

3-22-2016

Renegotiating the Archive: Scholarly Practice in a Digital Age

William G. Thomas, III

University of Nebraska - Lincoln, wthomas4@unl.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/historyfacpub>



Part of the [Digital Humanities Commons](#), and the [History Commons](#)

Thomas, III, William G., "Renegotiating the Archive: Scholarly Practice in a Digital Age" (2016). *Faculty Publications, Department of History*. 197.

<http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/historyfacpub/197>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the History, Department of at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Publications, Department of History by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

Renegotiating the Archive: Scholarly Practice in a Digital Age

William G. Thomas III

March 2016 version

published in

[*Terra Cognita: Graduate Students in the Archives, A retrospective on the CLIR Mellon Fellowships for Dissertation Research in Original Sources \(CLIR, May 2016\)*](#)

In the last two decades scholarly practice in archival research has changed substantially. The availability of digital finding aids and digital facsimiles of original sources combined with powerful search engines and digital library technologies have altered how historians and other researchers encounter, access, and use archives and sources. Scholars who were trained to work solely in physical archives are now dealing with a fundamentally new environment. These changes have come with considerable anxieties about whether digitization and digital archives are replacing, as well as displacing, traditional archival work *in* the archives. Judging from the experience of the Mellon Fellows, however, these same changes have also heightened scholars' reliance on the expertise of archivists and librarians. The relationship between the scholar and the archivist or librarian has become more central, more direct, and more consequential, not less. As a result, we need to renegotiate what happens in and with the archive.

Archival Anxieties

In 2003 historian Roy Rosenzweig foresaw an age of abundance and information overload with digital sources as presenting fundamentally different problems for scholars than those in a previous period of scarcity and limited sources. "One of the most vexing and interesting features of the digital era," he wrote, "is the way it unsettles traditional arrangements and forces us to ask basic questions that have been there all along." Rosenzweig argued that historians would need to change their methods "to meet the challenge of a cornucopia of historical sources."¹

Rosenzweig was talking mainly about using algorithms and computational technologies to systematically sort through and organize the ever-expanding virtual world of information. He argued that every day in our present circumstances we generate terabytes of digital data, including emails, images, videos, and audio files. All of this material would soon become the archival record of our cultural heritage. In the case of the Clinton administration's correspondence, for example, millions of emails would go into the "archive," along with thousands of printed hard-copy letters and reports. A single scholar could hardly "read" such voluminous correspondence. Rosenzweig pointed out that computational means would be necessary to assist scholars in any investigation and

our methods would need to change, even as he asked, "will abundance bring better or more thoughtful history?"

At the same time as Rosenzweig wrote his seminal and prescient essay in the *American Historical Review*, other scholars were struggling to come to terms with the changing practices of original research made possible by rudimentary web sites and search technologies. In 2005 historian René M. Sentilles was surprised to discover online hundreds of references and documents on the subject of her research, Civil War actress and poet Adah Issacs Menken. She thought that the virtual, disembodied research experience raised doubts about the validity of the practice of historical "mastery" and the impermanence of the object of study. With web sites disappearing and reappearing over time, Sentilles concluded that Google searches and digital sources, however useful, were not as satisfying as getting "the dust of two centuries under my nails." Sentilles realized that "after a few weeks" of reading the private letters and diaries of her subject from folders and boxes she had come to know her "in a personal way" she did not "even try to describe" in the book she eventually wrote.

This archival ideal of inhabiting the subject of our investigation is a powerful one, and for many scholars takes place in the physical space of the archive where we literally touch, feel, smell, and even hear the past in the material objects we handle. Seeing the "human response to tangible objects" as the central drama of archival research, Sentilles speculated, "Virtual archives will never serve as more than a place to begin and end the research journey; never as a place to dwell."²

Yet, ten years later the reverse seems to be more accurate in describing the practice of scholars and the way that archives and sources have been renegotiated. The virtual has become the place to dwell; the archive has become the place to begin and end. Correspondingly we are revising the archival ideal for the digital age in ways that stir the same kinds of emotional responses, commitments, and discoveries as the old ideal.

