

Documentary Editions and Free Online Access

A note from the Executive Director of the National Historical Publications and Records Commission (NHPRC)

At its meeting in February 2011, the members of the National Historical Publications and Records Commission discussed the topic of free online access to historical documentary editions that are funded by the NHPRC. At that meeting they adopted a policy to give preference to those projects that provide free access to online editions, and they requested the staff to prepare a report on the current state of NHPRC-funded projects' efforts and plans for online publishing and access.

The following report, submitted to the Commission in November 2011, summarizes responses from the editors and some publishers of documentary editing projects funded by the NHPRC. As members of the Commission noted, the report demonstrates the transitional moment confronting the historical documentary editing community as it considers the potential and challenges of publishing online.

Some editions already provide free, online access in several forms and clearly influenced the Commission's new policy; others are now planning to provide free access; and others wonder about the long-term sustainability of online resources without a method to recover costs or maintain such investments over time. We present in this summary report the variety of responses we received to our inquiries, noting that the Commission continues to consider how it will encourage the widest possible access to the incredible historical richness of the documentary editions it supports.

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Overview

This report attempts to summarize the online publication capacities and plans of documentary editing projects. The NHPRC staff acquired this information from those publishing projects that applied for NHPRC support in 2011, and from a handful of publishers of these editions. The staff has summarized data where possible and provided examples from the projects, when such examples help to illustrate a point or provide additional information. The staff has not carried out an exhaustive analysis of the data at this time, but recommends that, as Commission moves forward with its plans, we continue to engage the documentary editing community in a review and analysis of the challenges to be addressed with online publication.

Introduction

Soon after we issued a revised “Publishing Historical Records” grant opportunity announcement this spring, Commission staff notified ongoing publishing projects of the Commission’s new policy regarding free online availability of the documentary editions it supports. Shortly thereafter, the staff circulated a list of frequently asked questions and answers concerning the new approach. In April, the staff conducted two webinars in which they discussed with publishing projects the implementation of the Commission’s priorities.

All of the documentary editing projects that applied for consideration at either the June 2011 or the November 2011 meeting incorporated their online publication plans in their proposals, or else submitted online publication supplements. The Commission staff suggested that these supplements should address the following questions:

- What digital products is the project currently producing?
- Who has the electronic publication rights to the edition?
- Does the holder of these rights plan to publish the edition online?
- Has the project had discussions with its publisher regarding electronic publication of the edition? If so, what have been the results of such discussions?
- Has the project made contacts with any digital humanities centers that might be interested in publishing the edition online? What were the results of these discussions?
- What implications would digital publication have for the project's staffing?
- Would a project require consultants, additional editors or specialized training in going online? Would it require new computer hardware and/or software in going online?
- What would be the estimated costs of the transition to electronic media?

Commission staff appended copies of all project submissions to the staff report packages for the June 1 and November 15 Commission meetings. Many projects failed to address all of the issues suggested by the staff. This report is an attempt to summarize these supplements. Some projects have delayed implementation of their plans, awaiting a more definitive expression of the Commission’s new priorities and policies.

Below is a summary table of some of the information gathered from the editorial projects.

Documentary Editing Projects funded by NHPRC	34 projects
Publishing in book format primarily	30 projects
Publishing online editions exclusively	4 projects
Free online editions available (includes document transcriptions and, in most cases, annotation)	7 projects
Free “image-only” editions available online	5 projects
Subscription-based editions online (available or under contract)	13 projects
Founders Online Initiative (free, federally-funded website)	6 projects

Of the 34 publishing efforts receiving NHPRC support, 11 projects expect to complete their editions by 2015, and 17 additional projects plan to finish by 2025.

I. Freely Available Online Products

Some projects provide free online versions of their editions, either transcripts or images; most others provide selected documents or biographical information.

Projects with Comprehensive Online Editions

Project	Online Links
Adams Papers Project: Digital copies of the published volumes are available on the Massachusetts Historical Society Web site, which also includes both images and transcriptions of letters between John and Abigail Adams, and John Adams’ diary and autobiography. The site also provides images of John Quincy Adams’ diary. The project has put its document control file online, enabling users to search the entire archive of Adams manuscripts.	http://www.masshist.org/publications/apde/
Benjamin Franklin Papers Project: The published Franklin Papers volumes are accessible on the Web, as is a cumulative index to them. The digital edition of the Franklin Papers includes such special enhancements as translations of French language documents and a biographical dictionary of all Franklin’s correspondents.	http://www.yale.edu/franklinpapers/digitaledition.html
George Washington Papers Project: A free electronic version of the published Washington Papers volumes – without annotation – is available through a link from the Mount Vernon Ladies Association Web site to Rotunda.	http://rotunda.upress.virginia.edu/founders/GEWN
Ulysses S. Grant Papers Project: Digital versions of all of the volumes are published on the university’s Web site.	http://digital.library.msstate.edu/collections/usgrant/index.html
Martin Luther King, Jr. Papers Project: Its website features copies of the project’s published volumes, and the Martin Luther King, Jr., Encyclopedia, as well as transcriptions and recordings of selected sermons, speeches, and writings.	http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/resources/index.php

