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# The Civil War on the Internet

JOHN Y. SIMON

You are about to read a paper on Civil War resources available on the World Wide Web by someone forced to acquire a computer by his dean over his strenuous objections. I now concede that she was right, but I still require assistance with computer problems, sometimes calling out in distress to the young woman in the adjoining office who grew up with and loves computers. What she can't fix requires a call to technical support people in the basement, one of them named Gonzo, and another named Trouble. This paper would be different if Gonzo or Trouble had written it, but I can assure you that it will be free of technical jargon since I don't understand any of it.

The World Wide Web is only a decade old, yet a few years ago the number of Civil War sites was already estimated at 600,000, quite possibly a misleadingly outdated estimate since a more recent search for "Robert E. Lee" turned up at least that many. In 1998, one reviewer noted "that the internet consists of equal parts *Star Trek*, stock market reports, soft-core pornography—and Civil War sites." Popular interest in the Civil War can resemble both blessing and curse. This year, William G. Thomas and Alice E. Carter published *The Civil War on the Web: A Guide to the Very Best Sites*. This valuable book identifies and describes ninety-five sites as superior, and I can hardly question a guide that includes my own site. The compilers evaluate technique as well as content, and for research purposes the "very best," as identified by Thomas and Carter, may not serve scholarly needs. For obscure and accurate information, the entire Web becomes a necessary tool.

The Internet is coming of age for Civil War scholarship. Make no mistake about the cluttered debris and frivolous nonsense available in quantity. The electronic revolution permits fools and obsessives to disseminate ignorance worldwide, sometimes cloaked in anonymity or pseudonymity. The Internet becomes the chief source for clownish or sinister error, sometimes buttressed with intended or pretended scholarly citations. Nonetheless, any

well-stocked library contains much the same thing. The development of electronic transmission of error has by no means led to the creation of error itself, merely to its proliferation. Cataloguing Civil War misinformation available on the Internet would prove an endless task—and to no good purpose.

What is more significant is the creation of electronic tools that facilitate research and scholarship never before possible. One example is the development of access to massive accumulations of documents. For example, *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies* consists of 128 separate volumes, many of them lengthier than 1,000 pages. Published between 1880 and 1901 by a large staff of War Department employees, the series concluded with an index volume of 1,242 densely printed pages, abridging and providing access to information contained in the index of each of the preceding 127 volumes. Additions and corrections alone occupied 151 pages, cataloguing errors or omissions in names, errors in named places, and other aspects of all preceding volumes. Ever since original publication, the *Official Records* have served as the foundation of all inquiry into the military history of the Civil War.

Now that this entire compilation is available electronically in at least two different CD-ROM versions and also on public access internet, the question arises what benefit this brings besides freeing up shelf space and eliminating the prodigious cost of a reprint edition. In other words, what can be learned from an electronic version of the *Official Records* that cannot be learned from a print version?

Individual word retrieval enables researchers to examine categories that would never have occurred to the meticulous indexers of the original edition. For example, what do these myriad documents disclose about anti-Semitism in the Civil War period? By feeding the computer a series of words and synonyms (*Jaus*, *Hebraus*, and *Israelites* are among the most productive), the existence of comments about Jews in the Civil War can be teased out of documents that appear unpromising at first glance and would not bear examination except under bizarre circumstances involving reading, while remaining awake and alert, every single word in this massive compilation.

Similarly, despite the meticulous original indexing to names of places associated with recognized military en-

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gagements, there is no way to locate places associated with activity elsewhere. References to Carbondale, Illinois, can be retrieved only through an electronic search, and accumulating the panoply of references to southern Illinois requires feeding the computer an array of place names including both towns and counties. The insulting term *Egypt* used for this part of Illinois during the 1858 Lincoln-Douglas debates—and still used—disappears from the *Official Records*, but probably through clerical sanitizing of documents rather than disuse during the Civil War.

Pursuing a search for *Egypt* through other documents led to the electronic version of *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, originally published in eight volumes in 1953 with an index volume completed in 1955. That index provided twelve entries for *Egypt* as applied to southern Illinois, all from the debates, but a search for further references, especially in incoming Lincoln correspondence, requires use of the electronic version of the original edition. The editors, however, skimmed lightly over Lincoln's incoming correspondence, using only a small percentage of the text for purposes of annotation. Even more profitable is the Library of Congress American Memory site, currently posting the entirety of its incoming Lincoln correspondence through transcriptions prepared by the Lincoln Studies Center of Knox College at Galesburg, Illinois. Questions raised by the transcriptions can often be answered by the facsimile reproductions of the letters themselves, posted adjacent to the electronically searchable text.

Properly used, electronic text provides a modern version of the rare and elusive concordance, previously available only for literary giants. If the search for *Egypt* appears relatively petty, Lincoln's use of the words *commander in chief*, as well as such use by his correspondents, sheds new light on the meaning of that phrase to the Civil War generation. In addition, electronic search opens up new vistas for psychologically charged words such as *mother* or *love*, or for evidence of religion such as *Christ* or *savior*. Electronic search cannot be relied upon as an infallible catalogue to word use; too often text is subject to faulty transcription or the vicissitudes of scanning. Nonetheless, it can bring to scholarly attention a great deal of material otherwise obscure to the point of invisibility and enable the scrupulous to verify accuracy through the use of the original printed and manuscript sources. At a moment when many believe that studies in the Civil War have become overdone and repetitious, an entirely new and revolutionary technique has suddenly emerged.

