

## Citizen History Projects

Crowdsourcing, inviting the online public to contribute to the work of an organization, is no longer a novel idea. In a previous column (Summer 2010) I offered examples of history organizations that created wikis to gather information from the public. Some museums have dabbled with citizen curation—asking the public to contribute to decisions regarding exhibitions. Others have asked the public to help identify photos or objects. Recently, a new twist to crowdsourcing has emerged at history organizations, taking public history research one step farther—*citizen history*. This approach follows early efforts in the science world. *Journey North* [www.learner.org/jnorth](http://www.learner.org/jnorth) allows students to track wildlife migrations on a global scale and learn about seasonal change. Cornell University's ornithology lab tracks bird migrations at [www.birds.cornell.edu/cit-sci](http://www.birds.cornell.edu/cit-sci), and *Solar Stormwatch* asks the public to spot explosions on the sun and track them as they head toward earth ([www.solarstormwatch.com](http://www.solarstormwatch.com)).

Why not citizen historians who help with data analysis? One project that calls itself citizen science, but crosses into the history realm, is *Old Weather* from the National Maritime Museum in England and other partners, including the National Archives of Britain. The project aims to “recover worldwide weather observations to help improve climate model predictions.” It requests volunteers to transcribe logbooks from the Royal Navy in the World War I era and to make notes about the raw material. Scientists and historians will use the work in their research.

An increasing number of public transcription projects are beginning every year. Many are connected to universities. An early project, begun in 2010, was the *Transcribe Bentham* project of the University College London. The project came into being because the original manuscripts of the philosopher and reformer Jeremy Bentham (1748–1832) had never been transcribed. *Transcribe Bentham* offers users the opportunity to make available worldwide the phi-

losopher's work and help the university produce a new publication. According to its website, the project targets specific audiences: people with an enthusiasm for paleography, transcription, and manuscript studies will be interested in Bentham's handwriting; people involved in digital humanities, education, and heritage learning will find the site intriguing; while undergraduates and school students studying Bentham's ideas will enhance

Plus, as a library we know that the more that people use a collection, the more we collectively learn about it.

their learning by using the site. Why participate? The patriotic answer given is “to help preserve national heritage.” A year and three months into the project about 84 percent of the manuscripts had been transcribed.

Stateside, a variety of similar projects are in progress. *What's on the Menu?* is a project of the New York Public Library, which owns one of the world's largest restaurant menu collections—approximately 40,000 from the 1840s to the present. Many of the menus are printed, so it begs the question, why ask the public to transcribe? The answer is that first, the variety of handwritten, elaborate typefaces and creative layouts would result in jumbled language if normal scanning processes were used. The project's website offers a second reason: “We're interested in unpacking some specific types of information that are highly relevant to researchers: dishes and prices (and eventually menu sections, geographical locations, and perhaps other data). We're not just scooping out text from pages, we're building a database of dishes! Plus, as a library we know that the more that people use a collection, the more we collectively

learn about it. Our hunch is that there is a lot to be gained by inviting the public to help us go through these fascinating artifacts with careful attention, menu by menu, dish by dish. We also hope that by doing so, we'll stoke people's appetite (so to speak) to explore the collection further.” By mid-summer 2011 the public had transcribed almost 9,000 menus.

The University of Iowa started a transcription project in May 2011, inviting the public to help transcribe Civil War diaries in its collection. According to Greg Prickman, one of the project's managers, it started as an experiment. The staff was already in the process of digitizing the material. The transcription idea came from the desire to make the online materials even more useful for research. The staff initially promoted the project to a targeted audience of Civil War societies of other historical organizations. Word got out on popular blogs and suddenly traffic to the site spiked and crippled the site for about twelve hours. Although interest has leveled out, response has been good. *The Civil War Diaries Transcription Project* began with 3,000 diary pages from the archives. A month or so later, citizen historians had transcribed 1,400 documents. By the end of July, the project had received 6,000 submissions.

Prickman is very positive about the experience thus far and encourages other organizations to try crowdsourced transcription. “The quality of submissions is very good. People have some investment in what they are doing and take it seriously.” Plus, he adds, it has not been a huge burden on staff. A couple staff members read each submission and compare it to the image.

George Mason University's Center for History and New Media (CHNM) staff recently developed a new open source tool called Scripto designed for crowdsourcing documentary transcription. They are testing the tool with the *Papers of the War Department Project, 1784–1800*. Sharon Leon, director of public projects at CHNM, says the response to Scripto has been good. About a dozen documentary editing projects are interested in using

**“Democratizing history through crowdsourcing is offering public historians another meaningful route to create a sense of community around content.”**

Scripto to make a first pass at compiling transcriptions for their work. (The release of the Scripto plugin for Omeka in June should increase interest even more.)

Not surprisingly, there is apprehension from staff at traditional documentary editing projects who are concerned about the ways that contributions from the public challenge their longstanding ways of working and their professional standards. Another concern is the amount of staff time needed to support these endeavors, which varies greatly by project. Most projects have at least one staff member

devoted to maintaining registered users, answering user questions, and reviewing submissions. Many have blogs to provide users with regular updates on progress and interesting research bits uncovered.

Leon sees a lot of potential. “I think that the most important thing about Scripto and other citizen history projects is that they confirm that the general public is deeply interested in the actual work of history. Democratizing history through crowdsourcing is offering public historians another meaningful route to create a sense of community around content, and that can’t be a bad thing.” She adds that these kinds of projects offer an opportunity to learn about the interests of our users because they get to select the individual items out of the larger archive that they are interested in working on. This sort of information can be really useful for thinking about subsequent programming. ●

#### Additional Resources

*Old Weather* project, National Maritime Museum, et al. [www.oldweather.org](http://www.oldweather.org).

Scripto, <http://chnm.gmu.edu/news/>

scripto-alpha-launches-with-the-papers-of-the-war-department.

*Transcribe Bentham*, University College London.

*War Department Papers* project, George Mason University, Center for History and New Media, <http://wardepartmentpapers.org> and [www.transcribe-bentham.da.ulcc.ac.uk/td/Transcribe\\_Bentham](http://www.transcribe-bentham.da.ulcc.ac.uk/td/Transcribe_Bentham).

*What’s on the Menu* project, New York Public Library, <http://menus.nypl.org>.

#### Other Citizen Historian Projects

New York Public Library map project, allowing users to help rectify historical maps with today’s maps, <http://maps.nypl.org/warper>.

Research project of the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum to enlist the public to help discover what happened to the children of the Lodz ghetto, <http://online.ushmm.org/lodzchildren>.

“History Bytes” is a forum for discussing Web issues facing all types of historical institutions. Tim Grove can be reached at [grovet@si.edu](mailto:grovet@si.edu).



**Historical Folk Toys**

Post Office Box 271  
Nashville, Indiana 47448  
Phone: (800) 871-1984  
Fax: (800) 871-1899  
[www.HistoricalFolkToys.com](http://www.HistoricalFolkToys.com)  
E-mail: [info@historicalfolktoys.com](mailto:info@historicalfolktoys.com)

**Early American Education**  
**Historical Doll Kits & Home Crafts**  
**Native American Crafts & Games**  
**Folk Instruments & Music Books**  
**Classic Toys & Puzzles**  
**Traditional Games**  
**Historical Books**

Explore the past and journey into tomorrow.™

Call us for a free catalog or visit our site at [www.HistoricalFolkToys.com](http://www.HistoricalFolkToys.com).

© 2004 by HFT