What explains this turnaround? Certainly, mass digitization projects have offered scholars more reliable, stable, and fully documented access to original sources. But the widespread use of digital cameras has probably had the greatest effect on research practice. Judging from the findings of Amanda Watson and Lori Jahnke in the CLIR/Mellon Foundation report on "Continuing Challenges for Research with Primary Sources," fifty-seven per cent of all Mellon fellows carried digital cameras into 568 total site visits between 2002 and 2011 at 445 different research sites. Roger C. Schonfeld and Jennifer Rutner in a report on "Supporting the Changing Research Practices of Historians," found that "The introduction of digital cameras to archival research is altering interactions with materials and dislocating the process of analysis, with potential impacts not only for support service providers but for the nature of history scholarship itself." Interviewing dozens of historians, they observe that what happens in the archives has become "more photographic and less analytical." The use of digital cameras, they conclude, is "perhaps the single most significant shift in research practices among historians." Schonfeld and Rutner noted that some historians "no longer engage

intellectually with the sources while in the archives; these trips have become more of a collection mission."³

Both the scholars interviewed in the Ithaka report and the fellows in the CLIR/Mellon program indicate considerable anxiety about the collection of digital images of original sources as a research practice. They worry about the lack of metadata, the challenge of integrating images with textual notes on the sources, the difficulty of managing thousands of image files, and perhaps most significantly the failure to analyze sources at the moment they are first encountered in the archive.

They are not alone. A random sample of faculty across the sciences, social sciences, and humanities by Ithaka S+R in 2012 found that about half of faculty members strongly agreed when asked if they would like to "more deeply" integrate digital research activities and methodologies into their work. But a third of humanities scholars "strongly disagreed" with the statement. Of these, seventy-five per cent did so because "digital research activities and methodologies are not valuable or important" for the type of research they do. About one-third of the respondents agreed that they did not know "how to effectively integrate digital research activities and methodologies" into their work.⁴

We have done little to prepare ourselves for this transition and the anxieties it has produced. When we refer to or "handle" original sources in digital or physical form, we often do not recognize that the source has been deformed in sometimes subtle but sometimes substantial ways. A physical object might undergo alterations that even its closest observers do not realize. The colors in Rembrandt's paintings, for example, have slowly changed over centuries as a result of hardened oil and varnish. Blueprints fade over time to reveal lines once drawn but previously not visible, a vista onto what was not built but was once imagined. Mary Todd Lincoln's cloak "wet with blood" has become less visibly stained over time. Infrared light reveals what the human eye cannot see, but the cloak's exact provenance remains undocumented.⁵ We often do not know the ways that our archival materials have been collected, arranged, and presented for specific uses. We do not often know what has been excluded from these collections. When we use the physical--"the original"--what are we using? When we use the "digital" what are we using? And how can we recognize the terms dictating these negotiations?

When libraries "go digital" and remove books and other materials to distant off-site locations, sometimes days away, the record of the past that humanities scholars consulted with regularity is in one stroke less accessible. The majority of volumes many humanities scholars use are copyrighted texts and not available in mass digitization projects. As a result the removal of these secondary sources upon which historians previously relied compounds the anxiety they are feeling about the authenticity of the digitized source. Scholars long considered the library to be a laboratory for the humanities, a central hub where the full range of secondary works mediated their access to, and understanding of, original archival sources. Without the ability to put ready hands on the secondary apparatus and its relationship to original sources, scholars understandably begin to question the confidence of their interpretive authority.

The library as a laboratory seems to have been turned on its head. As digital archival collections go online, what was once remote--the original source--has become immediately accessible. Yet what was once immediately accessible--the secondary interpretive source--has become more distant. This reversal may have long-term unanticipated and unintended effects stemming from the interruption of the fruitful negotiation in the library between original sources and their interpretive historiographical context. Repairing and mediating that negotiation in the digital library will require the collaboration of archivists and scholars.

