The year 2020 saw a perfect storm of events. It began with the COVID-19 pandemic that swept across the globe, followed by waves of racial unrest, economic distress, and political turbulence even as wildfires, hurricanes, and tropical storms tore across our region. It was clear to all of us that we were living through sweeping historical change compressed into a short space of time.

On March 13, 2020, the campus of the University of Texas at Austin, like so many colleges and universities across the United States and the world, shut down as all classes moved online. By September, we were six months into the pandemic with no obvious end in sight, unsure when we would return to our classrooms and the familiar, shared routines of university life. As academics and as a department committed to public history, we decided we had to do something to respond to the unprecedented stresses of 2020. At first, it was not clear where even to start. We teach students, quite rightly, that the legacies of history are visible all around us, but seldom do we see their presence in such a visceral and overwhelming way. In 2020, the legacies of racism and institutional violence, ongoing inequities in medicine and access to care, and patterns of environmental exploitation collided against each other like huge tectonic plates, exposing new and unpredictable fissures. We were living in history and as individual historians and a collective community of scholars trying to find a way to process it all at the same time.

To respond to these events, we began what would become the Beyond 2020: Living History project. In our initial notes, we laid out a basic goal: we wanted to showcase our craft, demonstrating what historians do and how we were uniquely positioned to respond to this moment by writing a first draft of history. The 1776 Commission and its distorted view of the past was rippling in the background, lending urgency to our efforts.¹ We imagined a collection, built by individual contributors, that could document firsthand the diverse experiences of 2020. Working quickly, we decided that contributors would supply four images—ideally taken via their smartphones—that could repre-
sent this moment of upheaval and change. We called these time capsules, borrowing a familiar term that everyone knew.

Time capsule projects have a long, often bizarre, but also strikingly consistent history rooted in nineteenth-century America. While the term originated in 1938 with the massive bullet-shaped cylinder lowered into the ground by Westinghouse Electric Company, the first recognizable time capsule, the Century Safe, was created by Anna Deihm, a magazine publisher and widow of a Civil War veteran, for the 1876 Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia. For the 1999 National Millennium Time Capsule, then-first lady Hillary Clinton homed in on a set of recurring themes and ideas:

Think of the items, the events and the ideas of the century that you would put into a time capsule, that you think would really represent the United States and the American century . . . These are just some of the items that will be placed, along with the scores of other objects representing the ideas and innovations that shaped the American century, into our National Millennium Time Capsule.4

The language around time capsules shows a remarkable uniformity. They are, according to one standard definition, “used to store for posterity a selection of objects thought to be representative of a particular moment in time.”5 The International Time Capsule Society, which records thousands of capsules scattered around the globe, explains that they “preserve the salient features of history and can serve as valuable reminders of one generation for another.”6 In this way, such projects, with their limited space, emphasize selection by seeking out representative objects that stand at the top of hierarchies of meaning. Time capsules have, in addition, a second distinctive feature that separates them from connected practices. Unlike older rituals such as the sealing of items in the cornerstones of buildings, the chosen objects are not intended to be hidden away indefinitely. Rather, the modern time capsule was designed be opened at a predetermined date. For Anna Deihm’s Century Safe, this was the national bicentennial in 1976, although it was initially far from clear whether its creator’s wishes would be honored.

Although we tied Beyond 2020 to the familiar language of the time capsule, we also diverged at key points from this template. Like the creators of standard time capsules, we planned to whittle things down to a representative list, in this case twenty images that could serve to represent this tumultuous year. But, facing a constantly shifting environment in which things seemed to change by the hour, we had no desire to speak to an imagined future audience. We did not plan to bury our capsules after an elaborate ceremony but rather to host them online in an open access format so they could be shared immediately. With this framework in mind, we constructed the first draft of a website,
which we dubbed Beyond 2020: Living History. It was little more than a few images and a call for capsules. By October, the project was live.

We were faced immediately by a decision: Should we attempt to harness the power of online communities, crowdsourcing our way to as many capsules as possible? In recent years, a number of highly successful digital humanities projects have made use of crowdsourcing by “harnessing . . . online activities and behavior to aid in large-scale ventures.” By the time we started, the pandemic had already generated a number of important crowdsourced projects at both the city (Amsterdam) and the state (California) level. If this approach did not serve our project’s goals, we could take a different path by soliciting capsules from a group of experts who were specially selected and tasked to represent this moment. This was the approach used, for example, by the BBC, which collaborated with the School of International Futures to produce a list of objects that defined 2020.

