

A Light in the Darkness:

An Illuminated Map of Queer History in Norfolk, VA

For this internship, I wanted to create a study of history and place. Knowing the history is one thing but seeing and interacting with it is a different story. For this, I wanted to find something that would let me apply various skills I have accumulated over the years, while also learning new things, and hopefully learning more about the history of Norfolk. An internship with Professor Cathleen Rhodes, Department of Women's Studies, Director of Gay Cultural Studies, and the Tidewater Queer History Project (TQHP), whose "...mission is to document and archive the stories of queer people of Hampton Roads", fit the bill.

I came to her with an idea for an exhibit that could be interacted with and 'shed some light' on these places. The concept was 'Light in the Darkness;' the idea behind it was to 3D print lithophanes for places important to the Gay community as the 'light'. A lithophane "is a thin plaque of translucent material, which has been molded to varying thickness, such that when lit from behind the different thicknesses show as different shades, forming an image" (Huang, R. 2024) The lithophanes would then be affixed to a large panel map of Norfolk where these places used to be. Interactions with the exhibit would be powered by a 'control box' of my design, which would house buttons for individual lithophanes. Buttons by date would also be an interesting addition to demonstrate which places were active at the same time.

This project was an intersection of deep-dive research, accessibility, education, exhibition, CAD, and 3D printing. Paula Wilson et al. (2018) discuss 3D printing technology, and why it is important for exhibits and museums in *Curator: The Museum Journal*;

The multisensory aspect of the museum, while neglected for many years, is undergoing a resurgence as museum workers have begun to push towards re-establishing the senses as a major component of museum pedagogy.

However, for many museums a major roadblock lies in the need to conserve rare objects, a need that prevents visitors from being able to interact with many objects in a meaningful way. This issue can be potentially overcome by the rapidly evolving field of 3D printing, which allows museum visitors to handle authentic replicas without damaging the originals.

3D printing is a relatively new phenomenon that is becoming increasingly popular in museums and in other historical exhibition contexts. I wanted to bring that breath of fresh air to ODU research and exhibition, and this project was a wonderful way to do it.

My preceptor Prof. Rhodes tasked me with sourcing historical pictures from *Our Own*, a hand-crafted newsletter (or zine) for the local Gay community. Unfortunately, the pictures were from faded, folded echoes of newsprint, with the newest being almost 30 years old. Luckily, Prof. Rhodes, just happens to be an artist, and was able to take and turn those blurry newsprint photographs into pieces of art in their own right. Between her guidance and artistic skill, and my computer and manufacturing skills, we were able to develop what I think is a beautiful representation of a Norfolk that no longer exists.

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For this project and this paper, I wanted to explore the intersectionality of old and new: hands-on, old-school research with a look to the future in 3D print form.

II. Archival Research

My first objective, of course, was to research. Professor Rhodes and I wanted to look closely at Queer History in Norfolk and to present that information in a clear, accessible, and novel way. The first stop was ODU's Special Collections for access to *Our Own*. Started in 1976, *Our Own* was published and distributed by the Norfolk Unitarian Church and ran until 1998. Over its 20+ year lifetime, it reported anything and everything relevant to the Lesbian and Gay community—from club meetups to legal issues to AIDs.

Professor Rhodes tasked me with going through each issue of *Our Own*, page by page, to see what I could find in the way of addresses and photographs. Unfortunately, the places in *Our Own* (and subsequently on the Tidewater Queer History Project Walking Tour) have all been torn down and paved over, and most of them are remembered only by the people that went there, as well as the Zine itself. I examined every page of every issue looking for photos and addresses of the various Lesbian and Gay clubs, bars, and meeting places that used to exist in Norfolk. This somewhat tedious, but very important research will help inform the TQHP's Walking Tour, an exhibit, and opens the possibility for more research avenues in the future.

After a month of this research, I had my first artifact— a master spreadsheet of the addresses and pictures I could find during the publication's lifetime. As I got deeper,

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I also began including what I deemed historically important—headlines, such as the 15th Anniversary of Our Own, and articles, such as “Gay Issues Addressed at Democratic National Convention,” “Clinton Vows to end Military Ban,” and “Hate Crimes in Texas: Virginians Should Watch Closely,” with the hope that this spreadsheet would become something that a future researcher could find useful and not have to start from square one.

Normally, when I am researching something for myself, I use what I like to call the ‘broadcast’ or ‘buckshot’ method, wide but not very deep. It is essentially a hunt for articles and other sources to list for me to come back to later. This project was different of course; I already had access to my primary source, the archived Our Own zine. Now, I needed to expand my search through other archival materials. As Michael R. Hill (2001) writes in his essay “Of Time, Space, and the History of Sociology: Methodological Rules in Archives and Archival Research,”

Archives...provide sociologists with data and techniques with which to study, reconstruct, and reflect on past social interactions and organizational patterns that are no longer observable via direct observation... Unpublished letters, telegrams, diaries, memoranda, transcripts, legal documents, budgets, minutes of meetings, memoirs and other manuscripts, together with newspaper clippings, scrapbooks, old class notes, souvenirs, invitations, photographs, mailing lists, sound recordings...

