



Volume 15

2018

Digital History Profile

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Recommended Citation

Sutton, Angela (2018) "Digital History Profile," *Madison Historical Review*: Vol. 15 , Article 2.
Available at: <http://commons.lib.jmu.edu/mhr/vol15/iss1/2>

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Digital History Profile

This year at the *Madison Historical Review*, we chose to profile an exciting digital history project out of Vanderbilt University.

We interviewed Angela Sutton who is a historian and Postdoctoral fellow in Digital Humanities at Vanderbilt University, where she helps manage projects with the Slave Societies Digital Archive (SSDA). Her publications about the archive and its contents can be found in *sx archipelagos* (Issue 2, September 2017) and the *Afro-Hispanic Review* (coming out later in 2018).

The Slave Societies Digital Archive directed by Jane Landers, Gertrude Conaway Vanderbilt Chair of History at Vanderbilt University, was launched in 2003 with an initial Collaborative Research Grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities to Landers and her co-directors, Mariza de Carvalho Soares of the Universidade Federal Fluminense (Rio de Janeiro, Brazil), and Paul E. Lovejoy of York University (Toronto, Canada), and seeks to digitize international slave records pertaining to the Atlantic World. After almost three years of intensive work in Cuba and Brazil, the teams had digitally captured ecclesiastical records of more than 750,000 individuals. The focus was on Africans and Afro-descended individuals, but the Catholic Church also recorded Europeans, indigenous, and Chinese individuals in the same books. Subsequent grants have allowed SSDA teams to preserve additional records in new sites in Brazil, Colombia, and Cuba, as well as the oldest known records for African, African-descended, and indigenous people in what is today the United States, dating to the sixteenth century. These can be found in the Spanish Florida collection. Also in the SSDA are materials for Angola, Benin, and Cape Verde.

This digital archive currently holds 500,000 unique images, dating from the sixteenth to the twentieth centuries, and documents the history of between 6 and 8 million individuals. They are the most extensive serial records for the history of Africans in the Atlantic World and also include valuable information on the indigenous, European, and Asian populations who lived alongside them. Current full-time members at the SSDA office are Professor Jane Landers, postdoctoral fellow Angela Sutton, and doctoral fellow, Daniel Genkins. The team is assisted by a wide network of students, staff, and faculty at Vanderbilt and in institutions around the world.

Q: Why start the project? What was the process that you had to go through in order to get the project started?

A: The slave societies digital archive was started to address a dearth in the scholarship of Latin America. The vast majority of history books tended to underemphasize the contributions of Africans and their descendants in the Americas. Both enslaved and free Africans built the Atlantic world, yet the available primary sources for reconstructing this past are difficult for researchers to access. The SSDA digitizes records that are not ordinarily available to the public and makes them open access online for anyone to utilize.

In order to get the project started, the initial team had to convince interested bishoprics and clergy in Latin America that their church records were the key to reconstructing the lives of Afro-Cubans and Afro-descended Brazilians, many of whom are unable to trace their family histories due to the disruptive and violent nature of enslavement. Once the teams were allowed to see the baptismal, marriage, and death records the Catholic churches had kept preserved in the sacristies, they were floored at how much serial information has survived and remains intact. There are no other such available sources that tie together generations of enslaved and later free families of

color in the Americas.

Q: What does it take to keep the archive operational? Is there funding associated with it?

A: Keeping the archive operational is the full time job of several of our current team members. Library staff, history professors, postdoctoral fellows, administrative staff, and graduate students work to maintain, update, and improve the archive in a wide variety of ways. We forward migrate the data to prevent obsolescence, create and improve the metadata to make records searchable, scan for bitrot, continually find ways to be sustainable in computing in order for the archive to use up less of users' bandwidth, update the website, create maps, work on transcriptions of the more unusual documents, and collaborate with our partners around the world to collect more documents to expand the archive's holdings. In addition to that, we work with our digital humanities partners to help make our data interoperable with theirs, allowing for greater collaborations. For example, the SSDA is a partner and provides data to Michigan State University's Mellon Funded project called "Enslaved: People of the Historic Slave Trade," a database hub that ingests datasets of projects to do with Atlantic World slavery, allowing users to cross-reference data from each of these sites in one place.