George Marshall Papers Project: All the published Marshall volumes are available on the George Marshall Foundation's Web site along with Marshall's congressional testimonies, Forrest Pogue's four-volume biography of Marshall, and copies of selected monographs.	http://www.marshallfoundation.org/Database.htm
Walt Whitman Archive: A comprehensive site that includes digital facsimiles as well as transcripts of publications, manuscripts, and other materials.	http://www.whitmanarchive.org/
John Jay Papers Project: Columbia University has mounted an image edition of thousands of Jay's documents.	http://www.columbia.edu/cu/lweb/digital/jay/
The Lincoln Papers Project: An updated version of its comprehensive image edition of Lincoln's Legal Papers is available on its Web site. The editors have also compiled a detailed chronology of Lincoln's life, which is also freely available online. Also available online are <i>The Papers of Abraham Lincoln: Images From the National Archives and Library of Congress</i> . Transcriptions of the documents are being prepared, but are not yet available.	http://www.lawpracticeofabrahamlincoln.org . http://www.thelincolnlog.org/view . http://lpapers.ncsa.uiuc.edu
The War Department Papers Project: Its online "image" edition is hosted by George Mason University's Center for History and New Media.	http://wardepartmentpapers.org/about.php
Thomas Edison Papers Project: Its digital edition consists of images from its microfilm edition, 1850-1898. The project also publishes a book edition.	http://edison.rutgers.edu/digital.htm

Projects with Selected Materials Online

The following projects provide a significant portion of material online without cost.

Founders Online Early Access: The Rotunda Web site presents preliminary transcriptions of thousands of the not-yet-published papers of John Adams, James Madison, and George Washington. The Adams and Madison transcripts on Early Access were funded by the NHPRC in 2009.	http://rotunda.upress.virginia.edu/founders/FOEA.html)
The Clarence Mitchell Project: The project's Web site contains biographical information about Mitchell, a highly selective set of documents, lists of his Congressional testimonies, and videotaped interviews.	http://www.clarencemitchellpapers.com/
Presidential Recordings Project: The Web site of the Presidential Recordings project offers both tape recordings and transcriptions of selected presidential conversations. Complete versions of the published volumes are only available by subscription to the University of Virginia's Rotunda Web site.	http://tapes.millercenter.virginia.edu/
Ratification of the Constitution Project: The Wisconsin Historical Society Web site contains the four volumes of the Ratification project relating to the ratification of the	http://www.wisconsinhistory.org/ratification/massachusetts.asp http://www.wisconsinhistory.org

<p>Constitution in Massachusetts as well as the supplementary documents generated by the ratification debate in that state. Transcriptions of other documents relating to the ratification process appear on the Web site of the Center for the Study of the American Constitution. Complete versions of the published volumes are only available by subscription to the University of Virginia's Rotunda Web site.</p>	<p>/ratification/supplements/ http://history.wisc.edu/csac/csac. htm</p>
<p>The Documentary Relations of the Southwest project: Comprehensive databases of biographical information and geographic place names are now available on the Internet.</p>	<p>http://www.statemuseum.arizona.edu/oer/</p>

In responses, projects raised questions regarding the meaning of “free.” Some projects wondered if the Commission’s interests would be satisfied if Web researchers had free access to transcriptions and annotation, but had to pay for access to more extensive information and more sophisticated functionalities. Similarly, some asked if the Commission would accept a scenario in which users were free to view documents, but would pay to actually download them. Others noted that in this case, enabling users to download documents might complicate the process of obtaining permissions to publish. Other projects suggested that Rotunda editions are freely available in the sense that users may request a free 48 hour trial period, or that some potential users are members of academic communities and will have access to Rotunda through the subscriptions of the institutions with which they are affiliated.

II. Publication Plans

The online publishing plans of these projects fall into several categories. Generally, the publisher of the book edition also holds the electronic publication rights. But the attitudes of book publishers toward this matter vary widely. A few long-standing contracts with publishers did not anticipate digital publication and failed to include any specific assignment of electronic publication rights. For example, the Madison Papers project director doubted whether “even a lawyer could provide a clear answer.” He felt that, in terms of his project, the university, the press, the Packard Humanities Institute, and federal funders could each stake a claim to the electronic publication rights; in any case, he concluded that the project itself did not hold such rights, and thus could not delegate them to any publisher.

