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From Farm to Market:
Digitizing the Confederate Reunion Grounds
Collection for Public Access

I. Introduction

Collections management, throughout my recent experiences in museum settings, has come to refer to finding a proper balance between caring for one's collection and caring for the public's needs. In the various professional situations that I have found myself during the past two and a half years, I have noticed that personal fascination over a collection only goes so far toward protecting and appreciating the value of an object. It is, in fact, one's ability to get the objects or the information out to the public that truly makes this profession important and therefore, should always be a primary motive behind every action in this field. Without the public, museums lose their immediate value, for why must an institution preserve history if no one is there to learn from it or be inspired by it? In the same vain, archives, without the researchers and students that come to benefit from their records, lack a goal and purpose that extends past their own self-sustainability. It is for these reasons that such institutions receive national, state, or private funding, and it is for these reasons that I believe that there is a purpose for studying collections management philosophy and ethics and acquiring the skills to perform such tasks.

For my graduate project, I knew that I wanted to do something relating to collections management. Given my recent experience at the Baylor University Institute for Oral History, processing metadata for their ever-increasing backlog of oral history transcripts, I knew that I could possibly try doing something relating to digitization and digital collections management. Using their software system, CONTENTdm, had allowed

me to become relatively proficient in the art of uploading files for public access, and

creating metadata to go along with these files. Metadata—or the information used to

describe a particular file, including related historical documentation and physical

qualities of the file—is a tedious, yet necessary task when uploading digital collections,

for it allows the files to be searchable to the user. Without metadata, a digital collection

lacks usability.

I had also recently taken a course on collections management, which had

equipped me with beginner's knowledge of how to use PastPerfect—a collections

software that is commonly used within the museum field. In doing my work as graduate

processing assistant and volunteering in various positions that gave me collections

experience, I found that I really enjoyed the near instant gratification that I received from

putting files and corresponding metadata online. I found that it is exciting to see what I

have created in a searchable medium, and I experienced joy in knowing that the

information could then be found online by the general public. I would later have similar

experiences while completing this graduate project, finding that information I had put

online from a trailer in the middle of the country were being viewed by people in

different states—and even in other continents! I have seen firsthand the process of

creating public access to a museum's collection and how this action functions as an

important tool for community and global outreach, and connects one institution to

another as well as to the public at large.

II. Site History

My project took form at the Confederate Reunion Grounds State Historic Site

(CRG) in Mexia, Texas. The site, which is currently operating under the Texas Historical

Commission (THC), includes an original 1892 dance pavilion, constructed for events held at the veteran reunions of the post-Civil War era, as well as freestanding chimneys and a pump house, which remain from the Humphrey Oil Boom era of the 1920s. The CRG has changed ownership several times, going from the United Confederate Veterans (1889–1946), to the private ownership of Colonel Albert E. Humphreys (1920–1996, when the water lease expired), to the Joseph E. Johnston Camp No. 94 C.S.A. (1965–1983), to Texas Parks and Wildlife (1983–2008), and finally to the current ownership of the THC (2008–present). Each transfer has brought with it a new era at the Confederate Reunion Grounds, marked by a change in landscape and infrastructure, as well as reinterpretations of site history.

The intricacies of the site's ownership, and its inconsistencies both historically and institutionally made it so that archiving the collections would be challenging. My job then was to make sense of these dynamic fluctuations, and put together a cohesive collection to be put online through the Southwest Collection at Texas Tech University.

III. Project Summary: Original

Working under the direction of Dixie Hoover, site manager, we put together a list of tasks for me to complete. It was decided that I would first enter the archival collection into Re:Discovery, the collections management software used by sites operating under the THC. Once completed, I was to begin creating metadata for items to be uploaded using DSpace onto the Southwest Collection website. These files, a collection of documents, which had been previously digitized by Paul Fisher, a past CRG intern, would allow public access to the site's collection. Dixie felt that this would be an exciting step for the CRG to take, and would expand their mission for public outreach.

