



## Inspire! Grants for Small Museums

Sample Application IGSM-255826-OMS-24  
Project Category: Collections Stewardship and Access  
Project Type: Large Project (\$25,001-\$75,000)

### Newport Historical Society

Amount awarded by IMLS:	\$75,000
Amount of cost share:	\$75,085

The Newport Historical Society will use funds to hire a full-time research assistant to continue work on its database of records representing black and Indigenous individuals. Since this work first began in 2021, the society has identified and recorded more than 1,700 names of people of African and Indigenous descent from the archives. The research assistant will continue the review of the collection, digitize records, create biographies of African, African American, and Indigenous people who lived and worked in Newport during the era of slavery, and make these resources available to the public through the society's online database, allowing researchers and the public to better understand the city's role in the transatlantic slave trade and serve as a tool for descendant communities to research their ancestors.

Attached are the following components excerpted from the original application.

- Narrative
- Schedule of Completion
- Digital Product Plan
- Performance Measurement Plan

When preparing an application for the next deadline, be sure to follow the instructions in the most recent Notice of Funding Opportunity for the grant program to which you are applying.

## Project Justification

The Newport Historical Society (NHS) respectfully requests \$75,000 from the Institute of Museum & Library Services' *Inspire! Grants for Small Museums* initiative to support the next phase of the Newport Historical Society's ongoing research and digitization project "**Newport's Black and Indigenous Communities: Enslaved, Manumitted, and Free.**"

The Newport Historical Society plans to hire a full-time research assistant to continue work on its database of Black and Indigenous experiences recovered from the NHS archives (referred to in this application as Newport's Black and Indigenous Communities: Enslaved, Manumitted, and Free). The online database includes digitized records from the NHS collection including church records, business papers, ships logs, colonial medical records, custom house records and more. Work on the database began in 2021 and more than 1,700 names of people of African and Indigenous descent have been recorded from the archival record, among the thousands more who remain unnamed and unidentified.

More than a database, this project seeks to study the NHS' manuscript collections page by page and create digital records and biographies of individuals to highlight the lives and experiences of the African, African American and Indigenous people who lived and worked in Newport, RI during the era of slavery.<sup>2</sup> To expand this research project by funding a dedicated research assistant, NHS seeks support from the Museums for America program under the Collections Stewardship and Access project category. This project specifically relates to objective 3.2.

In three years of study (2021-2023), four thousand pages of manuscript materials have been digitized, cataloged, and incorporated into the project database. This database is accessible online as part of NHS' Collections Online website. A [test system](#) is currently in place, with the upgraded site to be launched publicly in January 2024. To see sample database webpages, please refer to Supportingdoc6.pdf.

The impetus for this research project lies with a genealogical problem that is inherent in archives across the nation. The 1870 Census, conducted five years after the end of the Civil War, was the first federal census that recorded all African Americans by name. Prior to this, the names of enslaved people of African descent were not systematically chronicled. This important document, referred to some historians as a "brick wall," is a genealogical dividing line, a point at which many African Americans see the roots of their family tree cut off, obscured by a system of oppression and erasure that is echoed in the archival record.

Additionally, traditional histories of Newport in the 17<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> centuries have centered on the white and the powerful; indeed, for much of our own organization's history, the collection and preservation of historical materials have also privileged these perspectives.

These two issues have engendered the pervasive fallacy that historical data on people of color is limited or non-existent. Many of the stories about people of African descent in Newport that do exist are rooted in 19<sup>th</sup> century accounts that were largely manufactured through hearsay or memory. They generally focus on the lives and associations of the enslaver or emphasize the exemplary qualities of the enslaved that led to them earning their freedom.

The initial phase of this research project (**Phase 1**, 2021-2023) sought to refocus the ways in which the documentary record is examined and interpreted, to shift the emphasis away from the enslaver and instead center the personhood of those who endured enslavement. Research soon revealed a wealth of voices and lived experiences relating to people of color: family relationships, business enterprises, births, marriages

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<sup>2</sup> For the purposes of this project, the study period is between 1639, the year the town of Newport was founded, and 1842, the year slavery was officially banned from the Rhode Island constitution.

and more. Threads of interconnectivity across documents, decades and localities have been teased out and unspooled, bringing dimensionality to the many lives interleaved in the documentary record.

