Review: Digital History of the Jews of Boston

Alison L. Joseph¹

¹The Posner Library of Jewish Culture and Civilization

Published on: Jun 26, 2023

DOI: https://doi.org/10.21428/3e88f64fae886631

License: Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0)
Project
Digital History of the Jews of Boston

Project Director
Simon Rabinovitch, Northeastern University

Project URL
https://dhjewsofboston.northeastern.edu/

Project Reviewer
Alison L. Joseph, The Posen Library of Jewish Culture and Civilization

Project Overview
Simon Rabinovitch

I created the site Digital History of the Jews of Boston as an experiment: I believed that with some guidance, undergraduate students could create digital humanities exhibits of value to the public. The goal was (and is) for students to use digital humanities tools to explore Boston’s Jewish history, and to use Boston’s Jewish history as a topic to learn how to use the tools.

Boston’s Jewish history is an ideal topic for a digital humanities website for several reasons: 1) The community has undergone a great deal of transition over the past 170 or so years, creating a role for digital humanities tools to trace and analyze change; 2) we possess excellent records about the locations and duration of historic sites, making mapping and visualizations possible; and 3) Jewish historic sites are currently being used for a diverse array of purposes, and are mainly publicly unmarked, creating public value in building digital projects that allow people to see the evolution of community sites over time.

The project began with a small seminar of just four students, where I alternated between teaching the students a variety of digital humanities methods and teaching them about the history of the Jews in Boston and taking them into different neighborhoods. With the help of the Northeastern University Library’s Digital Scholarship Group (DSG), I created the project website, which uses the Library’s CERES: Exhibit Toolkit and allows for images and other digital artifacts to be stored directly on the university’s Digital Repository Service. In addition to the DSG, I was fortunate to be able to rely on the expertise of Northeastern’s NULab for Texts, Maps, and Networks, as well as colleagues Jessica Linker and Angel Nieves in the history department, who specialize in digital humanities. Our seminar also included workshops on mapping with expert cartographers from Beehive Mapping and on using digital archives with archivists from the Wyner Family Jewish Heritage Center at the New England Historic Genealogical Society and the Northeastern University Library Archives and Special Collections.
As we built the website in the seminar, I considered my role to be as the editor or curator of the publication, working primarily on the site’s architecture and ensuring consistency of quality, while allowing the students to create the exhibits on topics they considered valuable. I also encouraged them to use one particularly good resource: an extensive dataset, compiled by a local genealogist, containing the dates in which synagogues, many of which no longer exist, operated in different locations. We went out to different neighborhoods in the city tracking down and photographing these locations in their current usage.

One student, a graduating senior in economics and Jewish studies, used the synagogue data and Tableau software to create data visualizations tracing the inner migration of the Jews in Boston and Massachusetts, from neighborhood to neighborhood, over a period of 150 years. By creating visualizations of when synagogues opened and closed in clusters in different neighborhoods, this project yielded significant insights about how and when Jews moved within the state. The other three students in this initial seminar worked collaboratively with the same data to create a visual history of shared spaces between Jewish and Black people in Boston — particularly places of worship that have been used by different groups from both communities — using Knight Lab’s StoryMap tool.

Now when I teach Jewish history classes on different topics, I give students the opportunity to contribute to Digital History of the Jews of Boston as their final project. People have chosen to do so using Knight Lab tools such as StoryMap JS and Scene VR. (I purchased a GoPro 360 for students to experiment with VR and 360 projects). The results have been impressive. One student created a StoryMap JS of sites associated with the history of the Jewish Advocate, the oldest continually circulating Jewish-language newspaper in the United States (which closed in 2020). Another created a StoryMap JS embedding 360-degree photography of over a dozen historic synagogues in Baltimore that demonstrates many similar processes in migration, mobility, and transitions evident in the Boston projects, as well as the unique features of local architecture.

This project, best viewed on a desktop computer, is intended as an educational resource for students, teachers, and the public. Digital History of the Jews of Boston provides a resource for learning about the history of the Jews in Boston (and other cities), where people moved over time, and how Jewish buildings and space transitioned in neighborhoods that are no longer predominantly Jewish. This site is also a resource for scholars researching historic trends in urban migration. I plan to continually build exhibits with students, and increase the scope and complexity of the projects on the website.

---

**Project Review**

**Alison L. Joseph**

Digital History of the Jews of Boston is a project by Simon Rabinovitch’s undergraduate students at Northeastern University. Rabinovitch started the site in 2020 for a course on Digital Histories of Ethnic Boston. The goal of the course was to use digital humanities tools to learn about the history of Jewish and other
communities in the city of Boston. Students created mapping projects using existing datasets to visualize trends and transitions occurring over the past two centuries in the Boston Jewish community.

The site serves as a platform for display of the students’ digital exhibits. Students have used CERES: Exhibit Toolkit and Knight Lab tools such as StoryMap JS and Scene VR to present and analyze their data. While the site does not have its own API or share the data behind the exhibits, it is a great example of how university instructors can integrate digital humanities tools into their teaching and classroom work. The site is dynamic, allowing for the continual addition of new student projects. To date, according to the site, Rabinovitch has posted three semesters’ worth of projects by nine students.

Relying on out-of-the-box tools, the site serves as an excellent example for university teaching. Rabinovitch introduces tools, research methods for analyzing data within the humanities, and an overview of U.S. and Boston Jewish history. Doing this work allows students to apply their learned content knowledge to ask interesting research questions and make conclusions based on their data visualizations. While the pedagogical value of creating the sites for the students is clear, the research has been undertaken by undergraduate students who are new to the topic, raising the question of how useful they will be for the intended audience of “students, teachers, and the public.” This may merit additional clarification on the site about the vetting process Rabinovitch uses to ensure the validity of the content. Further work could also focus on situating the projects within the larger historiography of Jewish Boston and why mapping Jewish life matters.

In the content of the exhibits, students explore important aspects of Boston Jewish History, including Mapping Shared Spaces: A Visual History of Boston’s Black and Jewish Communities, which analyzes the exchange of buildings and neighborhoods with Black neighbors, and Boston’s Jewish Advocate: A Visual History of a Publishing Landmark, which examines the oldest continually-circulated English language Jewish newspaper in the U.S. (1902–2020) by mapping its physical homes. The reach of the student projects has expanded beyond Boston, with students applying the methods to other Jewish communities, namely Baltimore’s. This project — and the model it sets — has the potential to continue to expand to other Jewish communities, as well as other groups, and opportunities for cross-classroom and interdisciplinary collaboration.

Future efforts could focus on optimization for mobile interface. As Rabinovitch notes in his overview, the project is best viewed on a desktop. When viewed on a mobile device, reading the content is possible, but the projects that use StoryMap JS and Scene VR are difficult to view. The experience of scrolling through the carousel on the desktop, with the map next to it, is lost. Another useful future development might be an app that people can use while walking around, to learn about the physical landmarks they are visiting.

In both his overview and on the site homepage, Rabinovitch credits the support of the various digital humanities units at Northeastern and their important partnerships in bringing these projects to fruition. This also serves an important appeal to university instructors to seek out digital partners and resources at their universities to learn and integrate digital humanities opportunities into their coursework, leaning on the
resources available to students and instructors. Rabinovitch and his students’ work also abundantly demonstrate the value of collaboration, something that is often absent in the humanities.