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Exhibit Reviews:

The Lefferts Family Story and *The Greenwich Village Bookshop Door*

An American Family Grows in Brooklyn: The Lefferts Family Papers at Brooklyn Historical Society. Brooklyn Historical Society. September 13, 2013.

http://www.brooklynhistory.org/exhibitions/lefferts/

Before 2010, those who visited Prospect Park in Brooklyn, NY might have been surprised to learn from one of the park's attractions, the Lefferts Historic House, that the Lefferts family was one of the first modern-day Brooklyn Dutch settlers, integral to the city's development from the 17th to 19th century. When the historic house donated a large collection of Lefferts family documents to the Brooklyn Historical Society (BHS) in 2010, the Lefferts family legacy was made known to the general public. With a grant from the Leon Levy Foundation, BHS was able to process, preserve, and digitize much of the collection and develop the online exhibit, *An American Family Grows in Brooklyn: The Lefferts Family Papers at Brooklyn Historical Society*. This exhibit does not feature the entire collection, but users can access everything at the BHS's Othmer Library. Through interpretation of family documents and contextual history, this exhibit follows the Lefferts family from their 1661 settlement in Flatbush through the donation of the Lefferts homestead to the city of New York in 1917.

The exhibit is divided into two parts: "The Lefferts Story" and the "Image Gallery"; users are directed to start with "The Lefferts Story," hereafter known as the "digital exhibit," and then

can peruse the "Image Gallery" to examine all visual records used in the digital exhibit. The digital exhibit does not move chronologically, but is divided into the following categories: "Introduction," "Brooklyn's Dutch Frontier," "The Lefferts Clan," "Marriage and Family," "Slavery in Brooklyn," "The Church," "Farming Brooklyn," "Developing Brooklyn," and "Chronicling Brooklyn." Each category is a separate webpage with blocks of text analyzing the family history and providing historical context, as well as images of relevant records from the Lefferts collection. The "Image Gallery" is a standalone section which acts as an image repository of the records included in the digital exhibit, as well as entirely new images. The gallery is an alphabetical image grid, with a keyword taxonomy that can be used to filter images, and a simple search function. Each image has accompanying metadata, the record's call number in the BHS Othmer Library, and a link to download the high resolution image file. The exhibit ends with "Resources" and "About this Exhibit" webpages which provide further reading for users and a history of the exhibit's development, respectively.

While some online exhibits choose a design that mirrors the content, the simplicity, web-safe colors (white, blue, and orange), and ease-of-viewing on a mobile device of this exhibit emphasizes *content* over *form*. The design also incorporates hyperlinks, "Learn More" sections, and "hover" links which identify words, phrases, locations, concepts, and historical events in the exhibit which may be unfamiliar to the user. This feature promotes self-guided learning and widens the audience to children as young as 10. Users can choose to follow supplemental learning opportunities, such as "Learn More: How did women's property rights change under the English rule?" in the "Marriage and Family" section or a description of "Bedford Corners" (present-day Bedford Stuyvesant) in "The Lefferts Clan" section. However, *not* reading this

supplemental material does not impede the user's understanding of the content; in its most basic form, this exhibit describes the experiences of the Lefferts family throughout the centuries.

Though this exhibit provides numerous learning opportunities for users, it does—to a fault—rely heavily on historical context. The need to provide "filler" for the visual records is seen throughout the categories, as some have a lot of information, while others are repetitive. For example, the categories "Marriage and Family" and "The Church" use the same family genealogy record as visual context, and "Slavery in Brooklyn" and "Farming Brooklyn" both explore the use of slaves on the Lefferts family farm. The exhibit also frequently cites family histories written by Gertrude Lefferts Vanderbilt in the late 19th century (200 years after her ancestors first arrived in Flatbush), which might not be the best (or most accurate) source of information. In one instance, the exhibit highlights a quote from Gertrude declaring, with no proof, the Lefferts farmers were "among the best farmers in the State" in the 17th century.

For the most part, the overall design and text of the digital exhibit allows for a rich experience for both the in-depth and casual user. The only issues of concern are the categories chosen to frame the Lefferts Family Story and the reliance on historical context and a biased family history.

As for the most important aspect of the exhibit—the visual records—the results are much less impressive. While users can view and download high-resolution images of the records, the detailed metadata include in the "Image Gallery" is not embedded in the image files. Some files have no metadata at all, while others only have "BHS" as the author (which is not true, given archival provenance). While BHS put a lot of effort into creating metadata for each image in the "Image Gallery," that crucial information is lost once the image is separated from the website. This lack of context is a theme running throughout the exhibit's use of visual records.