To share these findings with the public, NHS implemented structural changes to its Collections Online database (modeled on the data structure of [Enslaved.org](#)), so digital records for manuscript materials could be linked to newly created records for people (referred to as “entities”), life events (e.g. Births, marriages, baptisms), and locations. Examples of these records can be seen in Supportingdoc6.pdf, pages 2 and 3. This highly relational database is now primed to incorporate additional material from the NHS collection and beyond.

NHS Executive Director Rebecca Bertrand had the opportunity to present this research project to IMLS Director Crosby Kemper on October 30, 2023; Director Kemper was enthusiastic about the aims and results of this ongoing research and encouraged the NHS staff to seek grant support from the IMLS to expand the project scope.

The next phase of this project (**Phase 2, 2024-2026**) would be supported by the *Inspire! Grants for Small Museums* initiative under the Collections Stewardship and Access project category. While significant progress has been made to demonstrate that Black and Indigenous voices and life histories are prevalent and findable within the surviving documentary record, only an estimated 5% of our manuscript collection relating to the study period (1639-1842) has been reviewed thus far. Due to limited staff capacity, progress on this ambitious and important project has been slow.

Support through this grant would allow NHS collections staff and a dedicated project researcher (to be hired with grant funds) to systematically digitize and catalog (at the page level) several key manuscript collections that are certain to contain detailed information about Black and Indigenous Newporters living in the 17<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> centuries. It is our intention that the project research assistant would also use their findings to develop biographies of enslaved, manumitted, and free individuals that will be hosted online through the “Featured Stories” section of the [Collections Online](#) website (see Supportingdoc6.pdf, page 1).

The collections of interest for this project are the Congregational Church record collection (**9 Volumes, 1733-1872**), Trinity Church record collection (**7 Volumes, 1709-1865**), state and local census records (1782, 1790-1850), the Physicians Books record collection (**18 Volumes, 1725-1837**), and the record books of Newport merchant Aaron Lopez (**80 Volumes, 1750s-1760s**).

These records will provide valuable information on the families, births, marriages, deaths, and livelihoods of a substantial number of BIPOC Newporters. Phase 1 of this research project incorporated limited portions of these collections; Phase 2, as funded through this grant, would see these collections incorporated into the project database in their entirety.

Through digitizing and uploading digital assets to NHS’ [Collections Online](#) database, this project directly supports the society’s strategic goal of improving public access too, and understanding of, the collections under our care by leveraging technology.

While there are thousands of archival manuscripts and documents in the NHS collection, the majority of the existing catalog records contain only the date of the document and the name of the person who owned or created the manuscript. At present, there are limited options for researchers and the public to access the people and information recorded *within* these volumes. The systematic study of the materials outlined above would make these manuscripts and their contents highly searchable and accessible on the [Collections Online](#) database. The biographies and digital records that would be developed are positioned to connect the public with the names and voices of those who endured the injustices of slavery.

## Project Work Plan

If this grant is awarded, project staff on site at the NHS (led by project director Kaela Bleho) will begin digitization of the volumes outlined above. Digitization is to be executed in-house by NHS staff. As a small collections staff with limited equipment and time, the project team in Phase 1 produced digital images using the tools and technologies at their disposal, namely a DSLR camera and iPhone cameras. For the purposes of this research project, our aim is to produce access files (jpegs) for research use and use by the public, rather than preservation-quality images. This expedites the digitization process and frees up more staff time and resources towards research, cataloguing and biography development. The project director will allocate approximately 20% of their schedule to this project.

Digitization will occur on a rolling basis throughout the grant period. Once a volume has been photographed, pages will be uploaded to the [Collections Online](#) database by a dedicated project research assistant, operating on a 30-hour work week. Each page will be cataloged as an object record, nested hierarchically under the record for the parent volume.

The research assistant will review the volume page by page to determine if its contents are relevant to the scope of the project. The researcher will be trained to identify shorthand, abbreviations or terminology that were used historically signify a person of color or their freedom status (for example, “B” or “N” adjacent to the name of a Black person, “Ind.” or “Indian” next to the name of an Indigenous person, “mulatto” to identify mixed race individuals, “Servt of” or “Servant” to identify the enslaved or indentured).

Any occurrence recorded in a historical document will be broken down into four component parts, using a data structure established by [Enslaved.org](#): the “Source” document, the “Event” that the document records, the “Entities” (people or organizations) involved, and the related geographical “Locations”. Event records are at the heart of the relational database; these describe something that happens in a person’s life, like a birth, marriage, enslavement, or emancipation. In the context of a given Event, each Entity has a “Role”. Relationships between Entities can be inferred based on common associations with Events, and those individuals’ Roles within that Event.