The operations that digital humanities scholars perform on sources further complicate the current state of affairs. When we encode and markup texts for computational processing, we make various aspects of texts organize-able and searchable even as we radically reduce the complexity of human language, making our entry points into the text and across texts more rigid, uniform, and far less supple than in analog form. When we build a virtual model of a place, a historical site, a genre, or a period, we highlight linkages and relationships selectively and often to the exclusion of other possibilities.⁶ Despite the advantages of the digital medium for linking texts and encoding metadata, we often make interpretive argument less apparent. Digital scholars have stressed the act of encoding original sources more than interpreting how these sources relate to the secondary apparatus of historiography and criticism. The stresses on humanities scholars conducting this research are significant, and together they contribute to a broad sense of epistemological concern.

We see evidence of this concern when both the scholars in the Ithaka report and the fellows in the CLIR/Mellon report the "displacement" of intellectual engagement with original sources as problematic. One of the premises at work here is the idea that the archive constitutes an important--indeed a paramount--site of discovery and intellectual activity. The material object speaks to the scholar in ways tactile and sensory, and the time dwelling with these material objects allows the scholar to absorb and apprehend their meaning. While digital imaging and access are "convenient," scholars report the convenience as a trade-off. Something, they suggest, appears to have been lost. Yet, I am not so sure.

New Archival Possibilities

Historian Durba Ghosh has written about how the structure, arrangement, and management of archives can resist the narratives and questions scholars carry into them. In her case she encountered archivists who showed her some materials but not others and who made assumptions about what she should and should not have access to because she was a woman of Indian ethnicity. Although she too appreciates the dust of original documents, she has sought to "expand our definitions of the kinds of knowledges that archives produce by destabilizing the notion that archives are only places of impersonal encounters with printed documents." Instead, some encounters can be highly personal and particular; in a second encounter with the same object, a scholar may see something entirely different. Ghosh, furthermore, notes that after completing her dissertation, and once she was back in the archives, she "finally knew" what she "was looking for."⁷

Two points are worth making here. The first is that colonial, gendered, and political organization and maintenance of archives in no small measure works to deflect some kinds of research and some kinds of researchers. Gatekeepers restrict access or scrutinize whether a researcher should or should not be inquiring into a subject. Ghosh's research into interracial relations in colonial India prompted highly gendered reactions from archives and archivists, affecting her access to the original sources. Digitization can to a significant degree liberate sources from the physical, cultural, and social restrictions that attend them in the archive.

The second is that scholars do not always know what they are looking for when they enter an archive, even after intense planning and research. They bring certain questions into the archive at a given point in their research process only to find that much later they realize other questions to ask. Digital materials allow for a longer, more deliberate, continuous, iterative process of research and discovery.

Although neither the Ithaka report nor the CLIR/Mellon fellows report specified these renegotiations, scholars using digital cameras in the archives are participating in a new practice characterized by a deliberately more prolonged interaction between the researcher and the object.

Why have scholars so prized the transcendent qualities of the material object, the so-called dust in the archives? One reason is that letters and diaries in particular carry the voices of the past into the present, and these inanimate objects become animated through the personal penmanship of the correspondent and diarist. They are the physical traces of our subjects long dead and gone. In "The Historian as Death Investigator," Stephen Berry, a historian of the American Civil War, has written about this strange "temporal vertigo" and points out that anyone who has done work in an archive knows "the Zen-like moment when you forget not merely where you are but when you are, who you are, almost *that* you are." This "wormhole" into the past, he suggests, is somewhat stupefying and it works a kind of spell over the investigator. For Berry who studied death records of soldiers, it begins with the dull recognition that "this guy isn't going to make it." Berry, however, experiences this vertigo whether in the physical archives or perusing digital images of original hospital records and death certificates.⁸

