

Final Narrative Report: Building a Statewide Digital Readiness Community of Practice

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Performance Objective: *Establish a Digital Readiness Community of Practice focused on improving access to historical records in small and under-resourced local historical societies and historic preservation organizations across the state.*

During the grant period, staff and volunteers representing eleven cultural heritage institutions across Wisconsin met regularly to identify priorities, plan events, and provide feedback on content created to support the digital readiness needs of Wisconsin's public history practitioners. The members of this Digital Readiness Community of Practice Launch Committee included:

- Chris Allen, Kenosha County Historical Society
- Ben Barbera, Milwaukee County Historical Society
- Bonnie Byrd, Waukesha County Historical Society
- Michelle Gobert, Forest County Historical and Genealogical Society
- Jennifer Gurske, Madison Trust for Historic Preservation
- Joe Hermolin, Langlade County Historical Society
- Cheryl Kern-Simirenko, Stanley Area Historical Society
- Janean Mollet-Van Beckum, History Center of Washington County
- Tammy Schutz, Barron County Historical Society/Pioneer Village Museum
- Katie Stilp, Appleton Public Library
- Robin Untz, Lake Mills-Aztalan Historical Society

Beyond this core group, we consider the Digital Readiness Community of Practice to encompass the 50 individual local history practitioners across Wisconsin who presented at the Digital Readiness Fairs or other events, contributed to a case study, reviewed or tested draft documents, or otherwise contributed to the community knowledgebase during the grant period.

Going forward, we will not convene regular formal meetings of a dedicated group as we did with the Launch Committee. We expect this Community of Practice will remain vibrant and continue to grow by offering a range of more informal, open-ended engagement opportunities through the Recollection Wisconsin consortium and its partners, including:

- Inviting community members to review or test-drive new documentation as it is created.
- Partnering with the Wisconsin Historical Society to host periodic virtual or in-person brown bag events or other informal opportunities for community members to learn from one another.
- Co-presenting with community members at conferences.
- Using the digistew email list to share relevant information including local, state, and national events and opportunities.
- Facilitating connections among individual CoP members (for example, we introduced Launch Committee member Bonnie Byrd, Waukesha County Historical Society, to Melissa Olson (Archivist, University of Wisconsin-Parkside) to learn more about Melissa's experiences implementing a digital collection using Omeka).
- Increasing the visibility of local initiatives and regional collaborations (for example, we invited Jim Bokern, Manitowish Waters Historical Society, to present about various public history projects including interpretive trails and podcasts at WiLS' annual virtual membership meeting in February 2022).

Performance Objective: *Finalize and promote throughout the state's archival community a Digital Readiness Levels document for small repositories to use to plan digital stewardship activities and benchmark their progress.*

Borrowing from the NDSA's [Levels of Digital Preservation](#), we developed a set of **Digital Readiness Levels** to offer a structure for organizations to plan and sustainably grow their digital initiatives in order to improve access to collections. This document includes seven focus areas and three levels of capability benchmarks within each area. It also includes "Check As You Go" questions to guide planning and decision making as a repository moves through each level.

In November 2020, we requested feedback on an early draft of the Levels from 60 colleagues and other professionals engaged in digital work in the Midwest and beyond. With a 55% response rate, we received lots of helpful feedback on the Levels' structure, language, and content. Throughout the grant period, we used the Levels as the foundational framework to shape other learning opportunities and resources. **Appendix A - Digital Readiness Levels.**

Performance Objective: *Hold one statewide Digital History Fair and four regional Digital History Fairs to increase awareness of and build support for the Community of Practice, promote digital concepts and the value of creating digital collections, provide opportunities to learn about what other repositories are doing, build community connections through social and learning opportunities, and promote the Digital Readiness Levels document and other resources.*

From June-August 2021, we facilitated four virtual Digital Readiness Fairs, reaching a total of 269 individual registrants from 121 organizations. These free, half-day events were offered virtually via Zoom and were open to anyone. A Wisconsin library or historical society partner acted as the local convener for each Fair. Designing the virtual events in partnership with regional hosts was an opportunity to build on existing place-based networks and encourage participants to form connections with other practitioners in their region. We convened small working groups, made up of members of the overall Digital Readiness Launch Committee, to help plan and support each event. We created an event planning template and an internal outreach schedule to facilitate event promotion. We also created reusable graphics and a customizable media kit and managed registration and technical support for each virtual fair and host organization.