For example, a page of a ship’s log [Source] may contain reference to a voyage [Event] in which the people recorded [Entities] may be a captured person, a ship captain, a ship owner, or a participant [Roles]. The ship captain would be identified as an enslaver, and the captured person would be identified as an enslaved person, their relationship established by virtue of their Roles within the Event.

Within this record structure, associations are made between these four record types through the use of unique ID numbers, which are assigned by the project researcher. To see an example of these digital record types on the live database, please refer to [Supportingdoc6.pdf](#), page 3.

All the records and relationships described above will be highly searchable in the project database. Researchers using the database will be able to refine their searches using either Event, Entity, Source or Location information, or by using controlled vocabulary terms.

One of the challenges in this process will be training the project researcher to synthesize historical information while being sensitive to the experiences of those individuals whose life events they are recording. They will have to strike a balance between recording data in a source document verbatim where necessary, and inferring information (e.g., age, sex, freedom status) as needed. They will also have to navigate historical documents that contain harmful and racist terminology and determine how best to summarize that document and the Events recorded within without perpetuating white supremacist language and concepts. Through training and workshops led by NHS staff (who are informed by the data collection practices and guidance outlined by [Enslaved.org](#)), the researcher will develop the skills needed to navigate the prejudices and biases of historical recorders, obscure handwriting, and archaic language.

Another challenge the research assistant will face relates to the ways in which the names of BIPOC individuals were historically recorded. Surnames were commonly excluded or substituted with the surname of the enslaver; given names were spelled differently across documents (e.g., Quamino, Quamminy, Quaum). The researcher will have to pay close attention to context to avoid creating duplicative Entity records, or inadvertently conflating two different people based on similar names. It is our current practice that unless an association with an existing Entity record can be made with certainty based on two or more shared identifiers (e.g., common name, age, name of the enslaver, familial relationships) the researcher should err on the side of creating a new Entity record and should note the potential connection to another Entity record in a dedicated notes field.

NHS staff will train the project researcher in best practices and the use of controlled vocabulary. The controlled vocabulary for this project is based on the terms outlined by [Enslaved.org](https://www.enslaved.org), established to improve search function while incorporating anti-racist terminology. Digital records produced by the research assistant will be vetted by the project director to ensure they accurately and sensitively summarize the people and Events associated with a given Source document.

The research process as outlined above is painstaking, but it will result in detailed, highly searchable digital records that will allow members of the public and researchers alike to easily navigate the documents in our collection to explore the lives and stories contained within.

As digital images are created and uploaded to the Collections Online database, data storage, hosting, and database support costs will accrue. These have been addressed in the Budget and Budget Justification components of this application.

The execution of the workplan outlined above is contingent on NHS hiring a dedicated project researcher who will work full-time (30 hours per week) over the two-year grant period. There is always the risk that the research assistant could leave the project ahead of its completion. Should this occur, NHS staff are confident that a replacement hire could be trained to complete the project work within the grant period. During Phase 1 of this research initiative (2021-2023), NHS staff successfully trained several cohorts of summer research fellows in the execution of the project workflow. Given that research has been underway for several years at this stage, our training processes are well established.

## **Project Results**

It is our hope that the expanded database will serve as a gateway for researchers and the public to better understand the city's role in the transatlantic slave trade and will act as a tool for descendant communities to research their ancestors in Newport. The NHS caters to in-person audiences of approximately 30,000 annually; our online resources, including videos, digital articles, and collections information accessed through [www.newporthistory.org](http://www.newporthistory.org) and [Collections.NewportHistory.org](https://collections.newporthistory.org) serve over 170,000 people from around the world. It is our expectation that the research and materials developed through Phase 2 of this project will be incorporated into all aspects of our programming, including tours, educational resources, lectures, and publications.

While it is difficult to quantify the number of digital records that will be created through this phase of the research project, or the number people and names that will be unearthed, the significant inroads that will be made to centralize historical data on people of color during this period cannot be understated. For the NHS to fulfill its mandate to chronicle, advocate for the importance of, and communicate the history of Newport to a broad audience, it is imperative that we emphasize and celebrate Black and Indigenous histories.

We believe that the people and stories uncovered through this research will help enhance and support the work of current Black-run efforts to highlight the history of Rhode Island's long association with the slave trade and of African heritage history generally (including the Port Marker and Rhode Island Slave Medallion projects). For example, it is the current expectation of the leadership of the Newport Middle

Passage Port Marker Project that the names and biographies that have been uncovered through this project will play a role in the interpretation of the memorial site they seek to create in Newport.