In the search for documents, the Web has become a valuable resource. Many institutions are posting invento-

ries, some simultaneously curtailing or eliminating conventional dissemination. This group includes the National Archives, which provides inventories, finding aids, and sample documents. Inventories and catalogues from other institutions available on the Web include errors and misreadings of documents of a sort rarely tolerated in print. At the same time, such flawed listings provide access to materials otherwise unknown. The Web is used by lesser-known institutions, especially those likely to be overlooked by even assiduous searchers. Who knew about Navarro College in Corsicana, Texas? Not me. Yet Navarro houses an important collection of Civil War documents. The beginning of wisdom is to recognize that American historical documents are frequently housed in illogical places throughout the country. The end of wisdom is to recognize that not all will be found. The Web enables even the careless and sloppy to look wiser than they truly are.

The Web has provided a venue for the publication of documents privately owned, such as Civil War soldier letters, especially those which through number or quality could not lead to dissemination in print. Highly prized by families of descendants, they probably will not be donated to public institutions even in photocopied form. Such documents are sometimes posted on the Web as a token of family pride, and provide valuable insight, especially to those who study individual regiments as social groupings.

Family pride has also given the Internet primacy in the dissemination of genealogical information. Obscure persons, mentioned by persons less obscure, often supply the cornerstone of annotation. Immense effort, much of it obsessive, compulsive, and even counterproductive, goes into the acquisition of genealogical data. Previously, retrieval required travel to peculiar institutions or tedious examination of otherwise useless printed sources. Now such obscure material floats upon the computer screen. Best of all, the process is only in its infancy. Much additional material may be anticipated, perhaps enough to resemble a collective national database.

The Web also meets another need by supplying a market for manuscript material. Beginning with E-Bay, the existence of a worldwide market for individual treasures has coaxed from numerous attics documents of scholarly value as well as cheap fakes and facsimiles. The simultaneous success of the television hit *Antiques Road Show* encourages viewers to anticipate incredible prices for manuscripts. Autograph dealers have joined individual sellers, selling either from individual websites, on such collective venues as E-Bay, or both. Dealers have long been reluctant to share their catalogues, sometimes expen-

sively produced, with scholarly projects invariably managed by those with no money or access to it. In addition, they follow the unexamined trade assumption that publication diminishes value. Lurking below is the dealers' fear that documents shared with editorial projects may prove to have been stolen from institutions, an increasingly common practice as choice Americana escalates in price.

The Internet includes numerous sites providing access to books, magazines, journals, and newspapers, the best of them word searchable. Under optimum conditions, entire shelves of books can be searched simultaneously. Scanning has encouraged institutions to provide photograph and other pictorial sources in quantity.

This richness of information comes at a price. Much Civil War material is posted by dealers or individuals who constantly revise their websites by rearranging and eliminating material. For many, the visitor count rules, as does the timeliness of the information. Few archive what is valuable, useful, or significant. While the current Web serves as a library of useful information, users have no guarantee that any of it will be available tomorrow. Some message boards contain only a farrago of opinions, constantly reiterated by those whose passion is equaled only by their misspelling. If someone should accidentally post useful information, that message may soon vanish with the rest.

At the same time, much information remains proprietary with fees adjusted to expected customer demand. Sometimes fees are incommensurate with research value to individuals. This applies to other electronic tools as well, including the Lincoln Legals DVD, originally published by the University of Illinois Press at a cost of two thousand dollars. Acquiring a copy in one academic library involved considerable arm-twisting. Other resources remain completely out of reach because they do not have enough permanent value to any individual researcher to justify the fight for funds.

The Valley of the Shadow project at the University of Virginia, directed by historian Edward P. Ayers, has pioneered a possible pattern for further development of Web resources. Calling his project an "intentional archive," Ayers has assembled a large quantity of documentary resources on two counties—Augusta County, Virginia, and Franklin County, Pennsylvania—to facilitate comparisons and contrasts in the Civil War era. A large and dedicated crew has posted newspapers, documents, census records, maps, and other materials designed to provide a comprehensive view of the people of these two counties. Beautifully designed and remarkably accessible, the material serves a large clientele ranging from high school stu-

dents to Ayers himself. The intended result is to enable all users to interpret the Civil War on the basis of primary sources. This massive assemblage of information enables students to explore subtopics involving women or African Americans, as well as to locate individual case studies within such categories.

We can anticipate that in the future the Web will continue its prodigious growth of the recent past, perhaps at an accelerated rate, considering the number of students learning how to create their own pages. If we seek refinement, good taste, and higher standards, we are likely to be disappointed. The Web remains open to all. If instead we seek additional useful research information, we can anticipate rewards. In any case, like it or not, the Web is here to stay.

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*Continued from p. 3*

the annual meetings, through the pages of our quarterly journal, in correspondence and personal conversations, and—of course—by the volumes from your hands. Second, should the annual meeting ever be staged in Tallahassee, Florida, please consider yourself invited to come to my home and take a look at those frames. They're beauties.

### **Volunteers Sought to Review Electronic Editions**

The ADE Committee on Electronic Standards (CES) seeks members of ADE and other volunteers to visit electronic editions on the World Wide Web and complete a questionnaire describing the edition. Simply rendering a text in electronic form does not constitute an electronic edition. The ADE-CES defines an electronic edition as primary source material prepared with (1) rigorous attention to the text, (2) explanatory annotation and (3) a description of the editorial practices used on the texts.

Members of the CES will use these completed questionnaires to compile short descriptions of electronic editions which will be posted on the ADE website. For details see <http://etext.virginia.edu/ade/ade-ces/ces-quest.html> or contact Cathy Moran Hajo ([cathy.hajo@nyu.edu](mailto:cathy.hajo@nyu.edu)) for further information about this initiative.