

# Collaboration Puts Chicago History At Students' Fingertips

by [Marlaina Cockcroft](#)

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A student needs images from the 1933 Chicago World's Fair. Researchers seek the speeches of Ida B. Wells. A music teacher wants to find folk songs from the Great Lakes region. No longer an overwhelming and time-consuming quest—they can just type the request into a search bar.

[Explore Chicago Collections](#), a free online portal, lets users search the digital collections of Chicago Collections members, including the [Chicago Public Library](#), the [Art Institute of Chicago](#), the [Chicago History Museum](#), and area colleges and universities. Users can either view the images and content directly or visit the institution that houses the materials to study them in

person.



Courtesy Chicago Collections

“There are so many unique, important Chicago stories that made the city what it is,” said Jeanne Long, executive director of the Chicago Collections Consortium. She says that the portal has users in all 50 states and in 170 countries and has gotten well over 700,000 page views. The [Philadelphia Area Consortium of Special Collections Libraries \(PACSCCL\)](#) and other cities have consortium models as well. But Long and Scott Walter, librarian at DePaul University and member of Explore Chicago Collections’ executive committee, say that the Chicago Collections

is unique because it has a broader range of members and information to share. Working with the larger community helps people appreciate the value of libraries and of cultural and heritage centers, Walter says. “And that’s a very, very important message for us to be able to put forward.”

## **FOCUS ON STUDENTS**

Chicago Collections has a particular focus on local students. It is working with Chicago Public Schools to complement what children learn in class and to see how best to get information to young users. The portal isn’t just a research tool, Long notes: it’s a way of encouraging people to visit the museums, libraries, and other institutions showcased on the site. “These efforts make research fun for young minds,” Long says. “It’s easy, it’s simple.” Walter says the portal has been added to the Chicago Public School district’s virtual library. It draws a lot of high school and middle school users, especially around the time of the Chicago Metro History Fair, a citywide competition leading up to National History Day. Thousands of students undertake projects related to Chicago history every year, he says. More than simply assisting on projects or reports, Chicago Collections is filling a gap for students, Walter says. Because of funding cuts, many school librarian positions around the city have been eliminated. According to the American Library Association, students in three out of four Chicago Public Schools don’t have access to a school librarian, and there are 140 school librarians serving more than 370,000 students. Working with the K–12 sector helps the consortium as well, by showing how productive this sort of relationship can be—even after, Walter hopes, the librarians return to schools.



Courtesy Chicago Collections

## **UNIQUE COLLABORATION GROWING AND EXPANDING**

Since its 2015 launch, the Chicago Collections Consortium has grown from 12 member institutions to 35. New members include the Federal Reserve Bank of Chicago and Adler Planetarium. The portal’s content is constantly being updated with newly digitized material, and it has an “Ask Us” feature for users to get questions answered by member librarians and archivists. “It’s a regular stream of requests, and a regular stream of questions,” says Walter. The consortium has also expanded its offerings to include audio material, such as the Chicago History Museum’s archives of journalist Studs Terkel’s radio interviews, and offers free public programs at member institutions. This fall, they’re planning their first digital exhibit, on the history of protests and activism in the city. Long and part-time portal manager, Kate Flynn, are the only employees of the consortium, which is otherwise “run on the backs of a hundred volunteers that are dedicating their time and talent,” Long says. The idea for the collaboration started in 2008

after the citywide Festival of Maps, in which libraries and museums around Chicago presented yearlong exhibits on cartographic materials. “It sort of planted the seed and got people thinking, ‘Well, we are all here. What do we know about each other’s collections? What could we do to work together more effectively and have a bigger impact across the city?’” Walter says. Libraries haven’t previously worked together in this way—at most in the past teaming up on a one-off project, according to Walter. But Chicago Collections planned “something that was, from the beginning, designed to [not only] cross all library types—academics, publics, school libraries, special libraries—but also to cross that boundary between libraries and museums.”

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Art Institute of Chicago

Chicago Collections Consortium

Chicago History Museum

Chicago Metro History Fair

Chicago Public Library

Explore Chicago Collections

Philadelphia Area Consortium of Special Collections Libraries

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