Additionally, through planned partnerships with platforms like Enslaved.org, the Harvard Dataverse, and 10 Million Names (via the New England Historic Genealogical Society) the reach for this project, and the communities that can engage with it, becomes global.

This research project is also directly aligned with the aims of the *IMLS250: All Stories, All People, All Places* initiative. Many of the BIPOC individuals living in Newport during the study period would have found an avenue to freedom by enlisting during the Revolutionary War or were forced to serve on the behalf of their enslavers. Furthermore, as slave-holding families were displaced from or fled Newport during the British occupation, many enslaved people, including women and children, were forcibly removed with them. Using the collections highlighted in this application, NHS researchers will have the opportunity to uncover and share these experiences with the wider public. The Newport Historical Society is working closely with the Washington-Rochambeau Revolutionary Route National Historic Trail (WARO) to develop public programming in commemoration of the 250<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the nation's independence in 2026, and the research that will be carried out through this project will underpin this outreach.

Following the grant period, NHS is dedicated to ensuring the people and stories uncovered through this project, and the digital records created, will be hosted on our Collections Online platform indefinitely. It is our hope that this project will guide other historical societies and museums in our region with limited resources and funds to undertake similar initiatives, by demonstrating the wealth of information on people of color that is embedded in the documentary record from this period, how these names and stories can be recovered, and how they can be made accessible online. To increase the visibility of the project and its results, the project director and research assistant will attend and present at conferences like NEMA and AASLH, detailed in the Budget and Budget Justification sections of this application.

While this phase of the research project is confined to the church, census and merchant collections outlined in this application, the methodology for interpreting and cataloging the documentary record in a way centers the voices and experiences of historically marginalized peoples will remain embedded in NHS research priorities and practice for the foreseeable future.







## **Digital Products Plan**

The Newport Historical Society will create access-quality digital images for 114 bound volumes from our archival collection, encompassing the Congregational Church record collection (**9 Volumes, 1733-1872**), Trinity Church record collection (**7 Volumes, 1709-1865**), state and local census records (1782, 1790-1850), the Physicians Books record collection (**18 Volumes, 1725-1837**), and the record books of Newport merchant Aaron Lopez (**80 Volumes, 1750s-1760s**). These images will be uploaded to the NHS' CollectiveAccess website ([Collections.NewportHistory.org](http://Collections.NewportHistory.org)); Collective Access is an open-source cataloging software for publishing museum collections online. The digital assets produced through this project (image files and relational records for Entities, Events and Locations) will be made available to the public at no cost through this website.

### **Type**

Through this project, NHS staff will produce access-quality JPEG files of every page of the manuscript materials outlined above, to be used for web access. The reason for producing access files (average file size 10MB) compared to preservation-quality master TIFF files (average file size 40-60MB) is to expedite the digitization process, mitigate cloud and local storage fees, and focus project resources on the study of the materials and the creation of digital records. While these materials are not at risk of deterioration in their current environment, producing digital files for use by researchers and the public will limit the extent to which these historical documents are handled in future.

It is difficult to quantify the exact number of digital images that will be produced through this project, as the volumes vary in page number. Working off the estimation that the volumes listed above contain an average of 250 pages, at 10MB a page each volume would result in an estimated 2.5 GB of image files. Digitizing 114 volumes for this project could produce 285 GB (or more) of JPEG files.

Once these image files have been produced, they will be uploaded to Providence, the CollectiveAccess cataloging software. Each manuscript page with its associated image file will be cataloged by the research assistant; they will record metadata for the creator, date, description, and condition of the document, among others. Additional digital assets will then be created by the research assistant that are linked to these catalog records. These are records for Entities (people or organizations; metadata includes name, alternate name(s), age, sex, race, birth and death dates, occupation, freedom status), Events (occurrences like marriages, baptisms, enslavement, or manumission; metadata includes date, type, description), and Locations (metadata includes name, location type, and description).

### **Availability**

Catalog records for manuscript pages, their associated image files, as well as related Entity, Event, and Location records, will be made publicly available through [Collections.NewportHistory.org](http://Collections.NewportHistory.org). To see example pages from this site, please refer to [Supportingdoc6.pdf](#). This website is accessible online free of charge on all web browsers.