The ephemera he lists are important not only to sociologists or anthropologists, but to anyone doing deep, critical, archival research. For this reason, I also looked through the

various family archives that I have either built myself or belong to my cousins:

Bush/Wright, Bush/Shipp, Bush/Echols, Echols/Rockefeller, and Echols/Wyatt. I shifted my search a bit with the family archives: I wasn't looking for direct photographs of these places, but some of these families have been in this area for hundreds of years, and I thought I might be able to find a picture of a street that contained my quarry. Nothing.

The next step, then, was to visit the Sargeant Memorial Collections and Archives housed at the Slover Library. Denied access to the photograph collection, I turned to the forever-loved-and-trusted-by-researchers Sanborn Fire maps. The maps were initially developed by the Sanborn Insurance Company as a way to help them gauge fire risk. They "...combine the documentary power of historic photographs, city directories, and birds-eye images and as such offer immense value to historians interpreting the history of American cities, towns, and crossroads from the late-19th century through the beginning of the second half of the 20th century" (Tenny, C; 2022). As such, they are critical to understanding a city's (and therefore population's) history.

I was able to find a few helpful things in the Sanborn maps, such as alternate addresses, additional addresses, building shapes, sizes, and construction styles. These maps have been invaluable to researchers because they show each address, each building at that address, the dimensions of those buildings, and anything special about them. Special in this case indicated the fire hydrant locations, well locations, and materials stored inside warehouses—anything and everything an insurance company would need to know to properly insure each building, and what fire-fighters would need to know should they respond to a fire at the premises. I was able to find that two

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important Lesbian clubs, Shirley's and the Hershee Bar, took up more than one address. They were in buildings adjacent to each other—so instead of just 811 Colley Avenue, I learned that Shirley's also occupied the adjacent 813 Colley Avenue. Having multiple addresses to look up increased my chances of finding photographs by that many additional addresses.

Aside from the two examples above, I could not find much other pertinent information. A large part of that is the fact that the public only has access to the maps ending in 1970-1971. I needed something a bit more recent, ideally from 1978 and later.

So, I began to think on larger terms and decided to search The National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) archives. I have worked with NARA before, in my position as Division Secretary for the Grants and Agreements Management Division (GAMD) at the National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST) between 2009 and 2011. The division had lost track of some three-quarters of a billion dollars, and I had been tasked by the Division Chief to track it down. That meant, in practical terms, that I was to recall hundreds of boxes of files that had been sent to NARA incorrectly years before, dig through them to see if I could trace what went wrong. I worked with NARA so much that my counterpart in their office began to recognize my phone number, and would often answer the phone with something along the lines of the decidedly non-official greeting; "What do you need today, John?"

According to NARA's website, "...valuable records are preserved and are available to you, whether you want to see if they contain clues about your family's

history, need to prove a veteran's military service, or are researching a historical topic that interests you.” I looked for historical maps, photographs, and newspaper stories about Norfolk. However, no matter how I attacked the search bar, I could not find anything of direct interest to add to this project.

It was at this point that I realized I needed to again change tack. I needed to understand how to research history with a ‘Queer methodology’. As Jimmie Manning (2017) writes:

Queer methods are those that are informed by queer theory. Just as queer theory does not involve singular theoretical viewpoints or specific propositions about gender and sexuality, queer methods are also often open to multiple approaches and guiding philosophies or principles. As that statement suggests, queer methods are often reflexive and open to engaging multiple and conflicting worldviews related to sexuality and gender.

To understand how this worked in practice, I was invited to a skill-building workshop called ‘How to Do Queer History’ by Kimm Topping. Kimm is an artist-educator and historian, dedicated to uncovering and sharing LGBTQIA+ histories. Kimm is the author of *Generation Queer: Stories of Youth Organizers, Artists, and Educators*. During an interview with Crystina Luna (2025), Kimm was asked

...What was the experience like coordinating and writing such a project?” “It was so joyful and meaningful. I went through many rounds of edits with each of the people interviewed, because I wanted their stories to accurately and positively

reflect their lives. Sharing your story is a vulnerable thing to do, especially given the political climate, so I'm beyond honored that the people in this book entrusted me with the writing process.

The stories that she talked about are reminiscent of an Anthropologist's method in constructing an ethnography. According to Signe Howell (2025), "The method is inductive and open-ended. As such, the method directs the anthropologist to study that which is of significance to the community studied rather than test a number of hypotheses formulated in advance of the fieldwork."

Each source I looked at over the semester (even if not directly helpful) led me to more sources congruent with the histories that I was looking for. It still amazes me that no matter how much research you do, there are always more fascinating things to discover.

III. APPLIED RESEARCH

Now that I had the research done, I wanted to apply it in a meaningful museum exhibit. I wanted something tangible that Professor Rhodes could use as an educational artifact. I learned in Exhibit Design at VCU that people love to touch stuff in museums. They want something engaging to interact with, which meant it was also important to me that the data I collected get off the spreadsheet in an interactive way.