In the end, we decided to do neither, resolving instead to limit submissions to current members of the University of Texas community. It proved a crucial decision that permanently altered the course of the project. We work in a large state university with more than fifty thousand current students, but the decision limited us to a far smaller pool than a typical crowdsourced project. Our motivation to narrow rather than to maximize potential contributors came from conversations with students, both undergraduate and graduate, who felt trapped within their apartments and homes—both part of the university experience but marooned outside it. The same words kept recurring in long Zoom discussions: community, belonging, and the palpable lack thereof. It seemed only right, then, to start with our community rather than trying to scale up the project to capture as many capsules as possible.

By October 2020, the first submissions were trickling in. We had feared that every capsule might look the same, beginning with the ubiquitous mask and ending with the omnipresent Zoom loading screen. Instead, they were both more intimate and more varied than we had ever imagined. The capsules were intensely personal, opening an unexpected window into the lives of students, staff, and faculty. They featured shoes worn down from walking, adopted pets curled up on laps, dishes that sustained long days in isolation, pictures of online games as students desperate to socialize reached out across the internet, and yard signs and street art that proliferated across the neighborhood.

Some of the most moving capsules came from unnamed students using the anonymous contributor option. They showed a crowded bed filled with a partner and two dogs replacing a cubicle in the library—a place of work, of disorder and distraction, of comfort and love—or a socially distanced and masked date trying to rekindle memories of happier days. Many capsules focused on the moments before the storm of the pandemic struck, showing images of large lectures crammed with people, huge crowds enjoying fireworks, crowded spaces that did not seem deadly. Emotions cascaded through the capsules: hope, fear, isolation, resilience, regret, joy. The vast, sweeping

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7 Beyond 2020: Living History (website), accessed April 1, 2021, https://www.2020livinghistory.com/
8 Melissa Terras, “Crowdsourcing in the Digital Humanities,” in A New Companion to Digital Humanities, ed. Susan Schreibman, Ray Siemens, and John Unsworth (Chichester, 2016), 420–39.
9 Corona in the City (website), Amsterdam Museum, accessed April 1, 2021, https://www.coronainstad.nl/en/; Tell Your Story—California in the Time of COVID-19 (website), California Historical Society, accessed April 1, 2021, https://californiahistoricalsociety.org/initiatives/tell-your-story-california-during-the-time-of-covid-19/.
10 Richard Fisher, “Time Capsule 2020: The 37 Objects That Defined the Year,” BBC Future (website), December 25, 2020, https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20201217-time-capsule-2020-the-37-objects-that-defined-the-year.
scale of history was present: Black Lives Matter, the 2020 election, the virulent resurgence of anti-Asian racism and xenophobia—all of these curled through the capsules. But there was an intimacy and often a smallness—flowers growing in a backyard, a set of headphones for online classes, a crowded desk in a garage.
The capsules that came in were never perfectly representative of the whole university community. Some student groups and departments embraced the project immediately; others never responded to our emails. When told about our plans, many individual students rushed to submit capsules while others told us (with commendable honesty) that they could not begin to reflect on a 2020 that seemed to enclose them in a tight grip. The most enthusiastic contributions came from students who immediately grasped that their smartphones held a unique archive that should be curated rather than simply stored or deleted. For them, the online submission form became a process of active research as they uploaded, deleted, and uploaded again in multiple permutations.

As the number of capsules mounted, we began to discuss how to whittle them down. Time capsules, with their limited physical space and desire to represent a moment in time, demand selection. The process is inherently one of subtraction, of paring and paring down to find representative objects that conform to a chosen vision. The 1876 Century Safe contained “photographs and autographs of public figures, gilded pens and inkstands belonging to (among others) Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, a bound volume containing the names of more than 80,000 government employees, a temperance manual, and a letter from President Rutherford B. Hayes.”11 By 2020 the model was essentially unchanged. The BBC project aimed to generate “a list of objects that matter, and that tomorrow’s generations should know about, 100 years from now.”12 In the end they settled on thirty-seven objects, ranging from a mask to a delivery bag for carrying food, to the toppled head of a statue.