Each of the four regional Fairs included brief presentations from **Janet Seymour**, **Kristen Leffelman**, or **Liz Arbuckle** of the Wisconsin Historical Society Office of Programs and Outreach about the Society's Local History Affiliates program and from WiLS staff **Kristen Whitson**, **Vicki Tobias**, and **Emily Pfothhauer** about the overall NHPRC-funded Digital Readiness Community of Practice initiative, Recollection Wisconsin, and the Digital Public Library of America. Each Fair also included an informal opportunity for attendees to chat with a representative from the WHS Outreach team. During breaks, we displayed a rotating "brag deck" of slides submitted by community members to spotlight their digital collections work. Each Fair included multiple invited guest presenters, who were practitioners from local or regional repositories identified by the Launch Committee and the local hosts. All presentations were recorded and are available on [Recollection Wisconsin's YouTube channel](#). Links to those videos, as well as Fair agendas, slide decks, and related resources, were shared with registrants over email and are collated on the [Recollection Wisconsin website](#).

In October 2021, WiLS staff Kristen Whitson and Emily Pfothhauer facilitated a 1.5 hour virtual workshop as part of the Wisconsin Historical Society's annual statewide Local History and Historic Preservation conference. The workshop walked participants through three planning activities for their digital projects: articulating goals and priorities, identifying resources needed, and assigning roles to project stakeholders. Workshop participants were split into breakout sessions to discuss their ideas and questions on each of the three topics. This format prompted participants to work with each other to generate ideas and answer questions, a key activity for forming Community of Practice relationships.

- **Digital Readiness Fair 1: Appleton Public Library, June 29, 2021**
Registered: 65
Attended: 46
- **Digital Readiness Fair 2: Crandon Area Historical Society, July 16, 2021**
Registered: 63
Attended: 41
- **Digital Readiness Fair 3: Pioneer Village Museum/Barron County Historical Society, August 3, 2021**
Registered: 71
Attended: 51
- **Digital Readiness Fair 4: Kenosha County Historical Society, August 18, 2021**
Registered: 75
Attended: 43
- **Digital Readiness Fair 5: Wisconsin Local History and Historic Preservation Conference, October 20, 2021**
Attended: 48

Comments from Digital Readiness Fair attendees:

- “The Digital Readiness Fair was an excellent way to get started in our digitization efforts. It provided the type of actionable information that most conferences lack. The information was presented in a way that was accessible and, as important, motivating.”
- “I loved that it was online, and I tried to copy down all the links, but I only managed a few. I'm new to archiving, so this gave me an idea of what the "grownups" do.”
- “I appreciated learning that we're not alone with our digitizing problems! That was reassuring! I also appreciated all the suggestions regarding organizations or projects that could assist us with our projects.”

Performance Objective: *Provide virtual community-building resources such as a listserv to facilitate peer-to-peer networking, a resource directory that will serve as the central location for training materials and other resources gathered or created by the Community of Practice, and at least eight case studies showcasing exemplary digital work at small institutions.*

Rather than starting a new listserv for this initiative, we chose to leverage an existing email list, Wisconsin Digital Stewardship, which is maintained by WiLS using Google Groups. Following the Digital Readiness Fairs, registrants were invited to sign up for this email list and 44 individuals joined as a result.

During the grant period, we researched and published six case studies and created a [landing page](#) within the Recollection Wisconsin website to spotlight these and future case studies.

- **Madison Trust for Historic Preservation**
- **Lake Mills Aztalan Historical Society**
- **Richard I. Bong Veterans Historical Center (Superior)**
- **Door County Library**, focusing on the library's newspaper digitization project and their oral history collection kits
- **Chippewa Valley Museum**, sharing the value of documentation, workflows, and training checklists for volunteers doing digitization work
- **"Sharing Local History Resources,"** showcasing a range of examples of the dissemination and creative re-use of digital collections, including projects from the Sterling Eureka Historical Society, University of Wisconsin-La Crosse, and Waukesha County Historical Society (in collaboration with Carroll University)

As of March 1, 2022, these case studies have been viewed a total of 740 times. In 2022, we intend to publish at least three additional case studies focused on digitization and preservation of audiovisual collections.

