1981

"Goodbye Gutenberg" Part 1

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Such was the title of a recent PBS program on the current information revolution made possible by electronics. Some of the opportunities which this technology offers to historical editors were explored at a conference in Philadelphia on 4-5 May 1981 entitled "Modern Technology and Historical Editing: National Historical Publications and Records Commission Word Processing Conference." The program focused on the use of word processors and computers by historical editors to expedite the publication of multi-volume printed editions.

Long before the federal budget crunch, the NHPRC became concerned about the length of time and amount of money it took to complete many of the projects it sponsored. Several years ago, the Commission began to test one possible solution by making grants to projects for the purchase of word processors and mini-computers. Recipients were encouraged to buy equipment and develop programs to suit their own particular needs. Several projects used optical scanners to make machine-readable files from previously transcribed documents or printed indexes or to produce new machine-readable files with a low ($15) capital investment. Many projects used word processors to transcribe, edit, and annotate documents and send floppy disks of their volumes to the publisher. Some projects have both word processors and terminals linking them to central university computers, a situation which enables them to take advantage of the software and speed of the big units without sacrificing the independence and accessibility of the small units. Despite the variety of equipment, most of the projects are attempting to encode their manuscripts for computer typesetting both to eliminate proofreading in the production stage and to virtually eliminate further composition costs. Funded by the Mellon Foundation and hosted by the Historical Society of Pennsylvania, this conference was convened to hear from the projects who participated, from their publishers and printers, and to share the information with other NHPRC-sponsored editing projects. An estimated 110 people attended the sessions.

Following preliminary remarks, Frank Burke, Executive Director of the NHPRC, introduced David Chesnutt, one of the first NHPRC editors to investigate computer applications to documentary editing. The text processing system of the Papers of Henry Laurens at the University of South Carolina includes a word processor, a central computer, an optical character reader, a computer typesetter, and a computer-output microfiche unit. (For details see the description in the May and September 1980 ADE *Newsletter.*) Chesnutt described how computers could make the normal editing process more efficient particularly in terms of preparation of the manuscript, indexing, and production. Among the advantages, he listed easier revision of text and annotations, the ability to retrieve specific information from large files, the creation of control and search files by computer sorting, the creation of machine-readable indexes that could later be merged into cumulative indexes, and the elimination of proofreading in the production phase. Chesnutt has helped develop computer indexing packages (CINDEX) that can be used by other projects to produce indexes to single volumes or cumulative indexes, as well as a computer typesetting package (CACTUS) especially designed for documentary editions.

John Kaminski (Ratification of the Constitution) described the use of an OCR scanner to make computer typesetting possible with a low capital investment. For $15 the project purchased a special element for their IBM Selectric typewriter and produced a machine-readable typescript with simple typesetting codes embedded in it. The typescript was scanned by the printer, entered onto disks, and sent through a computer for typesetting.

The Documentary History of the Supreme Court does not have access to a central computer and has been working with a Wang 5 Model II word processor. Staff members discussed limitations in hardware and software and how they are developing programs on their own to make the system work for them. Maeva Marcus cautioned against using a word processor as simply a smart typewriter; only the capacity for computer typesetting made the transition worthwhile. She emphasized the importance of full consultation with one's publisher and the need for caution and persistence in dealing with vendors more used to equipping business offices. She advised against buying the cheapest model or a system lacking important components such as a printer and urged a careful consideration of such features as screen size, disk capacity, and service arrangements. In discussing the project's text processing system with the Wang, Jim Perry warned that vendors are not knowledgeable about our needs and editors must find their own solutions. In setting up tables and difficult documents, more time can be spent coding the format than is justified. Jim Buchanan discussed indexing on a low-power word processor. Names and subject terms are marked on a printout of the text. After page proof is received and page breaks marked on the master disks, a global search is conducted for each name and subject and page references are noted on index cards for each term.

To avoid the slowness of global searching on a low-power Wang, someone suggested taking the files to a service agency for processing on high-power equipment.

Scott Wilds (Papers of William Penn) and Barton Craig of the Winchell Company discussed the specific system used by the Penn Papers to prepare texts on a word processor for computer typesetting. The Penn Papers purchased a Wang 5 word processor early in the project. While they are pleased with the software, the hardware and service have caused problems. Wilds discussed how to command various typefaces and formats and Craig described how particular coding challenges such as old style figures and Greek letters were resolved.

A panel of publishers and word-processing experts discussed computer typesetting and documentary editions from their perspective. Documentary editions are problems for publishers because they are relatively expensive to compose, difficult to design, and are printed in small runs. Charles Cullen estimates that the Jefferson project will save Princeton University Press $12,000 per volume in composition costs by submitting manuscripts already encoded for typesetting. If NHPRC subventions are not available in the future, this savings may become critical. Gerry Mayers of Columbia University Press counseled that the publisher must be totally involved in the adoption of computer typesetting by a project but should not meddle in specific details. Larry Buckland of Inforonics, Inc., recommended that editors confused by a variety of options should consult publications such as *Typeworld* and the *Seybold Report on Word Processing.* He noted that one difficulty peculiar to some documentary editions was the need to reproduce the format of the original and that there were currently no standards in the industry to handle this. He thought programming costs for duplicating format would be astounding if billed completely. Max Lanzendorfer of York Graphics, Inc., recommended that editors consult specialists to work out their coding problems and seek out printers experienced in computer typesetting, especially in conversion of word processor output. He thought typesetting codes were best inserted by the editors themselves using relatively simple generic and mnemonic codes. Christopher Harris of Yale University Press and J. Robert Dinon of International Computaprint Corporation telescoped their comments as time ran out. Dinon advised that coding was much simpler than it sounded and recommended using consultants for expert advice and negotiations with vendors.

(to be continued)