Q: How did you come to the current webpage format of the archive? What considerations were taken in the design and layout? What platforms, software, and digital tools are used in the archive?

A: The current webpage format of the archive is under renovation as we migrate all of our data into Fedora, our new content management system. The website being built now is in Islandora, using Drupal. We decided on this method in order to keep both the data (our images, and the metadata attached to them) and all of the information and the way it is organized and curated in one system, which is best practice for sustainability. While building and updating, the team is always conscious of how to best curate the data and present the information, so that it can be most efficiently used to restore underrepresented voices to the historical record.

Q: Who assumes stewardship of the data, where is it stored, and how is it protected?

A: The data is stored in the Alexander Heard Library's repository at Vanderbilt University, where it is mirrored in several locations. The most rare and endangered materials in the archive are also stored in the Data Preservation Network (DPN) for further security. At Vanderbilt's repository, it is cared for by Dale Poulter, the director of library technology and digital services. With assistance from our doctoral fellow, Daniel Genkins, he coordinates the data and serves as technical advisor, helping to formulate storage solutions, best practices in data curation, and long-term preservation and access strategies.

Q: What sort of digitization best practices do you follow? What are some of the challenges of digitizing in foreign communities and with deteriorating documents? Are there digital preservation best practices in place?

A: We are very fortunate in that the majority of our data was obtained through the financial support of the British Library's Endangered Archives Programme. The Programme has very clear and carefully considered specifications for how the images should be digitized, and how their metadata should be created and stored. In order to keep the database standardized, we are ensuring uniformity of data by applying these same best practices and approaches to SSDA documents that were not obtained through a British Library EAP grant.

Digitizing these deteriorating documents in foreign communities has been rewarding, as each project presents its own specific challenges that must be overcome in order for the digitization to

be successful. For example, in a few of the more remote churches in Cuba, there were limited hours in which electricity and running water were available to digitizers. In some of our Colombia projects, digitizers were operating in locations of Choco which have seen conflicts with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), so they had to be very mindful of the daily changing security landscape and rely on local knowledge to stay safe. More common challenges seen in these digitization excursions are insect infestation, significant amounts of mold on the pages themselves, and the theft of documents (often for resale) or digitization equipment.

Q: What challenges do historians face when creating and managing a digital archive?

A: The biggest challenge the historians of SSDA faced was underestimating the sheer amount of complexity that goes into curating big data. When the archive was initially started, digital projects like ours were in their infancy. There was no clear standard as to how to collect and store data, and the team had no immediate plans to expand. After the first trips to Cuba and Brazil, the team found just how much data they had collected, and a librarian from Vanderbilt essentially created a program from scratch to help manage it. Since then, the teams and scope of the archive expanded as they won further EAP grants and collected more data in the field. It has been a significant challenge to work together with digital humanists and librarians to strip the existing data, clean and standardize it, and forward migrate it into a more modern system while not losing focus on the ways in which we intended the data to be utilized. It took a long time for these interdisciplinary discussions to become solid plans for fighting obsolescence and allowing for sustainable and historically responsible expansion. These plans are now being made possible by generous funding from the American Council of Learned Societies Digital Extension Grant, a Digital Humanities Implementation Grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities, and funding from Vanderbilt University's Andrew C. Mellon Grant.

Q: How do digital archives differ from physical archives and what are the advantages and disadvantages?

A: There are many pros and cons to both physical and digital archives. There is great need for both, and both will remain cornerstones of academic research for a long time to come. Physical and digital archives form a symbiotic relationship, as when curated thoughtfully, one can pick up where another leaves off and often they can complement one another and promote greater access to our shared past.