In the digital exhibit, each category has a few images from the Lefferts family collection, but they are much smaller in comparison to the blocks of text. While users can click on images to view larger versions, it is not immediately apparent that these links take you to the "Image Gallery." Users also have to discover through close examination of the "Image Gallery" that there are new images not in the digital exhibit. Additionally, there are no back- or cross-links from the image in the gallery to its placement in the digital exhibit. How is a user supposed to put the "Image Gallery" in context with all the information they have just ingested about the Lefferts family? It is clear that BHS tried to solve this problem by creating a keyword taxonomy for the gallery, but this vocabulary does not match the categories chosen for the digital exhibit. It makes no sense to frame a user's understanding of the Lefferts family using specific categories, and then throw those out the window in the second half of the exhibit.

The Lefferts family records are the reason this exhibit was developed, however BHS clearly had problems with how to handle the visual images, technically, and how to organize them into a schema that would provide context, opportunities for learning, and a link to the digital exhibit.

Overall, *An American Family Grows in Brooklyn: The Lefferts Family Papers at Brooklyn Historical Society* is an exhibit that anyone, without previous knowledge of the content, from the general public, ages 10 and up, can understand and enjoy. Users can either learn about the history and legacy of the Lefferts family or they can delve deeper into how the Lefferts family fit into the events that were shaping both Brooklyn and America as a whole during that time. It is the organization and the use of the "Image Gallery" that is problematic. Each image, whether it appears in the digital exhibit or not, should include a link to a relevant digital exhibit category so the user can examine the images with some context. For example, in

the "Image Gallery," the postcard image entitled "On the Vanderveer Farm" should include a link in its metadata to the "Farming Brooklyn" category of the digital exhibit. The ability to download the images and detailed image metadata are both great features, but they shouldn't be separated once the image file is pulled away from the "Image Gallery"—metadata should be embedded into every file to further promote thorough scholarship and user access. Online exhibits offer advantages and challenges that physical gallery exhibits don't, the interaction of the web and ability to reach a wider audience is something this exhibit exploits, but not to its fullest extent. While being able to view records so closely on a computer screen is great, the exhibit needs to emphasize the importance of these records by highlighting relationships and putting them in the context of the digital exhibit.

The Greenwich Village Bookshop Door: A Portal to Bohemia 1920–1925. Harry Ransom

Center at The University of Texas at Austin. September 26, 2013.

http://norman.hrc.utexas.edu/bookshopdoor/home.cfm#1

The Greenwich Village bookshop door was salvaged from Frank Shay's early 1920s

bookshop on 4 Christopher Street in Greenwich Village shortly after it closed, and was later sold

to the Harry Ransom Center at the University of Texas at Austin. What is so interesting about a

door in an early 20th century bookshop? It is the *writing* on the door, the signatures of prominent

(and not-so-prominent) members of the "bohemian" community, which provides historical value.

When the door came to the Ransom Center in 1960, only 25 signatures were identified; later

research by a University student identified 25 more. From 2010–2011, University faculty and

curators identified hundreds of additional signatures and pulled together items from throughout

the Ransom Center's collection which add historical context to The Door and the "bohemians."

The online exhibit, "*The Greenwich Village Bookshop Door: A Portal to Bohemia 1920–1925*"

is the product of that research, which makes this an "artificial" collection (i.e., not adhering to

the traditional archival definition of a collection), but informative nonetheless.

The exhibit is divided into five sections, "Home," "The Door," "The Shop," "The

Village," and "The Bohemians." "Home" gives a history of the exhibit, the order in which users

should peruse the sections, and an invitation to help identify the remaining signatures on The

Door. "The Door" is the first stop; this section has a wonderful image of The Door panels and

the signatures. As users click on the signatures, a pop-up window appears with a large image of

the signature and, if it has been identified, a short description of the person and a link to their

biography in "The Bohemians" section. Users can also see webpages of identified and

unidentified signatures as well as a webpage about The Door as an artifact. Once users have gone through the entire Door, they next move on to "The Shop." This is a single webpage overrun with text, hyperlinks to webpages for people/places/things mentioned, and a few small images of records applicable to the history of the shop (i.e., The Shop's poetry magazine, postcards, newspaper articles, etc.). This format is repeated in "The Village" section. The format and design of "The Bohemians" is much more dynamic. The "bohemians" are divided into categories based on their professional/social arena (e.g., Writing, Social Worlds, Performance, etc.), and these categories appear within circles that look like coffee cup stains. When a category is clicked, users are presented with a list of names, each of which is *another* hyperlink to *another* webpage with the person's biography and signature location on The Door (e.g., back, panel 5). The exhibit ends with a "Learn More" section which gives a bibliography of books recommended, written, or about the "bohemians" and "Credits," which lists all the researchers who put the exhibit together.

