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Yet Another George Washington Website: The Digital Edition and the Future of Documentary Editing

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Yet Another George Washington Website: The Digital Edition and the Future of Documentary Editing

Jennifer E. Stertzner

Why Create a Digital Edition?

In 2005, work commenced on what has become The Papers of George Washington Digital Edition. A small team was assembled, and the process of converting legacy volumes to XML began. For the past two years we have been busy entering corrections and changes, linking documents, tackling consistency issues, and correcting errors introduced by our conversion vendor. Though much of the work has been tedious, the resulting digital edition, released earlier this year, is an important milestone for the project. But it's more than just another George Washington website. This site contains all the features of the print edition, but it is also a tangible representation of how to get the most out of a digital environment.

Given the success of the print edition, one might ask, "Why create a digital edition?" The answer is twofold. First, users expect to find what they are looking for online. Using any search engine reveals the ever-expanding presence of humanities-related websites. Google any historical figure or event and see what you find—maybe links to the Library of Congress, archives that hold pertinent documents, and pages created by enthusiasts, with varying levels of accuracy. While not all scholars initiate research this way, numerous others do, whether they are middle school students writing reports or genealogists investigating their ancestors. As editors, we must recognize and respond to this trend and determine how best to add documentary editions to the mix.

The second reason for creating digital editions is far more important. In an age of information overload, it's easy to quickly search and find historical facts and opinions. But what about original manuscripts, rich annotation and contextualization, and meaningful search tools? Reliable and authoritative content and context are much harder to come by and are exactly what documentary editors have to offer.

Quantitative Benefits

The benefits of going digital can be divided into two categories: quantitative—which includes characteristics that are intrinsic to digital scholarship such as accessibility, capacity, and flexibility—and creative, such as searchability, interactivity, mutability, and interoperability.

Accessibility

Accessibility is perhaps the most important quantitative quality. It determines visibility, audience, use, and by way of these things, effectiveness. Traditionally, documentary editions were mainly available at research libraries only. Proximity to these libraries, or access to interlibrary loan, determined an edition's availability. The World Wide Web, however, has not only drastically changed the way information is gathered and used, but more importantly, it has increased awareness of what's available. Simply stated, the Internet is more accessible than libraries, in both a geographic and material sense. Anyone with an Internet connection has the ability to access digital editions, albeit there could be costs associated with some types of licensed sites. Digital editions are also the most effective way to reach diverse audiences, such as historians, students, teachers, genealogists, and the general public. And what of these research libraries, that, in addition to their printed holdings, now also have digital edition site licenses? Access becomes multidimensional—numerous people can use the edition simultaneously, at the library, in the classroom, off-campus, from home, or from anywhere that has a wireless connection.

The most rewarding outcome of increased access lies in how these documentary editions will influence research and exploration, at all levels. Dan Cohen and Roy Rosenzweig, in their book *Digital History*, ask: "How might our history writing be different if all historical evidence were available? The instantaneous access to primary and secondary connections—the ability to very quickly make and test out intellectual connections—will likely alter historical research and writing in ways that we haven't yet imagined."¹ This statement certainly rings true for the scholarship we have the opportunity to make available.

¹ Daniel J. Cohen and Roy Rosenzweig, *Digital History: A Guide to Gathering, Preserving, and Presenting the Past on the Web* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006), 4.

A meteorological account of the weather kept at Mount Vernon.

1 st In the morning NW Clear	Noon SW Clear	Night SE Clear
2 nd " " " " " "	Noon SW Clear	Night SW Clear
3 rd " " " " " "	Noon SW Clear	Night SE Clear
4 th " " " " " "	Noon SSE Cloudy	Night SSE Breezy
5 th " " " " " "	Noon SW Cloudy	Night SW Clear
6 th " " " " " "	Noon SW Cloudy	Night SW Had rain the night
7 th " " " " " "	Noon NW Clear	Night N Clear

April 7th 1792

*D*imensioned *W*ork for the Work of 12 Men to lay 24 Spikes for *W*ork 132

By a Wagon hauling, Stock & Cows to the Bay 1 day	3
By hauling rails from the park down from the repair the pasture fence	3
By hauling rails down from the bay to the post banks in the orchard 11	11
By hauling soil & rocks to the house & the mill from the mill 4	4
By hauling coal from the bay & carrying through the fields & down 1 day	1
By going to the mill & hauling 100 lbs coal 1 day	2
By Old fashioning of 100 lbs of iron in case of the 3 & 4 days of the day 12	12
By Old fashioning of 100 lbs of iron & 100 lbs of iron 6	6
By digging up brick earth to the farm & carrying them to the bay 3 days	9
By carrying the earth, 3000 convenient for the Wagon	3
By repairing the fence at the back of the Old House lot	4
By hauling coal & carrying soil, &c.	57
By hauling laying brick foundations for the mill of the better road 2	2
By hauling 100 lbs of iron in case of the 3 & 4 days	15
Total	132

