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Digital Projects in History

by Jim Fleming & Ben Steib

Editor's note: *While the current pandemic crisis has really driven home the importance of digital scholarship and pedagogy, the digital humanities have a much longer history in the academy, and conscientious teachers have been integrating them into courses for some time now. One such case in point is the innovative "Digital Projects in History" seminar that Jim Fleming designed and taught to undergraduate history and STS students of Colby College in 2019, which he remembers as "the halcyon days when in-person meetings were still possible." This article is adapted from Jim's presentation at the HSS/SHOT joint roundtable in the future of digital humanities at the 2020 Virtual Forum, for which he also invited Ben Steib (class of 2021), a former student from his class and his current research assistant, to share his insights and final project.*

Jim Fleming, Charles A. Dana Professor of Science, Technology, and Society, Colby College:

I first became involved in digital humanities in 1982 as a graduate student at Princeton University. One day in Gerry Geison's Darwin seminar, we passed around a copy of *A Concordance to Darwin's Origin of Species: First Edition*, by Barrett, Weinshank, and Gottleber (1981) and, as Michael Ruse predicted in his review, we had "a few minutes of fun" with it. It was then that I realized I could create, on the university's IBM 3081 mainframe computer, concordances to Darwin's *Sketch* of 1842 and *Essay* of 1844 and use them to reveal changes in his understanding of evolution and his writing strategies in the intervening years. Two questions motivated my research: First, how could one make quantitative and meaningful comparisons between Darwin's earlier works on evolution and the *Origin of Species*? and second, were the intervening years a period of delay or development for Darwin? Sparing further technical details, the effort was a notable success, and I was fêted, ever so briefly, as an up-and-coming scholar in the early years of the digital humanities. I have remained somewhat involved ever since, attending productive seminars and symposia, publishing a digital archive of the *Papers of Guy Stewart Callendar*, the scientist who established the carbon dioxide theory of climate change, and actively participating in the HSS's THATCamp efforts to promote digital history.

The 2019 course was a project-based seminar that introduced best digital practices in historical research. Students learned how to evaluate digital projects and approaches and were encouraged to follow their passions to design their own final projects. The goal was to empower them in a humanities "laboratory" setting in which they could:

- practice historical research through engagement with digital resources,
- learn from scholars at other institutions working at the cutting edge of their fields,
- explore digital tools to create and share their own work online,
- think critically about the power and the potential limitations of the available techniques,
- and look to the future of digital history and its "e-carnations."

The seminar benefitted from the expertise of the academic information technology team at Colby: **Jason Parkhill**, **Mark Wardecker**, and **Tim Stonesifer**. Librarian **Erin Rhodes** in our **Special Collections and Archives** department facilitated connections among paper, photographic, and digital materials.

In addition to in-class deliberations, we profited from virtual visits to various digital projects such as **Darwin Online**, **Nuclear Secrecy**, and the Navigli Project on Milan's Waterways. A highlight for many students was an outing to view "**They Shall Not Grow Old**," the Peter Jackson film about restoring original World War I footage, including Jackson's epilogue about his suite of techniques and his passion for the project.

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One problem that this project aimed to solve was how students might identify and live their passion—creating both author and audience engagement for digital delivery. The final projects were built around topics as diverse as family members, the college experience, and personal interests. Detailed information about the may be found via this link: **http://web.colby.edu/st235a/**.

"Digital Projects in History" provided students with the chance to choose a topic and design a project that really interested them. It was driven and fueled by their passions. Students were encouraged and empowered to take deeper dives into their topics than they might have done otherwise. History matters. Increasingly, digital media have become its vehicle.

Ben Steib, former student in the course and author of the *History of Colby's Buildings*:

"Digital Projects in History" was a very open, project-based course that allowed us to come up with our own idea and decide how to add a digital element to the history that we were trying to tell. I thought about the history of Colby and how all the buildings that we live in and take classes in got to be there, and how they've changed and adapted to meet the needs of the college over the decades. After doing some

searching online, I found that there was very little material about the history of the buildings on Colby's campus. As I dug deeper, I found the resources were there, but were not compiled in one place where it would be convenient for members of the community to find.

I began by building a simple WordPress website with pages for each of the buildings I intended to study. I also worked on more visual aspects of the website such as a campus map where visitors could just click on the building they wanted to learn more about and then retrieve all the information on one page. I worked with Colby's Special Collections and Archives department seeking articles, images, video and other media.

Photograph from Ben's project: Miller Library under Construction: side (1939), **Colby College Collection: Colbiana Photographs**.

I then summarized this information on each page to make it easy to find and understand. I managed to include most of the academic and residential buildings on campus, but I was unable to finish to the extent that I would have liked.

Thankfully, I was able to continue my research and develop the website during an independent study in the spring of 2020. The project is still evolving with the opening of the new athletic center this year and new construction on a performing arts center. It has received over 1,000 views to date, and I hope others may be inspired by my initial efforts to maintain the project and update it as the campus evolves.

I learned so much about Colby by doing this project. By seeing photos, drawings, and notes from the people who built these buildings you can accurately get a sense of what the priorities were at the time. Colby has come a long way, and I think its history is well represented in its buildings and in the priorities for each one. This course combined my interest in learning how to build a website and represent a story visually with an added benefit to the community: providing the history of our campus in a medium that works for the twenty-first century.