

Preserving appalachian history, 100 terabytes and counting

The sound of Appalachian music is alive at Berea College, and Preservica is working closely with the Special Collection and Archives department to ensure its large and unique sound collection, as well as the rest of its archives, are both digitally preserved and universally accessible.

Background

Berea College is a small liberal arts college in Kentucky formed by ardent abolitionists and radical reformers in 1855. The school's original mission – that all people deserve an education – continues today, and Berea provides educational opportunities primarily for students from Appalachia, who have great promise and limited economic resources. No student is charged tuition, and all students must work at least 10 hours per week to earn money for books and room and board.

As the South's first interracial and coeducational college, Berea has generated a rich legacy, with many historical treasures to archive. The Berea College Special Collections and Archives department houses materials that document the history and culture of Berea College and the Southern Appalachian Mountain region. The collection has particular strength in its sound and video collections; documenting traditional music and mountain culture.

The digital archives being preserved are all non-commercial – one of a kind, stored on a variety of now mostly obsolete formats.

They document Appalachian history and culture, as well as the history of Berea College. The collection is especially strong in the areas of traditional music (banjo and fiddle for example), religious expression, spoken lore, radio programs, oral history, and college events and personalities. It includes field recordings from homes and churches by collectors, including local and regional folk festivals, student performances, presentations of notable scholars, preachers, and social activists who have visited Berea.

Challenge

The digital collection is vast, approaching 100TB due to the inclusion of many large sound files. The large size is due to the inclusiveness of the files. Rather than deleting intervals between recital sound recordings to reduce file size, Berea has kept all files in their entirety in an effort to capture an end-to-end cultural experience, complete with background chatter from the audience. The video files were especially large, with some files over 500 GB each. For a liberal arts college with an annual enrollment of 1,600 students, this is an unusually large volume of digital material.

The migration of such a large collection was an important consideration in the project and had to be perfectly planned and scheduled so that nothing was lost.

In 2015, after an extensive research and selection process, Berea selected Preservica as its partner of choice to digitally preserve and protect its collection, and to make it publicly accessible. "The Preservica team is fantastic to work with," says Rachel Vagts, Head of Special Collections and Archives at Berea. "They have come up with a solution that works perfectly, and we always have a variety of people to answer our questions."

During the selection process of determining what would work well for us, it quickly emerged that Preservica Cloud Edition was the most economically feasible choice for the institution. "Preservica have been a great technical resource, and the solution has not broken the bank," says Vagts.



Solution

The first challenge the collection presented was that, because of the college's desire to allow access to the large collection, Berea needed not only a digital preservation system but also an access front end. To solve this issue, Preservica was able to easily integrate with the archive's existing IT ecosystem, including the ArchivesSpace application.

Preservica demonstrated a proof of concept that met all Berea's requirements, including their use of the cloud, which would preserve the collection and make it universally accessible to the wider research community.

To enable Berea to safely and rapidly move its collection to the cloud, they are using Preservica's Bulk Upload Service. The Preservica Bulk Upload Service works in conjunction with Amazon Web Services (AWS) Import/Export tool to accelerate moving very large amounts of content into and out of the AWS Cloud. This is accomplished by using portable storage devices for transport.

The Future

The finished solution will be available via Berea College Special Collections and Archives website, the objective being to share its fascinating history as widely as possible. "We're very excited about this project," says Vagts. "We have such an extensive collection of unique sound and video, and it's great that our students and the worldwide research community will be able to access it."

As Berea pioneers the way forward for other educational institutions in the US and beyond, Vagts highlights that the project is not only helping Berea, but also archivists around the world:

"I love the collaborative nature of this," she says. "I love the fact that we've been able to fund a project that will ultimately help my profession. Berea's history is so great, and the giving nature of the college has really filtered down through the collections we have. We are documenting history and making it accessible to everyone, and that's something to be proud of."



"The Preservica team are fantastic to work with. They provided a solution that will allow us to securely preserve our unique digital collection as well as make it accessible to a wider audience"

Rachel Vagts - Head of Special Collections and Archives,
Berea College