M^o from mill 26 bush of meal & 21 bush of Bran 1000 11 head of Cattle
 2 Cows to the bay 20 lambs & 200 lbs of iron & 200 lbs of iron & 200 lbs of iron
 200 lbs of iron & 200 lbs of iron & 200 lbs of iron & 200 lbs of iron

*D*imensioned *W*ork for the work of 6 Men amounting to 86

By hauling & carrying 1000 lbs of iron 2 days each	8
By hauling & carrying 1000 lbs of iron 2 days each	8
By hauling & carrying 1000 lbs of iron 2 days each	8
By hauling & carrying 1000 lbs of iron 2 days each	8
By hauling & carrying 1000 lbs of iron 2 days each	8
Total	86

31

Increased capacity and greater flexibility of digital editions allow the publishing of complex documents. George Augustine Washington, April 7, 1792, Farm Report. Image courtesy of the Library of Congress, Manuscript Division.

The Papers of George Washington Digital Edition - Windows Internet Explorer

http://rotunda.upress.virginia.edu:8000/pgwde/dft.xq?mode=menu&keys=menu:info-home-scholar

File Edit View Favorites Tools Help

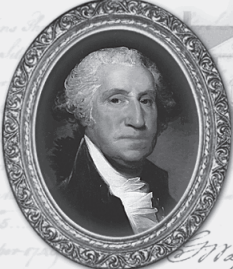
The Papers of George Washington Digital Edition

HOME ABOUT CONTENTS SEARCH PREFERENCES LOG IN

THE PAPERS OF GEORGE WASHINGTON
 DIGITAL EDITION
 ROTUNDA

Theodore J. Crackel, Editor in Chief

A landmark in historical scholarship, *The Papers of George Washington Digital Edition* encompasses five separate series and the complete diaries. This digital edition offers the complete Papers released through 2005 in one online publication. You may search on full text and by date, author, or recipient across all volumes and series. The exceptional indexing of the individual print volumes is combined here into a single master index, and all internal document cross-references are linked.



Editor's Introduction
 Acknowledgments
 Contributors

News [last updated: 15 October 2007]

The Papers of George Washington Digital Edition [v. 2007.02]
 The University of Virginia Press
 Copyright © 2007 by the Rector and Visitors of the University of Virginia
 You must purchase this publication to obtain full access to its contents.

The Papers of George Washington Digital Edition is available through the University of Virginia Press's Rotunda project.

Capacity

The traditional volume editor is aware of the space limitations of letterpress editions. These limitations influence document selection, length of annotation, and images used. Online, however, space is cheap and seemingly infinite. That's not to say that we need or should digitize every last scrap of paper, but it does alleviate some of these considerations. In the case of the Washington Papers, the amount digitized is incredible—the five main series contain over 18,500 documents; the *Diaries*, 6800 entries and over 50,000 footnotes.² The consolidated index is impressive in size as well: over 35,000 main entries, 98,000 subentries, 25,000 sub-subentries, and 1,000 sub-sub-subentries. These numbers contain just the first fifty-two volumes of the Washington Papers. Considering we have yet to add the remaining volumes, estimated at about thirty-eight, as well as additional documents, these numbers will grow exponentially.

Flexibility

Increased capacity also gives us greater flexibility, such as the option of publishing more complex documents. Good examples are Washington's financial records and farm reports. While some of these documents have been included in the letterpress edition, they are much better suited for a digital environment. Charts and tables such as these are hard to format for the printed page; online, screen space is expandable, only requiring the user to scroll. Adding images of the original documents is also feasible.

Creative Benefits

Accessibility, capacity, and flexibility are inherent to the digital medium—resulting from the decision to pursue a digital edition, as well as to what degree. On their own, these quantitative qualities are certainly reason enough to digitize. But stopping here, we run the risk of creating merely an electronic book—not really the best way to present a resource such as the documentary edition. This is where creativity, enabled by XML, becomes a factor. This next set of qualities—searchability, interactivity, mutability, and interoperability—are areas in which editors have the most options and influence, as well as the opportunity to develop standards.

² The five main series (Colonial, Confederation, Revolutionary War, Presidential, and Retirement) are comprised of forty-six volumes, while the *Diaries* were complete in six volumes.