She asked me to upload fifty files using DSpace, while including two oral history transcripts, and the research material written by Laura Jasinski (commissioned by Parks and Wildlife in the 1980s). By creating these first records, I would be providing future interns and/or volunteers with a template for uploading various file formats. Furthermore, Dixie hoped that I could get some items still under ownership at the Gibbs Library pertaining to CRG history digitized at the Riley Digitization Lab for later upload to DSpace.

IV. Project Summary: Revised

In order to begin work with Re:Discovery, I attended a meeting with Laura DeNormandie-Bass, chief curator at the Texas Historical Commission. Laura invited me to the THC warehouse in Austin, Texas, where I was given the opportunity to see some of the CRG's most coveted possessions, including a large, Civil-War era flag and several smaller, fragile items. Here, I was given a lesson on how to use Re:Discovery Proficio, the collections management software that I mentioned earlier. After a phone conversation with a Re:Discovery IT technician, we both concluded that what I had intended to do with the program was not compatible with the basic archeological and 3-D collections modules that the THC had purchased. In order to correctly enter our collections into the software, we would need the ability to organize materials by series. Unfortunately, the modules the CRG had would only allow cataloging at the item level. It was decided then that the CRG would need the archival module before I could begin entering anything onto the program.

For this reason, Dixie and I were forced to remove Re:Discovery from my initial task list, and I began to focus my project more specifically on public access and DSpace.

In this way, my project actually gained a more narrow yet concentrated focus, more in line with what I had originally planned to pursue.

V. Project Workflow

   a) Creating Metadata

In order to commence work with DSpace it was necessary to evaluate the state of the site's collections. I started by assessing what had already been done with the collections. I logged onto the computer's hard drive and began opening various documents that could provide information about the site and what had taken place with the collections thus far. Dixie had talked previously of Paul Fisher (mentioned above), a recent contracted employee and part-time volunteer. I noticed that his name appeared on many hard copies of finding aids found throughout the office, as well as a folder on the hard drive that contained many useful documents. I decided to contact Paul and was able to set up a time to meet with him on site.

Paul, who is currently an archivist at the Texas Collection, had had much more archival training than I had. He had arranged the one physical collection (the Tom Chatham collection) within the CRG's possession into an archival collection, dividing it by correspondence, literary productions, financial documents, photographs, and artifacts. Paul provided me with basic understanding of how he had divided the collections, and showed me eight test files that he had previously uploaded onto DSpace.

I created metadata for the various collections using basic Excel spreadsheets. I gave each item an individual accession number in order to gauge the connection between the files and physical items in various document boxes found in the office. Though I initially wrote these accession numbers on their corresponding folders, and ignored series

numbers as I went along, I quickly realized that archival processing differs greatly from traditional museum collection processing.

In order to understand better these differences, I relied on a manual that Paul had written to give me some basic pointers on Dublin Core, and I did some initial research online as well. Up until that point, my museum studies background had only provided me with knowledge of how to accession a museum collection. I had learned about formulating an accessioning system, cataloging individual items (in essence, creating data about these items), and how to upload them using museum collections management software. Archival collections, however, rely on different procedures, including the grouping of items under series corresponding to material type and theme. Furthermore, when creating metadata for digital archives, it is common to use Dublin Core standards for arrangement: including date, creator, description, format, title, etc. Library of Congress subject headings, which give files searchable terms based on subjects, were used by the Institute for Oral History, so in that regard I was prepared. However, I quickly realized that I would be forced to learn about archiving as I proceeded with my collections.

b) DSpace File Entry

Once finished with the Tom Chatham collection—the largest physical collection at the CRG—I had a telephone meeting with Lynn Whitfield, archivist and collections manager at the Southwest Collection at Texas Tech University. The Southwest Collection uses DSpace, an online collections manager that provides public access to their collections. Dixie, being an alumnus of Texas Tech, had already decided that the CRG

would use DSpace for public access, with the Southwest Collection acting as parent institution.