Throughout the planning and implementation stages of our work, we heard from community members that they wanted both a comprehensive, start-to-finish, step-by-step guide to digital projects (preferably in a format that could be downloaded and printed) as well as a web-based resource directory that could be easily navigated to home in on a specific topic or question. For the purposes of this grant, we chose to focus on creating the comprehensive resource, a 100+ page pdf manual we called the *Digital Readiness Toolkit*. Currently in the final stages of community review, this manual will be finalized and released in Spring 2022. We will then break out the contents of that manual into more granular pieces that will form a resource directory on the recollectionwisconsin.org website.

The development of the Digital Readiness Toolkit and related content has been a community-driven, iterative process. From designing the Digital Readiness Toolkit's structure to the final testing steps, the end product will have been created by and for the Digital Readiness Community of Practice.

- Drafts of the Digital Readiness Levels were reviewed by 25 digital projects colleagues, including the 11 members of the Launch Committee.
- The Digital Readiness Glossary was requested by the community as a point of access to often-confusing terminology; the Glossary was then designed and reviewed by the Launch Committee.

- Digital Readiness Fair participants were asked in post-event surveys if they would be willing to provide further direction and feedback for Digital Readiness resources; those who volunteered were included in rounds of content review.
- The Digital Project Planning Worksheet, a key component of the Digital Readiness Toolkit, was reviewed by invited experts (Biz Gallo, Library of Michigan; Ann Hanlon, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee; and Tamara Ramski, South Central Library System) for structure, content, ease of use and relevance.
- Content created for the Digital Readiness Toolkit directly responds to questions received from the community during the Digital Readiness Fairs.
- The Launch Committee dedicated several meetings to toolkit development including identifying exemplary models to borrow from (including the AASLH STEPS program and ICCROM's ReOrg workbook), identifying personas to articulate the Toolkit's target audiences, and providing feedback on multiple drafts of the Toolkit structure, layout, and content.
- Five practitioners are currently taking the Digital Readiness Toolkit through a beta testing process in their own work. These beta testers have little to no previous experience with digitization initiatives and are a mix of paid staff and volunteers in their organizations.

Other products created during the grant period in response to identified community needs include:

- [Digital Readiness Glossary](#) - A glossary, built using AirTable, to define jargon and acronyms commonly encountered in digital stewardship work.
- [The Toolkit blog posts](#) - Recollection Wisconsin launched this series of blog posts in January 2020 to provide practical advice to frequently-asked questions about digitization and digital preservation. During the grant period, we added five new posts to this series.
- Digital Project Planning Worksheet - Structured around the Digital Readiness Levels and intended to be used in conjunction with the Digital Readiness Toolkit manual.

Project Reflections

The Digital Readiness Toolkit became much more than the “online directory of resources” we initially proposed, which is right in line with what Fair attendees and community members requested in their feedback. The directory was originally envisioned as a curated collection of links to examples, templates, instructions, and guidelines created by other organizations. What we heard repeatedly from community members is that they wanted a step-by-step, start-to-finish guide for their digital projects, and that the guide should be easy to understand without any prior archives experience or professional training. After researching existing

resources available nationally, we opted to develop a comprehensive guide using accessible language and aimed at non-professional local history practitioners. We learned that one of the services we can provide to the local history community is this type of understandable, easy-to-follow, free and high-quality guidance on digital projects.

In our planning grant, which was completed prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, community members emphasized the significance of in-person, face-to-face, peer-to-peer learning opportunities. As mentioned in past reports, the inability to gather in person as a community of practice due to the ongoing pandemic throughout our implementation grant had both positive and negative implications. The connections between community members may have been deeper if we'd been able to facilitate in-person meetings, and this may have led to a more structured approach to ongoing governance and leadership. Perhaps because of the change in engagement method and continuing Zoom fatigue from the ongoing pandemic, the work became less about delineating formal membership in a defined community. Instead, we focused on creating and sharing resources and building individual connections.