Although historians often look down on time capsules, these capsules reflect in fact much of the historian’s craft. In class after class, we instruct our students to generate hierarchies of meaning by searching for representative experiences or objects. The exception is always important, but we sift through archives looking for the typical, enabling us to make wider claims as we join case studies to arguments. But when our capsules came in, they were so moving and so varied that they generated a different urge—a reluctance to tamper or to bring the historian’s craft to bear. Put simply, we did not want to edit, to subtract, to prioritize, to censor, or to impose a hierarchy of meaning.

Both of us have a long experience with public history projects, which are designed not only to make sources available but also, in most cases, to harness them to an argument. This seemed wrong in this moment, in a year when so much had been lost. Instead, almost without thinking, we decided to relinquish control of the project, letting the capsules accumulate rather than trying to corral them into sets of meaning. What was striking for us was how much this mirrored our experience of 2020 more generally. This was for us, as so many, a year defined by forces beyond our control. We could no longer travel or meet in person. In a year in which so many children never entered the gates of their schools, we were suddenly unable to disentangle our professional from our personal lives. Online courses brought us into each other’s homes in strange and occasionally joyful ways, allowing us to meet family members and pets. With the campus closed, we could not teach as we wanted. With communities cut off from each other, we could no longer access spaces or people we had previously depended on. With so much beyond our control, it seemed appropriate to let a public history project follow the same course, to surrender to the currents of 2020, rather than attempt to dictate direction.

11 “The Mysterious Centennial Safe of Mrs. Charles F. Deihm,” History, Art, and Archives (website).
12 Fisher, “Time Capsule 2020: The 37 Objects That Defined the Year.”
If there is one theme that resonates through the capsules, it is loss. The capsules are filled with loss—not so much the loss of a loved one, although that fear was omnipresent, but the loss of shared space. One marooned student shared an image of a perfectly constructed gingerbread dormitory, showing a once commonplace communal space now seemingly out of reach.

Many other contributors returned to the desolate image of the empty campus—picturing the last time they had been on campus, the last time they had seen their friends in person, the last time they had shared the public space that makes the university experience so important. Universities thrive on their campuses, which provide spaces for myriad encounters with people and ideas. The year 2020 closed these off, reducing shared space for many students down to close to zero. This loss ran like a thread through many of the capsules.

As we dropped our plans to curate the capsules and generate new meaning, providing a different kind of shared space became the driving force behind the project. Our goal became neither to order nor to develop a hierarchy of objects all linked to a single argument but rather to provide a shared space for the University of Texas community. In this way, the site morphed to become a collective space for our community to come together and to share their experiences, their struggles, and the things they have held on to in this uncertain time.
Why does the Beyond 2020 project matter? It matters, we believe, because the site offers a valuable source for historians and the general public. While they are in no way comprehensive, the capsules capture some of the raw emotion of a year in which society seemed to become unmoored from past certainties. It matters as well because the site provides a way to reflect on this tumultuous and traumatic year. Since its creation, Beyond 2020 has been regularly used as a teaching tool across a range of classes. In our own department, colleagues have asked students, still grappling with the challenges of a pandemic that never seems to end, to create their own curated, collaborative exhibitions of twenty images and objects that might stand in for the year. The results have been il-

13 One such archive is now available, created during Joshua Frens-String’s spring 2021 section of “Thinking Like a Historian”: Katie Austin, Carlos Badillo, Kevin Barajas, Catherine Barany, Joni Brunk, Bennett Burke, Henry Epperson, Emilio Gomez, Sophia Harkins, Aina Ongcheap, Aran Sahebi, Alex Schleppe, Skye Seipp, Amy Shreeve, Madison Tuley, Pierce Wisnie, et al., “2020 in 20 Images—a Student Archive,” Beyond 2020 (website), accessed April 1, 2021, https://www.2020livinghistory.com/20-image.
luminating, surprising, and hugely productive, revealing how lived experiences both converged and split dramatically. But for us as cocreators, Beyond 2020 came to matter most because it provided a shared collective space and a way for students and colleagues to feel less alone. Its most moving use came as an accompaniment to an event in March 2021. Exactly one year after our campus shut down, the university held an online gathering called simply “Grieving a Year of COVID-19,” with Beyond 2020 as one of its resources. This encapsulated for us what the site had become. It shared, it broke down walls, and it provided a collective resource for students, staff, and faculty all linked together yet unable to inhabit the same physical space. It was not where we started, but just as 2020 changed everything, so did it transform our public history project.

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