Improving Access to Special Collections through Collaborative Digital Scholarship

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Project Background

- The Seward Family Digital Archive (2012-present) works to digitize, transcribe, annotate, and TEI encode correspondence from the Seward family in the William Henry Seward papers, housed in the department of Rare Books, Special Collections, and Preservation at the University of Rochester
- Project members
  - Library staff from Rare Books, Special Collections, and Preservation, Digital Scholarship Lab, and Information Discovery Team
  - History department faculty, graduate students, and undergraduate students from a variety of disciplines
  - Volunteers from local retirement communities
- In 2014, a project archivist was hired to create a new EAD and DACS-compliant finding aid for the Seward papers in order to increase discoverability of the entire collection and aid in finding family correspondence for the project

William Henry Seward Papers

- Collection spans 1776-1878 and consists of correspondence, public papers related to Seward’s terms as governor, senator, and secretary of state, financial and legal papers, personal papers, photographs, and family papers
- At 32 file drawers, 139 boxes, 54 bound volumes, 3600 pamphlets, and 1 flat file it is one of the largest and most frequently accessed collections in the department
- The family correspondence being digitized for the Seward Family Digital Archive accounts for approximately 6% of the collection’s correspondence, or 2% of the entire collection

Finding Aid

- Old finding aid
  - Last updated in the 1960s
  - Description incorrect, incomplete, or inconsistent
  - Difficult to navigate
  - Family correspondence unindexed
- New finding aid
  - EAD and DACS compliant
  - Item and folder level description
  - Navigational bar anchored to left expands and collapses series and sub-series
  - Contains links to Seward Family Digital Archive website

Solutions

- Project archivist serves as liaison to Seward Family Digital Archive
- Attends meetings, develops workflows, provides collection expertise, primary contact for all communication
- Assists with training/orientation of new students and volunteers
- Create digital links between the new finding aid and the project website
- Item level description enables links to digitized letters and biographical entries hosted on the Seward Family Digital Archive website
- Programmer created algorithm that matches names in the project’s personography database to names in the finding aid
- Archivist checks matches for accuracy and provides feedback about structure and design

Outcomes

- Finding aid serves as a comprehensive reference tool and sets the foundation for future digitization projects
- Website sewardproject.org launched in April 2016 and currently includes digital images, transcriptions, and annotations for approximately 2000 family letters spanning 1815-1874
- Collaborative model, digital platforms, and code serve as framework for future digital scholarship projects
- Students become fully immersed in the correspondence and their excitement spreads to friends, creating learning opportunities and positive associations with the department
- Project received local and regional media attention, and resulted in donations from alumni
- Experiential learning opportunities for students across disciplines
- Creating a new finding aid reduces the work students need to do to have access to materials
- Providing less restricted physical access to the collection for students
- Presence of archivist to provide suggestions for descriptive practices and knowledge of collection
- Preservation of family correspondence
- Project supported by library administration through allocation of staff time and resources for long-term storage and administration of website
- Frequent communication with project managers to discuss project progression, needs, and goals

Suggestions for Future Projects

- Get students involved in the work – create class assignments based on transcription, annotation, or coding
- Take an active role. Don’t merely supply materials, be vocal in how they are being used and take advantage of associated opportunities for community outreach
- Train archivists in digital humanities in order to communicate more effectively with programmers, staff, and scholars in the field
- Become familiar with various platforms, programs, apps, and trends
- Make sure an archivist is on board to participate in project planning and advocate for how the project can be used to improve metadata, description, instruction, or outreach for the collection