This state of affairs is not unlike what has happened in oral history, where the practice of historians in the digital age has undergone significant renegotiation. Historian Michael Frisch has pointed out that even with oral histories "generally nobody has spent much time listening or watching the recordings, the primary source. Instead, the modal plane of engagement has been textual." Working with text transcriptions became "natural" even though the source was entirely aural. Frisch notes that the methods and theories used in oral history have been derivative of their textual, rather than aural, materiality. As practices emerge around and with digital technologies, as questions of these sources become "tractable" only in their aural form, other methods and theories become possible.⁹

When we look for people long invisible in the written record, who did not leave letters and diaries, their traces in the archive are mediated and embedded to a degree that requires us to renegotiate our work in the archive. In the case of Ghosh's investigation into interracial sex in British colonial India, she found that the archives, even those who managed them, functioned to keep such stories from ever surfacing in the record. Dust or no dust, finding their voices in the archive would mean confronting and breaking the institutional and historical modes of marginalizing. In this respect digital capture for later analysis may be essential, an act that allows for a more unmediated and extensive examination than possible in a purely physical, time limited, and on-site encounter. Even if one scholar is not able to access a collection, for whatever reason, another scholar might be able to gain access and ultimately share these sources.

In current research into legal records, a similar renegotiation is underway. Scholars seeking to build up the histories of long marginalized people are moving beyond the limitations of solely on-site, physical encounter with original sources. The Old Bailey Online, for example, has digitized the printed *Proceedings* of the court published from 1674 to 1913, volumes encompassing 197,745 criminal trials. While voluminous and rich in detail, these reports were highly selective and the original case papers remain at the National Archives (Public Record Office).

Similarly, the case files of the Circuit Court for the District of Columbia in Record Group 21 of the National Archives and Records Administration were administrative records designed to order and bureaucratize legal procedures and actions. Enslaved people who petitioned for their freedom worked their histories into these legal forms. But the printed records of the court's decisions published by Chief Justice William Cranch revealed little about their lives or their experiences. Cranch's volumes have been cited routinely in appellate decisions and legal briefs, as well as relied upon by legal historians for years. Yet, Cranch excluded the last names of African Americans throughout his volumes and focused mainly on legal procedures and rules. The result is a genealogical and historical erasure that needs repair. Digitizing Cranch's volumes only perpetuates the historical erasure of petitioners for freedom. When the original case papers are extracted from their archival sequence and examined as a whole, the full genealogies of these families become visible to the scholar (see earlywashingtondc.org).

In my own research, continual, repeated examination of the digitized case papers has led to discoveries nearly impossible to make on site using the physical records.¹⁰ A recent research trip to the National Archives (Public Record Office), illustrates this point. My research into a Maryland enslaved family indicated that their claim to freedom could possibly be proven today two hundred years after their case was unsuccessful. Their lawyers had filed a number of exhibits as evidence including depositions from earlier cases tried in the 1790s. These depositions referred to litigation in the early eighteenth century in London in chancery court where creditors hoped to extract a higher profit from the captain of a transatlantic raiding voyage. One of the Maryland depositions in particular indicated that the family members petitioning for freedom were the direct descendants of a free woman who was carried to London on this voyage. Every single item on the vessels was accounted for and documented, and every expense double-

checked. Ledgers were re-tabulated; receipts were re-bundled. A special master certified each account and record. I estimated over 3,000 individual items in the chancery record for this case. It was not possible to conduct a thorough analysis of each record while on site *in* the archive. In the four days I had on site, however, it was possible to review each item and digitally capture hundreds of important records for later examination and reflection. In the months that followed this visit I have been able to substantiate their claim based on cross-referencing original sources from other collections.



Figure 1: Chancery record at National Archives, Kew, December 2015.

Schonfeld and Rutner described this form of on-site collection as a "displacement of the intellectual engagement with the material," and they raised understandable concerns about its "downsides." But there are clear upsides. Some scholars are developing an alternative method as they visit archives and capture digital images for ongoing assessment and reassessment. This method supports a continual process of archival engagement, rather than one dependent on an exclusively tactile engagement with the physical object. Because the questions we ask on site may not be those we need to ask later and because the subjects we seek to investigate may only reveal themselves after weeks or months of systematic analysis, we are beginning to see a new practice in archival research take shape, one that begins and ends on site in the archives, and dwells for far longer on the virtual representation and manipulation of digitized original sources.

