiry, scholarly engagement, and active knowledge production. Both sites act as a digital commons, a repository of "non exclusive digital information and knowledge resources that are collectively created...[and] used freely between and among the community"².

The multi-institutional website has historical information readily accessible and easily circulated to members of the community. The "Learning Resources" section of the website contains free lesson plans, audio, and videos that can be easily utilized by anyone to learn and uncover St. Augustine stories they may not have previously known. The *Resilience* project Facebook page offers our community a space to gather, connect, and ask questions as stakeholders in knowledge production about St. Augustine's rich Black histories. This digital work in creating space for community made a positive impact on the project's ability to reach a wide and diverse audience.

Conclusions

The primary purpose of the *Resilience* project was collaboration and connection, both internally between its partners and externally with the St. Augustine community. The *Resilience* project encouraged collaborative initiatives, recognizing that different institutions have different perspectives represented in their collections, and working together allows for a more full and complete story to be told. *Resilience* provided an opportunity to serve the local community in a way in which it is rarely served. The project was eye-opening for many of its participants in recognizing that not all stories and perspectives have been considered in their institution's interpretive decisions, and furthermore, that it was worth the time and effort needed to ensure that all residents of St. Augustine had a voice and representation in the history telling space.

Though the *Resilience* project has come to an end, this work will never truly be done. It is our hope that through more diversity and inclusion in our collections, all underrepresented groups in St. Augustine will feel that their stories and contributions are recorded and celebrated in the cultural heritage of today and the future.

References

1. St. Augustine Visitors Center (2014). *Journey: 450 Years of the African-American Experience*. St. Augustine, Florida.
2. D'Alisa, G., Demaria, F., Kallis, G., & Morell, M. F. (2015). *Disobedience*. In *Degrowth: A vocabulary for a new era*. essay, Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group.

To learn more about Resilience and access the resources mentioned in this poster, visit the Resilience website, accessible via the QR code above.