Both types of archives cost a lot of money to safeguard and maintain: physical archives must invest in paper-saving technologies, repairs, physical storage space, transport costs, and upkeep of facilities, while digital archives invest in digitizing equipment and costs, storage space on the cloud, content management, and continual migration of data to prevent obsolescence. The vast majority of holdings in our digital archive come from places that do not have the financial ability to function as physical archives. Often, the rooms of churches and offices in which we digitize are not open to the public because there are insufficient funds to hire staff which can maintain the records, serve customers, or offer sufficient facilities. In digitizing these collections and hosting them in the Vanderbilt University Library repository for anyone to access online, the SSDA transfers the costs of access from churches and offices in Latin America and Africa onto an institution that can more easily bear them.

Q: As this is an international project with many different contributors, what is the experience like working in foreign countries with local communities, church officials, academics, and additional stakeholders?

A: It's always chaotic in our office, but it is a good, energizing chaos. There are so many different jobs and responsibilities that vary day by day, and most of them require multiple skills and perspectives to finish. Each member of our team has to be adaptive and a great communicator in order to juggle multiple collaborations that require highly specialized tech and language skills, and working with people from groups with radically different priorities, resources, and institutional cultures toward shared goals.

Q: Is there any significance to the name of the Archive, Slave Societies Digital Archive, and why was it changed from Ecclesiastical and Secular Sources for Slave Societies?

A: When the project began, it was named Ecclesiastical Sources for Slave Societies (ESSS), as the first records, which for a long time comprised the bulk of our records, were from Catholic churches. As the holdings expanded, we included "Secular" in the title to reflect our holdings from notarial offices and other such records. People joked that we would just keep tacking S's onto our name until it was one long hiss: ESSSSSSSSS. So for the sake of helping people to remember our name and keeping it simple, we changed it to SSDA. We wanted to keep "Slave Societies" because of the differences seen in slave societies, as opposed to societies with slaves. A slave society is a society in which the economic backbone and the cultural conventions were largely shaped by the institution of slavery, while a society with slaves was one which featured enslavement, but did not build an entire society around this feature. Slave societies, such as the US, Brazil, and the other nations from which our documents hail, have a unique character, and the ways in which they suppress their populations of formerly enslaved create many social problems that persist into the present, making the preservation of their documents a priority for the SSDA team.

Q: Why choose the regions of Brazil, Colombia, Cuba, Spanish Florida, Angola, Benin and Cape Verde? Do you see the archive extending beyond these regions?

A: The regions were chosen because there were organic connections or partnerships between an institution in the region and someone at SSDA. For example, Jane Landers had been working with the historically black towns of Fort Mose and St. Augustine as a grad student, so when she decided to expand the archive beyond its initial NEH grant scope, the documents from the Diocese of Saint Augustine were a natural fit. Later on in her career, one of her graduate students, Pablo Gomez, came to Vanderbilt from Colombia and had his own contacts there, which proved another productive collaboration. The archive will likely extend beyond these regions as new research interests emerge and collaborations expand. For example, as my own research interests lie more in the Dutch Atlantic, I have recently visited St. Eustatius, an island that was a very active location for the trans-shipment of enslaved Africans in the eighteenth century. I will collaborate with our partners at the Historical Society and the Monuments Foundation in digitizing important documents related to the Afro-descended population there.

Q: What kinds of perspectives are reflected within the archive? Are any perspectives left out? What kinds of sources do you aim to collect and represent in the archive and how do you determine which sources are presented?

A: We are very conscious in the way we curate our document collections. When working with sources for enslaved populations in the Atlantic World, it is vital to understand the limitations of the documents. The vast majority of our collections were created by imperial agents about populations to which they did not belong. This limits the ways in which these documents can be

read. Still, we can promote these documents as viable sources to learn about the enslaved and formerly enslaved populations through how we organize and tag these collections. We instruct our research assistants to find the things that researchers of Afro-descended populations would ordinarily search for: the names of the enslaved and formerly enslaved, events specific to their lives, important dates for their history, etc., and encode these things into the metadata so that they will show up in searches. As our documents are currently unable to be transcribed via OCR, this process is done by hand, by people with training in Afro-Latin history and the specific languages and paleographies. In this way, we take on the responsibility of setting the tone for how these documents, which could be used to produce a wide variety of history, are used.