Most editions are bound by existing publication agreements, and these may restrict efforts to make the editions freely available online. For example, the *Selected Papers of John Jay* project signed an agreement with the University of Virginia Press that assigned non-exclusive electronic publication rights to the press. Since the agreement is non-exclusive, it appears that there is not an issue. However, the University of Virginia press director has explained that this contract includes a stipulation that Columbia University, “would not use the XML files in any way that directly competes with the Rotunda edition,” and further noted that, “A free edition with all contents including annotation would constitute such competition.” As a practical matter, such an arrangement may well be exclusive when such clauses are included. The Wisconsin Historical Society, which holds the electronic publication rights to *The Documentary History of the Ratification of the Constitution*, has signed a contract with the University of Virginia Press for the publication of the Ratification volumes on Rotunda. The project itself cannot alter that contract, or release the edition through a different publisher that might provide free access to the edition.

Presently available through subscription to Rotunda are digital versions of five Founding Fathers editions. These editions, now incorporated in the *American Founding Era Collection*, include the papers of John Adams, Alexander Hamilton, Thomas Jefferson (two separate projects, with one of them receiving support from the NHPRC), James Madison, and George Washington. Through the *Founders Online* Initiative, plans are in place, with the assistance of special funds from the Commission, to make these editions, as well as the Franklin Papers, available on the Internet without charge on a new “*Founders Online*” Web site. Publication of the Franklin Papers volumes on Rotunda, or on Founders Online, continues to await the approval of the project’s administrative board. It should be pointed out that although special funding for Founders Online has come from the White House and the Congress, there is little likelihood that this funding model can be replicated in the foreseeable future.

Editions other than the six that will appear on the *Founders Online* site will continue to be available through subscription to Rotunda. These editions include the Documentary History of the Ratification of the Constitution, as well as the papers of John Jay, Dolley Madison, the Pinckney Statesmen, Andrew Jackson, the Presidential Recordings editions, and (perhaps) Eleanor Roosevelt. Some Rotunda contracts do not convey exclusive electronic publication rights. In these cases, projects could publish digital versions of editions for which Rotunda has the electronic publication rights, but Rotunda would likely decide not to publish an edition that would be freely available elsewhere. Projects whose editions are to be accessed through subscriptions to Rotunda are facing a decision whether to keep their editions on Rotunda or move them elsewhere in order to comply with the Commission’s policy regarding free availability of online editions.

Several of these projects wish to continue publishing through Rotunda, even though its publications would not be freely available online. For example, the Jay Papers project would like to continue publishing through Rotunda. The project cites Rotunda’s staffing, procedures, and experience, as the basis for its conclusion. Likewise, the Dolley Madison project is persuaded that libraries and digital humanities centers are primarily “geared either toward curation of collections or electronic exhibitions.” Even at the University of Virginia, the Dolley Madison project found that libraries and digital centers had limited experience with copyright law, copy-editing, sophisticated search protocols, or sustainability planning. The project felt that the University of Virginia Press, on the other hand, had proven its ability to deal with these issues. Some potential users have access to Rotunda through their association with subscribing institutions. As has been noted previously, prior contractual arrangements with Rotunda may make it difficult to offer some editions without charge through an alternative publisher. An additional concern is that a move away from Rotunda could mean that some parts of their editions would be available on Rotunda while other parts would be available elsewhere. For others, the choice might be between having TEI-encoded versions of all their volumes on Rotunda or having PDF versions of only their future volumes available on an alternate Web site.

Others are exploring options to present their editions on the Internet without charge. The Maryland Historical Society (which holds many of Charles Carroll’s papers and provides office space for the Carroll Papers project) and the Maryland State Archives (which is actively putting many of its own records on the Web) will combine forces and make all the Carroll Papers volumes available on the State Archives Web site without charge. The Documentary Relations of the Southwest has not contracted for the publication of its future volumes, so its publication options remain open. The Missions Initiative, whose Web site is hosted by the University of Arizona’s technology services office, has a clear interest in the Southwest project’s work with

Spanish missionary efforts, and may serve as a Web host for the project's volumes if the University of Arizona Press chooses not to be the online publisher.

Some presses have been willing to return digital publication rights to the projects. Such has been the case with Southern Illinois University Press, which permitted the Grant project to make its edition freely available online, and with Johns Hopkins University Press, which allowed the Marshall Papers to provide free copies of its volumes online, and evidently is willing to grant similar permission to the Olmsted project.

