

Digitizing the Civil War

Editor's note: This article is based on a session at the 2010 AASLH Annual Meeting.

The Civil War 150 (CW150) is the first major Civil War commemoration that has occurred in the modern information age. As such, it has spurred a broad array of digital outreach projects, including websites, online lesson plans, and more. Among these efforts, none has more potential to provide lasting value than the digitization of Civil War-era materials. Preserving images of important collections for future generations and making them available online to exponentially more users than can access them at our respective sites can be a way to provide a high-impact service that lasts far beyond events or other activities typically done for commemorations.

Digitization is the hot topic for CW150 in many states, and just may prove to be our lasting legacy of the commemoration. Here are some examples:

- The Ohio Historical Society is partnering with five local organizations through an AmeriCorps program to build regional digitization projects across Ohio that will include Civil War-era collections.
- The Virginia Sesquicentennial of the American Civil War Commission and the Library of Virginia are sending teams of archivists to scan privately held manuscript material for inclusion on both organizations' websites.
- The Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission and Penn State University are digitizing and making available online local primary source collections with a focus on African American collections.
- The Tennessee State Library and Archives is copying, archiving, and creating a digital exhibit from citizen manuscripts and other materials.

If done well, digitization projects can provide lasting value as long-term resources, reaching well beyond the immediacy of the original commemoration, including as the foundation of a more comprehensive digitization program with-

in an institution or a cooperative. Without proper foresight and planning, however, these projects can leave behind loose ends and confusion that can fester for years to come. Even the lifecycles of short-term digital projects often extend far beyond their intended scope. Considering the consequences of this up front can benefit the project long-term. In sum, it is important to think through how you will provide access to the resources beyond the life of the specific commemoration.

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When planning for effective long-term access, here are some of the inherent opportunities and issues to be aware of when developing a commemorative digitization effort:

- **Standards and Best Practices:** It's best to create metadata that is harvestable should you need to transfer information from one host or software to another. Also, generate preservation-quality files that will be accessible for as long as possible.
- **Rights and Reproductions:** People will want access to the resources they find and will want to use them for purposes ranging from personal enjoyment, to scholarly research, to commercial publication. Take into account what to do when those (often unsolicited) requests come in. Will you decline all requests for reuse, or do you have a structure in place to handle those requests? Will you charge for access? Who will receive the fees?
- **Ownership:** One of the benefits of creating a digital repository is that you can pull objects from disparate sources together into one comprehensive portal.

Maintaining intellectual control over ownership rights is an essential element to successful long-term access. When working with materials from multiple sources, make sure that ownership is clearly defined in the metadata and/or the project records. This is especially true with digital collections that include submissions from private individuals. Also, be sure your institution has a legal right to use the materials you have digitized, especially if the originals remain with the private citizen.

- **Audience:** Recognize that a simple Google search will bring users from all around the world to your resource, from middle school history teachers in your state, to Civil War buffs three states over, to college students in Prague. Determining who your intended users are, while recognizing the inherent value of your project for everyone else, is critical.
 - **Community:** Digital collections that include submissions from private individuals can be a great way to build community support and document significant historical collections in private hands. In the past, digitizing items from your own organizational collection would have been enough for most users, but the current conversation about the role of history organizations has changed that.
 - **Preservation Expectations:** When digitizing collections, you are already handling fragile objects and doing the time-intensive work of scanning or photographing them. Thus, you might as well do it to a set of standards that limits the need to repeat the work in the future. Digital preservation standards are based on the ability to sustain and access digital surrogates (images) over time. Creating these images to standard is usually as simple as making some minor adjustments to the settings on your scanning software.
- Most of today's long-term digitization programs started off as short-term projects. (Ohio Memory, for example, started in 2000 to commemorate Ohio's bicentennial and has expanded today to include

354 partner organizations from around the state.) Even if you have no current plans to extend your digitization efforts beyond the scope of your commemoration project, preparing for this potential upfront can make a big difference over the life of your project and the future of your digital assets.

When developing your Civil War digitization project, think about creating a product that stands alone, but that can serve as a foundation for future digitization initiatives not yet conceived of. Here are some questions to answer:

- Is the technical infrastructure flexible enough to expand should your digitization efforts grow beyond this specific topic or event?
- Are you using standards for metadata, imaging, and online delivery that ensure project interoperability—the ability to connect and work with other software and technology platforms you already use, like your website—moving forward?¹
- Are you documenting your practices and procedures, to avoid future duplication of work and ensure you can answer

questions about your policies and procedures in the future?

- How and when will you evaluate your work and learn from your mistakes?
- While it may seem a daunting task to think long-term when you are just getting started with digitization, there are resources available to help. Many states have collaborative digitization programs that can be a source of advice for new projects. The LYRASIS Digital Toolbox is a great place to start. Cornell has creat-

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ed the Digital Imaging Tutorial that provides very useful information. Ultimately, never lose sight of your end goal: connecting users and resources through new and different ways. Thinking about your commemorative digitization project not as a final product but as the beginning of a lasting resource for your community is an important step in that process.² ©

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Editor’s note: AASLH’s own digitization resources include Technical Leaflets #246, “How to Plan for Your Digitization Project,” and TL#251, “Copyright Issues, Rights Management, and Licensing Programs for Digital Collections by Historical Institutions,” as well as Jill Marie Koelling’s Digital Imaging: A Practical Approach (AltaMira Press, 2004).

¹ The industry standard for metadata best practices is posted at www.bcr.org/dps/cdp/best/wsdibp_v1.pdf. See also CDP’s Best Practices for Digital Imaging www.bcr.org/dps/cdp/best/digital-imaging-bp.pdf and CDP’s Digital Audio Best Practices www.bcr.org/dps/cdp/best/digital-audio-bp.pdf.

² See LYRASIS Digital Toolbox www.lyrasis.org/Products%20and%20Services/Digital%20Services/Digital%20Toolbox.aspx and Cornell Digital Imaging Tutorial www.library.cornell.edu/preservation/tutorial/contents.html.



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