I had an exhibit pictured in my head, "A Light in the Darkness," which would be a culmination of my research and work this semester. The lights, in this instance, would be lithophanes of places that no longer exist. I wanted to combine old-school research

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with modern methods (3D printing) to produce something beautiful as well as educational.

I used my background in Anthropology and Archaeology, as well as my time spent as an intern at the Virtual Curation Laboratory at VCU with my mentor, Bernard K. Means to conceive the project. Dr. Means and “[his] Virtual Curation Laboratory at VCU partnered with the U.S. Department of Defense’s Legacy Program to develop a digital data project that incorporates the use of a three-dimensional object scanner in recording American Indian and historic artifacts for analysis and conservation” (Means, 2020). My experience at the VCL was crucial to the conception of this project. Without that guidance, I don’t know how this project would have taken shape. He taught me every practical thing I know about Archaeology, from identifying PPKs (Projectile Points/Knives commonly but incorrectly called ‘arrowheads’) to 3D printing and what a lithophane is.

The goal of this project became to make a map of Norfolk and highlight ten to fifteen different historic places important to the Gay community at the time. In order to do this, Professor Rhodes and I came up with a plan to take the pictures from Our Own and make lithophanes with them. I have been making (or attempting) to make lithophanes for about 10 years now and was finally successful on my own 3D printer roughly 3 years ago, when my Wife and I were planning for our wedding. I was able to produce three which came out fairly well: two of my Wife and I and one of my late Grandfather reading to me as a child. I have since upgraded to a 3D printer with

settings I don't have to tweak as much, and the lithophanes regularly come out beautiful, although failures are still common.

Over the course of looking through issues of Our Own, I found a number of pictures that were clear enough to possibly work as lithophanes, notably Shirley's and Mickey's. Shirley's was a women's bar located at 811 and 813 Colley Avenue, which was torn down in the late 1980s for a parking structure at EVMS, while Mickey's was a men's bar located at 131 Brooke Avenue, which closed in 1979 to make way for another Norfolk City parking garage. The quality of the pictures in Our Own was good for the time, but not legible enough for 3D printing. I used the lithophane maker tool at Makerworld.com to create the initial pictures themselves. I traced the first (proof of concept) lithophane of Shirley's, which was still fairly rough, and Professor Rhodes decided to do the others herself in a different art style.

I then focused my attention on the frames for the lithophanes. I designed and printed custom frames for them in Fusion360, a CAD program. I printed quite a few prototypes with different sizes, frames, and materials to come up with the final design. I had several constraints I had to take into consideration. The first being that since I was downscaling the pictures, I had to make a frame for them to fit properly. I made the inside, behind the lithophane, thicker to accommodate the LED light strips I was planning to use to illuminate the print. I had to make the back of each frame practical—I needed a hole large enough to attach and detach the USB power cable. I then designed what I am calling 'stand-offs,' which are essentially tubes that bolt to the back of each frame. These stand-offs serve two purposes. First, they hide the cable running

from the lithophane, through the background map, and into the powered USB hub control box I wrote of earlier. Second, they also allow the frame to be ‘popped’ off the surface of the map in different lengths to add dimension to what otherwise might look both flat and perhaps a little bland. After many hours of prototyping, I was able to produce two example lithophanes and the frames, as well as standoffs for the frames. It was great to see the results of my research become material.

IV. CONCLUSION

Ultimately, I feel my internship with the Tidewater Queer History Project put me in a position to really apply all of my interdisciplinary skills, and hopefully provide some intellectual handholds for researchers that come after me. It is my hope that this exhibit will continue on after me, with more lithophanes, a fully-realized map, and buttons to ‘Light the Way’.

The research I did for the TQHP opened-up new avenues for future research of Norfolk, and not least of all, my family. I picked up my Grandfather and Great-Grandfather’s genealogical research when I was about 15 years old. For having been in the Norfolk, Upper Norfolk, Lower Norfolk, Princess Anne County and Virginia Beach (Tidewater, collectively) area since 1637, there was a surprising lack of familial information—a couple of street names, a lost parish, and a forgotten bay. My ancestors weren’t famous, nor particularly wealthy, but they were here. Those generations before

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me had a hand in developing Tidewater into what it is today, and they deserve to be remembered.

That is why Professor Rhodes' research struck a chord with me. I have spent the last 30 years of my life looking for places and faces forgotten by history, and it has become something I enjoy, something soothing to me in some way, like a comfortable ghost settling down across my shoulders. Indeed, pouring over copies of *Our Own*, I discovered something I did not expect—a tie to the Spiritualist church that my Great-Great-Grandfather attended and financially supported in the later years of his life. *Our Own* is the only place I have seen the Spiritualist Church mentioned. The only times I ever even heard about it were in quiet tones from my Great-Grandparents and Grandfather. I am excited to chase that lead in the near future.

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