These scholars are inaugurating a *digital archival ideal*, with an equally powerful allure as that of its physical counterpart. Scholars with high-resolution digital images and large, high-resolution monitors can manipulate the digital object long after their visit to the archive: recasting, rearranging, renegotiating the source, seeing it in multiple frames, dimensions, scales, and abstractions. Perhaps most important, they can encounter the document again and again, returning to its appealing possibilities to play with fresh questions and perspectives. In my own research the presence of collections of digitized

images has allowed me to conduct iterative readings and discover differences in the spelling of individual names impossible to see otherwise.¹¹

Putting the Archivist-Scholar Collaboration First

Undoubtedly, graduate programs will need to adjust to these new circumstances and practices. The CLIR/Mellon report should prompt graduate programs to consider revitalizing historical methods and writing courses. Recently at the Committee on Institutional Cooperation (CIC) summit on graduate training in the humanities, leading faculty and graduate directors explored the nature of the graduate curriculum, the dissertation, the role of new media and the digital humanities, and the nature of "the public humanities." These discussions followed numerous calls for shortening or changing the dissertation and greater emphasis in our programs on skills for alternative career pathways. While the participants in the CIC meeting considered more than the changing state of archival research, they agreed to create a working group to articulate a statement of principles on the dissertation in the humanities.¹²

Jahnke and Watson's CLIR/Mellon report and the other reports included in this publication indicate the gap in archival training for graduate students and the pressing need for specific methodological training in archival research. One graduate student in the Schonfeld and Rutner report put the problem succinctly:

One of my big issues with graduate education in general right now is that there's almost no training with methodology and what you actually do in the archive and why that matters . . . There are larger philosophical questions about what an archive is. I haven't gotten systematic training.

At several individual institutions, graduate programs are already revising not only the scope and form of the dissertation but also the coursework required to gain the skills and techniques necessary for research with original sources. These courses might provide specific guidance on the materiality of sources, how to properly interrogate them, how to conduct archival research for a large-scale project, and how to manage the research process, including especially digital images. One way to structure such a course is to emphasize the sharing of "archive stories" between faculty and graduate students. Our new course on research and archival methods at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln is premised on such exchanges. Each week part of the course is given over to a rotating faculty-led "archive story."

These reflections feature the experiences of practitioners working in various archives around the world and consider archives as a contact zone between researcher and what a state or institution allows her or him to see. These stories also explore the embodied experience of the researcher working in the physical environment and regime of the archive. Finally, they provide the framework for some basic hands on guidance on how to prepare for an archive visit, how to act and conduct oneself when there, and, most importantly, how to do research when at the archive.

Second, graduate programs might bring archivists and librarians more directly into partnership in the training of graduate students. At Nebraska we have restructured the methods course to include consultation with our university archivists, drawing on the expertise of our library faculty. Many of the steps to navigate archives were once learned by trial and error without formal training. Students in this course also visit the university and state archives, make requests for collections, and with a variety of collections laid out before them discuss with the archivists the tactics, strategies, methods, and ways to record what is found. We seek to model a partnership between historians and archivists and provide critical skills for graduate students to make and sustain such partnerships in their own research.