Lynn Whitfield gave me a two-hour crash course on using DSpace, explaining the program's frustrating maze of necessary mouse clicks to create a single record. She taught me how to upload an image, and how to enter in metadata in two separate stages. In my opinion, I found that DSpace was not entirely user-friendly because of the multiple steps for upload. In order to upload a file, one can only enter in lower-level metadata before uploading the PDF or tiff file. Only once the file is created can one edit the information, reformatting metadata and entering in remaining sections.

Compared to other programs that I have used, DSpace seemed to have few positive merits. CONTENTdm, for example, allows the file to be uploaded initially, and then provides a clean and organized page for metadata entry. By working with one page instead of backtracking and reformatting, CONTENTdm allows for a much tidier processing experience. However, while DSpace was more difficult to use, it is much cheaper than CONTENTdm. In this way, it gives a functional (if not frustrating) alternative to smaller museums and historic sites that do not have substantial funds.

With Lynn's help, I was able to begin uploading files in earnest, and given that I had already created a spreadsheet with metadata, my task became a series of copying and pasting. I was able to upload the Chatham collection in several long and tedious sessions and surpassed my original goal of fifty records within several days.

c) Digitization

To complete the next task on my agenda, Dixie and I ventured off to the Gibbs Library, the local library in Mexia, and repository for many of the site's most valuable

documents. Dixie has been anxiously striving to transfer their collection to the site's

ownership in order to preserve the objects for perpetuity. Unfortunately, this has been a

slow process. However, the staff at the library has been very nice, gathering items of

interest and allowing Paul Fisher to digitize them over time. This has created one of the

CRG's digital collections (the Gibbs collection), which consists of hundreds of files with

images of various records, interpretive materials, and photographs. Prior to this visit, I

had already begun uploading some of these files onto DSpace, providing incomplete

metadata due to the digital nature of the objects. Dixie is currently still in the process of

gathering loan agreements that will allow me to take more items from the library to the

Riley Digitization Center at Baylor University.

I also was in charge of digitizing some of the larger items within the physical

collection at the CRG. I put together the proper paperwork, scheduled a time with Eric

Ames and Darryl Stuhr, and had the items digitized within forty-eight hours. The

Digitization Center provided me with access to the new files through BearCat, and I was

able to quickly upload these files onto DSpace. Larger items typically included

photographs of the site, as well as oversized interpretive materials and posters. I had

initially been prepared to digitize a slew of newspaper clippings as well, however it was

decided that only two would be saved due to their rare nature and historical value to the

town of Waco.

Unfortunately, the Reagan Williams digital collection was more difficult, and

required me to individually resize each file before I could put them online. The Reagan

Williams collection included over a hundred postcard pictures of the CRG during the

1920s Oil Boom, and filled an important gap in our metadata thus far. Resizing the files,

though not difficult, proved to be extremely time consuming, and took several long afternoons to complete. However, once completed I topped off at one hundred and sixty-five images on DSpace, a hefty load of information open to researchers and the public at large. With this final upload, I had officially surpassed my initial goals for DSpace uploads by one hundred and fifteen records.

The few items left on the agenda included processing an oral history, a project that Dixie and Paul Fisher had been working on before I arrived in May. There is an interview currently being processed at the Institute for Oral History, a lengthy process that requires transcription, as well as several rounds of corrections, and the signing of paperwork. Once the final transcript is returned, I will be able to upload this onto DSpace as well, so that my successor will have a template for doing so in the future.

d) Creating Finding Aids

Due to the changes made to the Tom Chatham collection and other collections within the CRG, it became necessary for me to revise the outdated finding aids, which had been created by Paul Fisher. My internship at the History Center this past summer in Austin had provided me with essential experience in creating XML finding aid records, and I was able to apply this knowledge to my graduate project.