Additionally, NHS is committed to data-sharing partnerships with [Enslaved.org](http://Enslaved.org), the [Harvard Dataverse](http://Harvard Dataverse), and [10 Million Names](http://10 Million Names) (via the [New England Historic Genealogical Society](http://New England Historic Genealogical Society)), to expand the reach for this project and the communities that can engage with it.

### **Access**

The digital content produced through this project will be available through a Creative Commons BY-NC-SA license (Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International), specifically for noncommercial uses. The terms of this license will be outlined on the "About" section of the CollectiveAccess website, as well as on each catalog record page through the "Ask a curator/request an image" webform.

Given the sensitive nature of many of these documents, which pertain to slavery and the slave trade, NHS feels it is important to track any commercial use of the images. A permissions process is already in place for such use, in which those looking to acquire an image for commercial use complete a “permission to publish form” that is reviewed by the NHS collections staff.

### **Sustainability**

The access files (JPEGs) created through this project will be saved locally on the NHS’ Network Attached Storage (NAS) system, administered by IT contractor Atlantic Tech Group. They will also be hosted on the cloud by database developer Whirl-i-Gig, the creators of CollectiveAccess. IMLS funds will support the additional estimated 300GB of cloud storage through Whirl-i-Gig over the course of the grant period. Once the grant period is completed, NHS will continue to fund local and cloud hosting fees to ensure these digital assets remain accessible online in the long-term. The metadata generated during the project period will continue to be embedded in Providence, the CollectiveAccess cataloging software, as well as Collections.NewportHistory.org, for use by NHS staff and the public for the foreseeable future.

**Applicant Name: Newport Historical Society**

**Project Title: Newport’s Black and Indigenous Communities: Enslaved, Manumitted, and Free**

<b>Performance Measure</b>	<b>Data We Will Collect</b> (e.g., counts, costs, weights, volumes, temperatures, percentages, hours, observations, opinions, feelings)	<b>Source of Our Data</b> (e.g., members of the target group, project staff, stakeholders, internal/ external documents, recording devices, databases)	<b>Method We Will Use</b> (e.g., survey, questionnaire, interview, focus group, informal discussion, observation, assessment, document analysis)	<b>Schedule</b> (e.g., daily, weekly, monthly, quarterly, annually, beginning/end)
<b>Effectiveness:</b> The extent to which activities contribute to achieving the intended results	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>To measure how effective we are at reaching the public through the database, NHS staff will use Google Analytics monthly to assess viewership of the online database. This will inform our approach to the outreach and marketing pursued by the NHS to drive users to the platform.</li> <li>At the end of each project year, the project team will compile a report of the number of records generated, and the number of users/pageviews on the site. This will form the basis of an updated workplan for the next project year. The benchmarks outlined in the Schedule of Completion will be updated accordingly.</li> </ul>			
<b>Efficiency:</b> How well resources (e.g., funds, expertise, time) are used and costs are minimized while generating maximum value for the target group	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>At the end of each month, NHS staff will run an export of the records created in the project database by the research assistant. This will give the project team a sense of the progress made in generating new Entity and Event records and how efficient the research assistant is in executing project work.</li> <li>At the end of each week, the Project Director and research assistant will update a project workflow sheet to track the volumes that have been digitized, cataloged, and linked to new Entity, Event, and Location records. This will allow the project team to assess if they are meeting the benchmarks outlined in the Schedule of Completion, and make adjustments to the workflow if needed.</li> </ul>			
<b>Quality:</b> How well the activities meet the requirements and expectations of the target group	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The project team will address user feedback regarding the project website and digital records when comments are submitted through feedback forms featured on the site.</li> <li>NHS will actively solicit feedback on the database by running workshops twice a year for local student groups, Black and Indigenous-led organizations, and other groups within the community.</li> <li>The project director will conduct regular (weekly) quality assurance reviews of the digital records created by the research assistant to ensure they accurately and sensitively summarize the people and Events associated with a given Source document.</li> <li>The project director and research assistant will have a quarterly performance review to ensure both the research assistant and NHS staff are satisfied with the workflow and results. Any issues identified will be addressed through additional training or support provided to the research assistant, or adjustments to the project workflow.</li> </ul>			
<b>Timeliness:</b> The extent to which each task/activity is completed within the proposed timeframe	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The project director and research assistant will meet weekly to check that the benchmarks outlined in the schedule of completion are being met.</li> <li>Each quarter, the research assistant and project director will assess overall project progress (in terms of total number of volumes processed) against the schedule of completion and will adjust the schedule as needed.</li> </ul>			