In embracing a more digital archival ideal, alongside our more traditional methods, we might give our students the opportunity to create new forms of scholarly communication and expression. Historian Edward L. Ayers has pointed out, "Digital scholarship may have greater impact if it takes fuller advantage of the digital medium and innovates more aggressively. Digital books and digital articles that mimic their print counterparts may be efficient, but they do not expand our imagination of what scholarship *could* be in an era of boundlessness . . . when our audiences can be far more fast and varied than in previous generations."¹³

Our graduate training in research might feature ways to see the archives as a social space and experience. Both pre-doctoral and post-doctoral scholars are finding that these new circumstances prompt more collaboration with archives rather than less, and more opportunities for archival engagement rather than fewer. Digital imaging and other techniques do not in and of themselves "displace" intellectual engagement with original sources nor do they displace the archives and archivists. Scholars working with archivists are negotiating partnerships and drawing on one another's expertise. Some of these collaborations will result in more formal joint projects, while others will lead to ongoing informal exchanges. We should welcome these opportunities.

William G. Thomas III is the John and Catherine Angle Professor in the Humanities and Professor of History at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. He currently serves as Chair of the Department of History. His current research explores the legal and social history of black, white, and mixed race families in early Washington, D.C. (earlywashingtondc.org). Based on these sources and stories, he is writing "A Question of Freedom: The Ordeal of an American Family in the Age of Revolution."

¹ Roy Rosenzweig, "Scarcity or Abundance? Preserving the Past in the Digital Era," *American Historical Review*, Vol. 108, No. 3 (June 2003): 758 and 760.

² René M. Sentilles, "Toiling in the Archives of Cyberspace," in Antoinette Burton, ed. *Archive Stories: Facts, Fictions, and the Writing of History* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005): 155.

³ Roger C. Schonfeld and Jennifer Rutner, "Supporting the Changing Research Practices of Historians," *ITHAKA S & R*, December 10, 2012.

<http://www.sr.ithaka.org/publications/supporting-the-changing-research-practices-of-historians/> (accessed February 26, 2016).

⁴ Ross Housewright, Roger C. Schonfeld, and Kate Wulfson, "Ithaka S+R Faculty Survey 2012," April 8, 2013, pp. 41-44. http://www.sr.ithaka.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/Ithaka_SR_US_Faculty_Survey_2012_FINAL.pdf (accessed February 24, 2016)

⁵ Burton, *Archive Stories*, 210. Chicago History Museum, "Wet with Blood: The Investigation into Mary Todd Lincoln's Cloak," <http://chicagohistory.org/wetwithblood/> (accessed March 4, 2016).

⁶ On modeling, see Willard McCarty, "Modeling: A study in Words and Meanings," in Susan Schreibman, Ray Siemens, and John Unsworth, eds., *A Companion to Digital Humanities* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004).

⁷ Durba Ghosh, "National Narratives and the Politics of Miscegenation: Britain and India," in Antoinette Burton, ed. *Archive Stories: Facts, Fictions, and the Writing of History* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005): 28 and 40.

⁸ Stephen Berry, "The Historian as Death Investigator," in Stephen Berry, ed. *Weirding the War: Stories from the Civil War's Ragged Edges* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2011), 184-185.

⁹ Michael Frisch in "The Promise of Digital History," *Journal of American History* Vol. 95, No. 2 (September 2008): 459.

¹⁰ Old Baily Online, <http://www.oldbaileyonline.org> (accessed February 20, 2016) and O Say Can You See: Early Washington, D.C., Law and Family, <http://earlywashingtondc.org> (accessed February 20, 2016).

¹¹ There is a growing literature on digital humanities and aesthetics and design, too much to refer to here. An essential beginning point is Johanna Drucker, *SpecLab: Digital Aesthetics and Projects in Speculative Computing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009).

¹² The CIC conference was held November 4-5, 2015 at Penn State University. See also Sidonie Smith, *Manifesto for the Humanities: Transforming Doctoral Education in Good Enough Times* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2015); Michael Bérubé, "The Humanities Unraveled," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, February 18, 2013; Michael Bérubé and Jennifer Ruth, *The Humanities, Higher Education, and Academic Freedom: Three Necessary Arguments* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

¹³ Edward L. Ayers, "Does Digital Scholarship Have a Future?" *EDUCAUSE Review* (August 2013), <http://er.educause.edu/articles/2013/8/does-digital-scholarship-have-a-future> (accessed February 24, 2016).