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PERMISSION STATEMENT

Website Review

Mapping Jewish Charleston: From the Colonial Era to the Present Day, Special Collections, College of Charleston Libraries, https://mappingjewishcharleston.cofc.edu. Reviewed March 2020.

Using digital mapping to explain the contours and transformation of social geographies over time has been a primary research focus of several digital humanities projects over the past decade. The Mapping Jewish Charleston: From the Colonial Era to the Present Day project lays the foundations for an ambitious repository of Jewish historical narratives, social geographies, and the cultural landscape of Charleston.

The project, which provides user access to several archival texts, georeferenced maps, and images, was developed by Sarah Fick, Alyssa Neely, Harlan Greene, Dale Rosengarten, and Shari Rabin. The purpose of the project, according to the welcome documentation, is to educate the general public by providing basic facts about the geography of the Jewish presence in Charleston between the eighteenth and twenty-first centuries. The project is primarily derived from the archival record; its core is a collection of biographies of middle- and upper-class Jewish Charles Towners and Charlestonians who were pillars of the community in three distinct eras over three hundred years. Although this research could have been used to develop a traditional monograph or journal article, the digital maps provide users access to a detailed spatial understanding of Jewish Charleston and enable a wider audience to have instant access to this research. The maps, research, and data the site provides are certainly useful to casual knowledge-seekers and researchers. However, it is important to

(From Mapping Jewish Charleston.
https://mappingjewishcharleston.cofc.edu.)

evaluate the end user experience, its contribution to the digital humanities, and its contribution to the general historiography of Charleston. Because the digital project is a work in progress, this evaluation will also provide a wish list for future updates.

Some scholars have been apprehensive toward the digital humanities and its methodologies due to the perception that such projects lack a clear connection to meaningful humanities research questions. Others argue that digital humanities projects tend to "illustrate what we already know rather than give us new ways to think." As such, Patrik Svensson recommends that digital humanities projects should not only consider the insights and questions which undergird the project, but they should also demonstrate depth, quality arguments, and novel ideas. Moreover, we should also consider the infrastructural work, the tools and methodology which are in part responsible for shaping our research questions. Thomas Coomans argues that like any other historical work, we should pay special attention to how data from different sources are combined to tell a story. While standard textual histories can provide this material, data visualization and digital maps are more effective media that can communicate

cultural landscapes in all of their complexity. Moreover, Coomans explains that the challenge of digital mapping is to use these digital tools to illustrate the palimpsest-like nature of the urban and rural landscape, while also showing the often complex relationship between space, time, and its transformative effects on geography. Using several maps and data visualizations of the same geographic region can illustrate the uneven changes in social geographies over time. Of course, none of this is as important as the user experience, which should be engaging and easily accessible. How then does the current version of Mapping Jewish Charleston measure against these guidelines?

The Mapping Jewish Charleston website is divided into three sections: the colonial Charles Town era of 1788, the antebellum Charleston of 1833, and early twentith-century Charleston. While the dates located in the upper-right corner of the homepage seem to be of historical import to the Jewish population of Charleston, they actually refer to the dates of the three historical map overlays. These overlays have been georeferenced, or adapted to correspond to a modern GPS Cartesian plane like Google Maps. The maps are used to display geographic points of interest. Clicking on any of the dates takes the user to a detailed textual overview of the

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sociocultural history of Jewish Charleston in the associated era, with links to specific geographic locations at the end of the article. Clicking on any of the links takes the user to a georeferenced historical map with pinpoints that correspond to different historical entries located on the left side of the map. When a user clicks on either a pinpoint or a historical entry, the map refocuses on the selected pinpoint, opens a lengthy explanation, and in some cases displays images germane to the location. In effect, the map functions as an organizational space for several encyclopedic article entries.