We do have more limited collections of documents written by the enslaved and their descendants, but these too were crafted under historic constraints that researchers need to know about before using them. For example, the testament books from Mariana in the Minas Gerais collection were written by that region's first free blacks; black men and women themselves recorded their last wishes. These materials speak to their lives, customs, material culture and kinship networks, as well as their engagement with the larger community of Minas Gerais, making them an invaluable source for African experiences during the colonial period of Brazil's history. However, the testaments were still produced in an imperial time, under the auspices of a government hostile to Africans and their descendants. Creators of these documents still had to follow certain rules and formats for these types of documents. They created the documents under the constraints of a slave society which affected access and the types of things and statuses they could and could not obtain, and pass on to their descendants or others.

Q: Who, is the archive's primary and secondary audience?

A: We have two main audiences who use our archive: researchers of the African Diaspora, and people interested in tracing their ancestry. Each audience is of primary importance, and while their needs are different, we have collected and curated the documents in such a way to be helpful to both. We believe that every human has a fundamental right to find out where they came from, and that the system of mass enslavement disrupted this knowledge to the detriment of descendants as well as the broader population. Ensuring usability for both researchers and genealogists allows them to incorporate the historic contributions of Africans into broader local, regional, national, and international histories and contexts.

Q: Why choose to keep the translations and transcriptions on a separate page from the images of the documents themselves? Who makes the majority of design and curatorial decisions on the digital platform?

A: The choice is largely due to limits in funding and personnel. It is a long-term goal for the archive to offer transcriptions side by side with images. Currently we have over 600,000 images, and less than 1% of them are transcribed. Our first priority has always been, and will always be digitizing endangered documents. Every day these fragile paper artifacts get lost to time, mold, insects, flooding, theft, and other acts of nature. In many cases, our digital copies are all that remain. We race against the clock to try to rescue as much information as possible before it is lost forever, and as long as funding is a constraint, we choose to devote our limited time and energy to preservation, hoping that others will later transcribe and translate what we have saved.

Q: How affective is digitization in democratizing primary sources and what are the drawbacks?

A: In our case, digitization is incredibly useful to democratizing access to primary sources, provided we can overcome access barriers. The vast majority of our physical documents are in locations that are either difficult or not possible for the public to access. Many scholars in Europe, Africa, Latin America, the Caribbean, and the US don't have the funds to travel to rural Northeastern Brazil, or to Benin to seek out these documents, and if they did, often the churches or other repositories which allowed us to digitize their holdings aren't open to the public. Due to lack of funding, the collections are not maintained professionally and too fragile to withstand multiple persons accessing them. Our website is the only way to get at the information therein. Hence it is of primary importance to have open access. We have discussed at length with our international partners what needs to happen in order to make sure the access truly is open in places where bandwidth is more limited, and we are currently overhauling the way we organize our images to increase the uploading speed. We will also offer the ability to download full volumes as pdfs. We also have plans to make the interface trilingual so as not to privilege any one group of users.

Q: Finally, what implications do digital archives have on the future of traditional archival institutions? What implications do digital archives have for future historians?

A: Digital archives are a supplement to, not a substitute for traditional archival institutions. This will never change. Digital archives open access to people who wouldn't be able to go to an institution, and allow the burden of cost to fall onto institutions that can better bear them. It also allows for more people who generally wouldn't attend an archive to interact with historic documents, fostering more interest in history and our shared past. That said, the implications of digital archives are very similar to those of traditional archival institutions. A lot of that has to do with curation: every document collection has a history, and every document collection was curated with some kind of purpose or intent, which means it is not objective. SSSA is upfront about its mission of collecting and presenting material for afro-descended populations within slave societies. If an archive's user does not have an understanding of the ways in which power structures determined how documents were generated, which documents were deemed worthy of preservation, and how they were sorted, tagged, and presented, then they run the risk of not fully understanding the context of their documents and how the documents illuminate historic events, or fail to. Whether digital or physical, it is every archive's responsibility to help contextualize its holdings, and recognize/disclose the subjective nature of this help.