At the same time, our virtual community gatherings were much more inclusive as a benefit of their online nature. Attendees from across the state and across the country would not have been able to casually attend and glean and contribute knowledge had the gatherings been held in person. This underscores the importance of providing a mix of virtual and in-person engagement opportunities in the future. In addition, the success of our virtual events prompted WiLS to create a virtual event planning kit, a template that will serve us and our community as we offer future virtual events. Kristen Whitson will present several of these best practices and lessons learned in a free professional development webinar for WiLS members on May 12, 2022.

Dissemination and Publicity

- **Midwest Archives Conference, May 2021 (virtual)**
Two members of the Launch Committee, **Robin Untz** (Lake Mills-Aztalan Historical Society) and **Janean Mollet-Van Beckum** (Washington County Historical Society), joined project staff **Kristen Whitson** and **Vicki Tobias** for a panel discussion about the project and digital readiness concepts at the annual Midwest Archives Conference.
Attendance: 90
- **National Digital Stewardship Alliance (NDSA) conference, November 2021 (virtual)**

Kristen Whitson presented about the project with **Kristen Leffelman** (Wisconsin Historical Society), Launch Committee member **Jennifer Gurske** (Madison Trust for Historic Preservation), and planning grant participant **Dustin Mack** (History Museum at the Castle, Appleton).

Attendance: 93

- **Wisconsin Library Association conference, November 2021 (in person)**

Kristen Whitson shared digital readiness project work in a panel with Community of Practice members **Steven Rice** (Door County Historical Museum) and **Beth Renstrom** (Sturgeon Bay Historical Society Foundation).

Attendance: 30

- **Upcoming: Midwest Archives Conference, May 2022 (in person)**

Kristen Whitson will share lessons learned about accessible language and content in educating local history practitioners on digital readiness concepts in a panel presentation with **Elizabeth Morris** (Bensenville (Illinois) Community Public Library), **Nancy Webster** (Highland Park (Illinois) Archives and Local History Collections), and **Stevie Gunter** (Denver Public Library).

- **Publication:** **Vicki Tobias** and **Kristen Whitson** published “[Digital Readiness for Wisconsin's Local History Community](#)” in *Archival Outlook*, the newsletter of the Society of American Archivists (SAA). (January/February 2022, pp. 8–9, 19)

In Fall 2021, we used Recollection Wisconsin’s Facebook and Twitter channels to spotlight individual recordings and resources from the Digital Readiness Fairs in a “Fair Friday” series. The social media format allowed us to tag partner organizations, guest speakers, and funders for increased community reach and visibility. The average reach of these posts was roughly 280 views; the most popular posts highlighted the Fair presentation about [how to get started on a digital project](#) and the overall [Resource List](#).

Project Impact and Continuity

At the start of the grant period, WiLS hired [Kristen Whitson](#) to serve as our program assistant. As of January 2022, Kristen is now a permanent WiLS staff member at 0.50 FTE. She continues to provide project management support for the Recollection Wisconsin consortium and is contributing to other WiLS work in cohorts, communities of practice, and virtual programming, including our cooperative agreement with IMLS to mentor small and rural libraries awarded Accelerating Promising Practices grants and our partnership with ALA as a regional mentor for Libraries Transforming Communities grantees.

We were pleased to advise the Community Archiving Workshop of the Association of Moving Image Archivists (AMIA) as they prepared their own Archives Collaboratives grant proposal for NHPRC, *Assessing and Addressing Digital Readiness for Audiovisual Collections*. Beginning in 2022, we will collaborate with CAW to incorporate guidance on audiovisual resources into the structure of the Digital Readiness Levels. We are thrilled by this opportunity to enhance our work and extend its reach both geographically, through AMIA's partner network across the US, and in scope, in order to better support the preservation of a highly at-risk category of content.

Finally, we are committed to working with the Wisconsin Historical Records Advisory Board (WHRAB) in their current NHPRC grant cycle to provide training in digitization project basics for local affiliates of the Wisconsin Historical Society. We will offer two WHRAB-sponsored in-person workshops in conjunction with the statewide Local History and Historic Preservation conferences in October 2022 and 2023.