The content of this exhibit is a definite driver behind its design. When people think of the 1920s art community, they think of dark back rooms, coffee houses, and speakeasies. This exhibit takes those images and runs with them. The design uses a brown color scheme and images of coffee-stained paper and wood paneling. However, this does not enhance the viewer's comprehension; in some cases, it is hindered. The blocks of text in "The Shop" and "The Village" frequently mention the "bohemians," with hyperlinks to the relevant webpages, but the links are the same color as the text, so it is difficult to discover learning opportunities. That being said, the "learning opportunities" are necessary to understand the content of the exhibit. The density of information and the need for users to go out of their way to discover information makes this exhibit most appropriate for college students and researchers already familiar with this subject matter. There is no opportunity to just get the "basics" from this exhibit, aside from

appreciating the door as an artifact, and it is very hard to understand the overall themes without reading through every section and clicking on every link.

The design and text portions of this exhibit are geared towards researchers who have knowledge and an established appreciation for the content. The exhibit reads like a research paper, the dense blocks of text are hard to follow and while hyperlinks provide many learning opportunities, it is difficult to pick them out and their extensive use expects too much self-guided learning from users.

As for the images throughout the exhibit, The Door is the most impressive use of visuals. This is the one aspect of the exhibit where the user can truly appreciate The Door as an artifact and the signatures as records of activity and "the bohemian experience." Unfortunately, the visual records sprinkled throughout the rest of the exhibit to add context to the dense history of "The Shop," "The Village," and "The Bohemians" are not well utilized. The images are small in comparison to the text. Though users are instructed to click licks that say "view larger image" or "view the slideshow," these links lead to marginally larger images and/or slideshows of additional images such as subsequent pages in the book, backsides to postcards, and related visuals (e.g., pictures of the present day location of the bookshop from different angles). The use of these pop-out windows is an antiquated web-design method and doesn't work that well in some modern internet browsers (e.g., Google Chrome). Additionally, the lack of high resolution images makes the records very hard to examine—typically, this should not be a problem with an online exhibit, as users expect the opportunity to examine records closely on their computers. The exhibit does provide detailed metadata for each image in a separate pop-out window found by clicking on "view metadata" under each image. Since the exhibit does not allow users to download the images, it cannot be discerned whether or not this metadata is embedded in the

image files. But, it is safe to say that if researchers want to examine these records more closely, they have to visit the Ransom Center's collection and find the original.

The exhibit curators put a lot of effort into creating an interactive visual for The Door, as users can spend hours clicking through the signatures and learning more about the people who signed this famous door. It is a shame that more time and effort wasn't put into incorporating the visual records from their collection into the rest of the exhibit. While the images are relevant to the content, they are hard to view, the resolution is sub-par, and the pop-up windows make it difficult to examine and bookmark images for research.

Overall, this exhibit is a well-researched attempt at pulling together pieces from the Ransom Center's collection to provide historical context to The Door of Frank Shay's early 1920s bookshop in Greenwich Village. For researchers already well-versed in this area, this exhibit is a treasure trove of connections, visual records, research, and opportunities for self-guided discovery. However, this exhibit does not know how to properly utilize the digital space, nor is it appealing to the casual user. Since The Door is the impetus for this exhibit, it should be the focal point. There is no need to have separate sections for The Door and "The Bohemians," combining them into one interactive door will make for a richer user experience and cause less confusion. The historical context for "The Village" and "The Shop" should be brief, with supplemental learning opportunities for those who want to delve deeper. The exhibit design needs to be more user-friendly, with a color scheme that clearly separates text from hyperlinks. Each signature should still link to the "bohemian's" biography, with relevant visual records for context, but users should be able to examine them in high resolution. The Door is such a unique artifact and this exhibit should take more advantage of the piece, using it as the focal point to draw users from a wider audience and keep their attention for longer periods of time.