Because of this construction, users are guided through the main narrative via the stories of specific middle- and upper-class characters. The maps do not provide information regarding the hundreds of Jewish families who interacted with the featured characters. For example, the 1910 map focuses on the King Street shopping district and its environs. Although the section provides a wealth of information about the shops, owners, and built environment on the storied street, it provides little detail on the patrons who may have frequented them. Moreover, there is little discussion about how these owners interacted with the community. Highlighting the biographies of the middle and upper class without also providing details on the working class and others who were not as prominent in the archival record perpetuates their silence. Although the focus on the chosen historical actors is critical to understanding the pillars of the community, adding more details regarding the patrons and working class who may have shopped or walked through the district can provide insight into the complex social interactions between the classes that shaped the community. This would increase users' historical understanding of Charleston's Jewish cultural landscape.

Although the articles provide historical context for the associated map, some of the cultural details provided are either missing from the map or decoupled from the map entry. For example, in the early twentieth century section, the author explains that a generational gap existed within the Jewish community in that downtown "older 'Deutscher'" Jews felt superior to their old world cousins "and made efforts to acculturate them, to teach them English, hygiene, etiquette, and skills they needed to become citizens." In the 1788 and 1833 articles, the congregational rift between Sephardic and Ashkenazic Jews is discussed. In both cases, using data visualization to show these social divides within the Jewish community in

a geographic context could strengthen the user's overall spatial under-standing of how a social divide might have become a geographic one. Similarly, connections between individuals could also be visualized. This will allow users to see the relationship between geographic space and the subcommunities that make up the larger Jewish community on the map. In so doing, users can see how congregations and other social circles shifted geographically. A similar approach could be used to illustrate how the Great Fire of 1838 impacted the community on the 1833 map. Using this novel approach would give users a new insight into the construction and transformation of the Jewish community over time. Despite this over-sight, the pop-up windows provide extensive biographical information, albeit with limited connections to other pinpoints. Improving these capa-bilities could increase the project's depth and display of novel ideas while simultaneously showing the gradual transformation of Jewish Charleston.

Here users may encounter some site functionality issues. The site is programmed to render properly on a standard desktop computer. This limits the use of the site for research and classroom teaching purposes; self-guided walking tours using a mobile device is not an option. How-ever, rendering on mobile devices could be allowed by adding a few lines of code.

A pop-up window containing the historical explanation of the pin-point opens when the user clicks outside of the user's view of the map. This reduces the user's view of the spatial orientation of the mapped Jew-ish community and thereby diminishes the effectiveness of the map. Many of the map point explanations are interconnected with links to other map points that the user can navigate in a limited fashion similar to a wiki. If a user chooses to click through these links, the map will refocus on the new point of interest and open the new explanatory window. However, if the user wishes to return to the original site of inquiry, the site requires them to remember which point of interest was the original and click on it. The 1833 map entry for Judith Suares, an immigrant from the Caribbean who owned her own business after she was given permission by her husband, Jacob, highlights this issue. According to the entry, Judith lived at the King Street address with her four children during the 1830s. Only one of her children, Mary Ann Suares Levy, links to another section on the map. Be-cause both pinpoints are contained within a cluster of several numbered pinpoints, it becomes difficult for a user to navigate back to the Judith

Suares entry from the Mary Ann Suares Levy entry using the site's navigation tools. Moreover, since the points are numbered rather than titled, understanding the geographic relationship between these points can present a challenge for some users. Both of these issues could be remedied by including a site name in addition to a site number at each pinpoint, or by opening an embedded window to the right side of the page with the explanation. Despite these functionality concerns, the content is engaging and delivers several biographies of Jewish merchants, clergy, and artists as well as brief histories of religious sites.

Considering that Mapping Jewish Charleston is still in its infancy, the research is extensive and useful for the classroom and general public. However, unlike the traditional monograph, the beauty of digital mapping projects is the ability to update and expand on the project's original argument. As such, I would like to see further development of robust data visualizations to show the transformation of Charleston's social geography. This will help users visualize the relationships between the social and spatial contours of the Jewish community. Mapping Jewish Charleston is a strong foundation that will benefit from future scholarship, research modules, and technical upgrades. Despite some initial shortcomings, the overall project is an excellent starting point for users to explore and familiarize themselves with the history of Jewish Charleston.

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