But many publishers, hoping to recoup some of their costs through either print or online publication, are reluctant to permit projects to make their editions freely available online. For example, Louisiana State University Press has no plans for the digital publication of the Jefferson Davis Papers volumes, and, moreover, it will not permit publication of free versions that might reduce the demand for the print edition. Similar is the attitude of ABC-Clio with regard to the James Monroe Papers. Cambridge University Press, which holds the digital publication rights to the first four Freedmen and Southern Society volumes, apparently has plans to publish them electronically, but has not described these plans to date. The University of North Carolina Press, which holds the electronic publication rights to the remaining volumes of Freedmen, plans to make them available on a subscription basis through a new e-book initiative of JSTOR that will put books alongside the journal articles traditionally searchable in JSTOR. The University of Illinois Press (UIP) apparently has similar plans for the Jane Addams Papers and the Margaret Sanger Papers. After providing free access to the Booker T. Washington Papers for a decade, in the future, the UIP plans to make this edition available only through subscription. Similarly, the volumes of the Documentary History of the First Federal Congress are now available on Johns Hopkins University Press's *The Early Republic* Web site on a subscription basis (<http://earlyrepublic.press.jhu.edu/about/aboutFFC.html>).

These varied approaches to publishing online also have implications for how potential users discover the digital editions and how they use them, including conducting cross searches. In addition, choices made now will likely require revision as the computing environment changes in the future. Although some projects have raised these issues in their online publication statements, Commission staff has not attempted to develop a definitive statement on the ideal approach at this time.

III. Costs

The costs of online publication can be substantial; they are ongoing, and they have not been fully assessed at this time. The director of the University of Virginia Press explained that the *raison d'être* for the Mellon Foundation's initial grant in support of Rotunda was to develop a business model that could sustain the long-term digital publications. Rotunda cannot make its editions freely available online, she stated, because of the costs associated with preparing and maintaining electronic publications. Similarly, Johns Hopkins University Press calculated that it had invested over \$130,000 in its Early Republic Web site and that it had recovered only 10 per cent of this amount thus far. Columbia University's Digital Library staff envisaged several scenarios for publishing the Jay volumes on the university Web site. The most expensive option would offer transcriptions linked to documents in the electronic image edition of Jay's papers; the least expensive would provide searchable PDF versions of the project's volumes. The costs of preparing the online edition, according to Columbia, would depend on the approach adopted, with estimates for the initial volume ranging from \$20,000 to \$100,000, and those of subsequent

volumes running from \$3,000 to \$10,000. The Eleanor Roosevelt Papers project anticipated that the cost of obtaining permissions to publish might be as high as \$30,000 per volume. According to the Thomas Edison Papers project, it cost in excess of \$500,000 to prepare the first three parts of its comprehensive online image edition of Edison's papers.

Projects and publishers have suggested several methods of defraying these costs. Several projects suggested the need for special Commission assistance. This could have for its object the creation of new graphical user interfaces, assistance with the publication of Commission-affiliated editions on Rotunda, or inducements to persuade book publishers to make their editions freely available online. Alternatively, the Commission might take steps to facilitate the publication of these editions on the NARA Web site. Johns Hopkins University Press estimated that its costs for its *Early Republic* Web site would eventually total approximately \$200,000. With a single \$100,000 grant, the press felt it would be able to make this content, and the associated functionalities, freely available to the public. An official of the Wisconsin Historical Society suggested a program under which the Commission would pay projects or publishers for licenses to publish editions online. The director of the Ratification project is considering a special fund-raising effort that would generate \$100,000 so Rotunda could make the project's volumes available online without charge. But that investment would evidently provide free access for only three years.

IV. Long-Term Access

Various factors contribute to the permanence of digital products. These include the relative timelessness of such formats as ASCII, TIFF, and PDF, non-proprietary coding, and open source platforms and tools. Because technologies are changing with increasing rapidity, the maintenance of Web sites and the continuity of institutional commitment are also important. Some projects plan to back up their digital editions on CDs or alternative servers; other projects have prepared analog security copies. Although most editors rely on appropriate technology to ensure permanence, some editors are not persuaded of the long-term reliability of digital media. The director of the First Federal Congress project cited her experiences with the NHPRC's funded Model Editions Partnership in the 1990s as a basis for skepticism regarding online publication. The history of the MEP, she said, "did not engender confidence in the permanence of a well-maintained electronic product, despite the fact that MEP had excellent standards and goals and top notch technical advisors." (The First Federal Congress project, incidentally, has taken steps to preserve the material it contributed to the MEP, and is trying to assist in efforts to revivify the MEP site.) For this project director, "books remain the most effective and durable long term preservation medium." In addition, the digital edition of the Franklin Papers, put online by the Packard Humanities Institute in 2006, has no contract to ensure long-term access. And the director of the Madison Papers worried that even a NARA Web site for documentary editions "will only be sustainable for as long as the NHPRC receives funding through NARA for that purpose—and that is not an assumption that should be taken for granted these days." For some projects, long-term private funding is a concern. For example, the Edison Papers project and the Presidential Recordings project, both of which currently offer large and valuable online editions free of charge, both doubt whether they can continue to provide these editions on the Internet without cost to users. In these and other cases, long-term free access would depend on the success of special fund-raising efforts.