Here, decisions are informed by target audience and desired use, but are also a product of time, expertise, and money.

Searchability

While access is one important component, it's searchability that allows users, once at a site, to get the most out of an edition. It's rare to find a user who will read the volume cover to cover, or in the case of the digital edition, chronologically, page by page. Instead, users depend on the medium's supplied search features. In a print edition, the index defines important people, places, and ideas. The index is a crucial component of the digital edition as well; however, numerous other search tools can be made available, requiring varying levels of time and resources to implement. In the case of the Washington Papers digital edition, we preserved the traditional navigational tools of the letterpress edition, such as the table of contents and the index, and added the essential search page.

The consolidation of fifty-two individual volume indexes proved to be a time intensive, difficult task. Once combined, differences in indexing practice over the years and between different series and editors were revealed and had to be reconciled. Currently, a corrected and regularized master list of main index entries is the basis of the single consolidated index. Each main entry gathers all page references and subentries contained in the separate volume indexes; reconciliation of differences at this level continues and will most likely be informed by future volumes. Eventually, the index will be searchable either by keyword or main and subentry selectors. Bob Rosenberg, in his article in *Documentary Editing*, summarizes the importance of the digital index: "the . . . index . . . is a sophisticated intellectual tool that maintains and arguably increases its strength when applied to electronic texts. Full-text searching can help find specific text known to exist, but it is at best a marginally effective way to explore a body of information. A good index not only provides direction to implicit meaning in the text, but it reveals to the user what may be found in the work. In print volumes an index is often used as a browsing aid; online, where the scope and depth of a work is harder to judge, such an aid is that much more valuable."³

³ Bob Rosenberg, "Documentary Editing," in *Electronic Textual Editing*, ed. John Unsworth, Katherine O'Brien O'Keefe, and Lou Burnard (Modern Language Association of America, 2006), http://www.tei-c.org/About/Archive_new/ETE/Preview/rosenberg.xml.

Interactivity

The digital medium changes the relationship between the user and the edition. With numerous searching tools at their disposal, users can shape their experience and how they interact with the edition. For example, when searching a specific date, results not only contain documents from a particular series, but also the diary entries for that time period. Additionally, users can choose to look only at documents to or from someone or restrict searching to just annotation. Of course, the documents can still be accessed in the traditional way, navigating by print edition series and volumes. In the future, users will also be able to search by document type and repository and to limit searching to documents only.

Mutability

As editors, we are always concerned with accuracy. The digital edition is mutable—we can quickly make changes, corrections, and additions that are available to our users immediately. Over the years, editors at the Washington Papers kept records of errors in the transcriptions, annotation, and indexes. One of the first tasks of the digital edition team was to record these things into a master set and create an error database. This database contains correction ID numbers, series, volume, and page number information, original and corrected text, initials of editor responsible for correction, and columns for confirmation of entry and double-checking. This database corresponds to information we enter into the XML file. What's visible to the user is the corrected text that, when moused over, displays original text. This version transparency is important for those who use both the letterpress and digital editions.

Interoperability

The digital environment also makes collaboration much easier and more effective. This capability not only benefits editors, but it also benefits the user. Consider the usefulness of creating biography and geography databases accessible by numerous projects, or linking across editions, allowing users to quickly follow information lines. A good example is Rotunda,⁴ the electronic imprint of the University of Virginia Press, which has been working on the American Founding Era. Currently comprised of

⁴ See http://rotunda.upress.virginia.edu/index.php?page_id=Home.

the George Washington and Dolley Madison digital editions, the collection will eventually include the Jefferson, Hamilton, Madison, and Adams papers, as well as others. Interoperability of these editions will present numerous opportunities for internal referencing as well as information sharing.

Conclusion

So what does this mean for our field? Documentary editing is a creative scholarship,⁵ and the digital edition presents yet another opportunity to engage ourselves in developing materials for the future. We are not the first, nor will we be the last, to apply scholarship to this medium. Consider Google, currently digitizing library collections from the University of Michigan, the University of Virginia, and numerous other universities, or online journal collaboratives, as they navigate the waters of accessibility and continued print subscription viability. Those in the field of documentary editing will not only tackle the same kinds of questions, but also will contend with a unique set of issues. Ours is a different resource that will require innovative thinking and inventive methods to make best use of the digital medium. We need to all take part in this process, developing standards for and applying our time-tested editing methods to this new frontier.

⁵ Holly Cowan Shulman, "Doing Digital History," *History News Network* (January 8, 2007), <http://hnn.us/articles/32922.html>.