

SOUTHERN JEWISH HISTORY

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Website Review

The William Breman Jewish Heritage Museum, <http://www.thebreman.org>. Reviewed March 2016.

Cecil Alexander left his mark on Atlanta: Georgia Institute of Technology student, dive-bomber pilot during World War II, architect, civil rights activist, president of the American Jewish Committee Atlanta chapter. His wide-ranging influence presents the opportunity for an intersectional approach to exploring the history of Atlanta, and, with his passing in 2013, the William Breman Jewish Heritage Museum's archives became an essential link to this Georgia native. Previously, a research project on Cecil Alexander likely meant a physical trip to the Breman Museum in midtown Atlanta. But now, thanks to the Breman Museum's updated website, this digitized collection—along with approximately 20 percent of the Breman Museum's entire archival holdings—is available to anyone with Internet access.

The William Breman Jewish Heritage Museum, a fixture of the Atlanta cultural scene since its move to the Selig Center in 1996, houses several thousand collections in the Cuba Family Archives for Southern Jewish History. In 2015, the Breman Museum rolled out its first large-scale website update in nearly a decade. The new site features expanded content in a visually driven structure and a responsive framework that allows easy navigation on all mobile and desktop devices. Click, for instance, onto the webpage for Eighteen Artifacts: A Story of Jewish Atlanta, and you will access an exhibition overview, photo tour, radio interview with the curator, and a link to download Historic Jewish Atlanta, a map-based app of historically relevant sites. According to Jeremy Katz and David Schendowich of the Breman Museum, who spoke with the reviewer in March 2016, the website received national recognition



<http://www.thebreman.org/Exhibitions/Now-on-View/Eighteen-Artifacts-A-Story-of-Jewish-Atlanta>

in its first year, and they are currently working with the Google Cultural Institute to expand the audience of the new site.

The changes are of significant interest for scholars of Jewish history because the Breman Museum also included many of its archival collections in the website update. For the main website, the Breman Museum chose to implement an open-source Content Management System (CMS), which supports fast and easy updates and emphasizes usability. The Breman Museum’s archival management adapted the presentation of their newly digitized collections to fit this system, capitalizing on features of cross-reference (allowing for easy searches across the archives) and contextualization.

The updated home page for the Breman archives offers visitors the option of exploring the collections through finding aids or by directly accessing the separate online catalog, which includes several keyword options for searching manuscripts and objects included in the Breman's comprehensive holdings on the Jewish experience in Georgia and Alabama. Modeled on the website of the American Jewish Archives, each collection listing on the Breman Museum's new site includes searchable accession references that provide smooth transitions between collection summaries, finding aids, and the catalog. Of special note is the extensive work invested in updating the finding aids. The previous website's aids were in PDF form, preventing keyword searches of the contents; now approximately 350 collections with fully searchable finding aids and inventory lists are available online.

In addition to its expanded cross-reference capabilities, a notable feature of the website is its emphasis on contextualization. Each featured collection, including those still awaiting full digitization, is hosted on its own separate page. Alongside the standard archival notes of source, date, copyright, and summary, the Breman archives include useful links to other related collections. Many objects in the online catalog also include a summary of their relationship to other topics, opening opportunities for connections that otherwise might be overlooked. For instance, a catalog search for the *Jewish Progressive Club (J.P.C.)* yields a series of photographs, including a 1930 print of the JPC basketball team. The individual photograph listing includes a searchable roster and a link to a number of related subjects, including individuals, archival collections, and broader topics such as Jewish basketball players. These search results create potential avenues for additional research, increasing the connections between collections and aiding the discovery of new material and diverse applications by researchers.

The accessibility and utility of the Breman Museum's new website reveal not only the significant digitization efforts of the archival staff, but also the strength of the Cuba Family Archives. Over nine thousand objects and manuscripts have been catalogued for online reference, including textiles, newspapers, paintings, institutional correspondence, and oral histories. And the Breman Museum is steadily expanding its holdings as well. The July 2015 acquisition of the Savannah Jewish Archives, which includes records from synagogues, cemeteries, institutions,

and the family papers of some of the earliest Jewish settlers in Georgia, makes the Breman a top destination for research on southern Jewish history. Two significant collections are already fully digitized and available online, including the papers of Cecil Alexander, with plans to increase the digital holdings as copyright and server space become available over the next few years.

As the Breman Museum pushes the usability of its archives for researchers, it also fosters a connection between general audiences and the archival collections. Planners note that the Breman Museum's new website will feature online exhibitions that pull directly from their archives, with an eventual goal of twenty small, interactive online exhibitions produced per year. *Harold Arlen: The Man Behind the Curtain*, one of the first of these online exhibitions, is already on view. It features the Timeline JS model, an accessible and easy-to-use tool that some historians and educators are beginning to adopt to visually present their multimedia data to expanded audiences.

As with any large-scale website redesign, some housekeeping remains to be done. A few objects in the catalog are missing live links to their finding aids or the broader collection, and the emphasis on a strong visual template often prioritizes images over text, causing users to scroll down to find the text content on some devices. These are minor notes, especially given the relative newness of this iteration of the website and the staff's ongoing effort to expand server space to make room for additional content. As a whole, the William Breman Jewish Heritage Museum's update emphasizes accessibility and contextualization to provide a more useful interface for its expanding archival collection. The website evidences the power of a digital resource crafted with the researcher in mind.

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