I downloaded NoteTab 6 Light, a free XML mark up program, and was able to create an EAD finding aid, which will eventually be uploaded onto TARO (the Texas Archival Resources Online), which operates through the University of Texas. Since the CRG operates under the THC, it is necessary to get approval before we can continue with this step, therefore, this extra task remains on hold. Once on TARO however, the finding

aid will be accessible to the public, furthering my project's overall mission of public access.

VI. Conflicts

My first major problem arose when Dixie and I began to feel unhappy with how our collections were being divided online on DSpace. Items would fall into one of four categories based on either site ownership (Joseph E. Johnston U.C.V., Joseph E. Johnston C.S.A., or Confederate Reunion Grounds) or theme (such as Oil Boom). The division was confusing, and also did not account for items that may cross time period and theme. From here, we decided to change the sections, incorporating ownership and date together, and putting the time periods in the beginning of the title for obvious division.

This change in organization gave way to a very obvious inconsistency within the Tom Chatham collection. Many of the items within his collection had little, or nothing to do with Tom Chatham, or the C.S.A., which he headed. Though the collection had been archived and stored in this way for several years, and even though Paul had created a finding aid describing the collection, it would need to be divided in order for it to be entered online correctly. Thus began several weeks of back tracking.

Furthermore, Dixie kept mentioning records retention, a term that I had never come across in my past two and a half years of museum experience. She explained the term by saying that after Parks and Wildlife acquired the site from the C.S.A. in 1983, all files and incoming documents became records, as opposed to collections. Records are different in that they follow a retention schedule, and must be organized differently using a specific numbering system. For this reason, I was forced to begin dividing out all files

that were post-1983, and I was given the task of renumbering these items according to institutional records retention policies.

VII. Solutions

To correct these problems, I moved items online from their current place to their correct category. Luckily, Lynn came to my rescue and explained that this could be done easily by updating the metadata location. The major problem came when I had to adjust my growing number of Excel spreadsheets to accommodate the change, as well as creating a brand new collection (the Fort Parker State Park Transfer collection) to house items that were C.S.A. related but with no Chatham relation. Furthermore, I had to move the physical items from their folders and boxes, creating a document box for the new collection and renumbering everything.

 I also had to go through and pull out pieces from the Chatham collection that were post-1983. These documents thus became records, and had to be numbered using the separate system. In the end, the Chatham collection was reduced by nearly half, and several new collections had to be created to house the problem files. I also had to go into the hard drive and rename each individual file based on its new accession number. This alone took several shifts to complete.

VIII. Lessons Learned

Though the project has still not technically come to fruition, I have undoubtedly learned many essential lessons. I have learned how difficult it can be operating under a parent organization such as the THC, but also how useful having this institution can be when things go wrong. In the case of the Re:Discovery archival module, I have come to

understand that museums and historic sites cannot run without proper funding, despite the amount of passion the staff and volunteers may possess.

I have also learned that I was utterly naïve when considering what an archival project might entail until I was forced to learn—buried in records, boxes, and terms that I did not understand. Finally, I grasped how necessary it is to keep up with past contacts and to rely on previous jobs for help in current positions. Without the knowledge I acquired at the History Center, I doubt I could have tackled XML alone, and without my past employers and their encouragement, I might not have been able to complete this project at all.

IX. Conclusion

In gauging the success of the project, I truly did accomplish my initial goal, though it came to resemble something quite different than what I initially imagined. While I was not able to provide the CRG with an organized database of their own collections using Re:Discovery, I was able to provide access to a large portion of their collections online through DSpace. The Confederate Reunion Grounds—though located far from any Texas metropolis—is now officially open to the public at large and is linked with not only TARO and the University of Texas, but also the Southwest Collection and Texas Tech University through their online database. This web of intellectual sharing thus provides further access to the historic site and expands the CRG's mission of public service and outreach.