

Teaching with TEI: Research Methods in History

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Wheaton Family Papers

Since fall 2004, students in U.S. Women's History courses at Wheaton College have been transcribing and coding nineteenth-century documents from the Wheaton College Archives and Special Collections for digital publication. The opportunity to begin such work arose when Wheaton collaborated with Mount Holyoke College to host a two-part conference that explored uses of TEI in teaching and research at liberal arts colleges.

In fall 2004, students in U.S. Women to 1869 learned about the economic uncertainties in the lives of unmarried white women of the nineteenth century when they transcribed and tagged the journal of Maria E. Wood, the daughter of a Maine Baptist minister. Those students expressed a sense of having gotten to know Wood and having understood the past better than they ever had before.

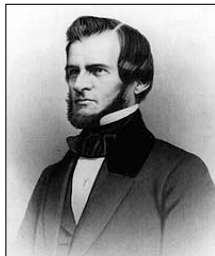
In subsequent semesters and summers, students have worked to create digital editions of the pocket diaries of Eliza B. Wheaton. These projects marked the birth of the Wheaton College Digital History Project, which has focused on digitizing the Wheaton Family Papers since spring 2005.

This collection contains documents with broad historical value. Because the college was founded as an institution for the education of women in 1834, students can explore primary documents that reflect women's experiences and changing ideas about gender. In addition, because the institution was financed primarily by the Wheaton family between its founding and the death of Eliza Baylies Wheaton in 1905, the financial records kept by Wheaton and her husband open a window onto the relationship between capitalist development and women's education throughout the nineteenth century.

Capitalism and Education

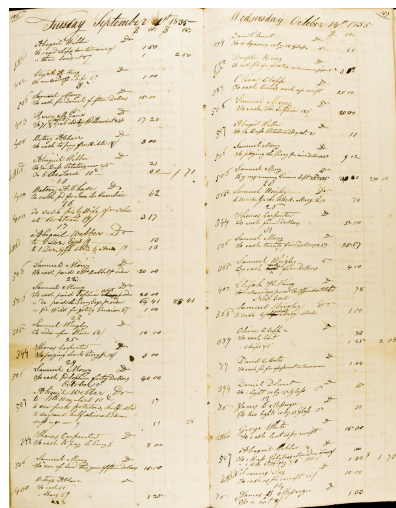
Eliza Baylies Wheaton and her husband Laban Morey Wheaton lived in a community that lay at the border of the changing agricultural and industrial economies of the early nineteenth century. Situated between the developing industrial centers of such cities as New Bedford and Fall River in Massachusetts and Pawtucket and Cumberland in nearby Rhode Island, Norton was a site where the Wheatons and other local landowning families diversified their economic pursuits through such industrial enterprises as cotton mills and iron foundries.

In the 1830s, these families mobilized their wealth to support the creation of local institutions. The Wheatons were instrumental in the founding of the Trinitarian Congregational Church in 1832, and they were involved in the temperance and abolition movements. The educational, religious, and benevolent changes in the town were comparable to those that have been documented in such better-known hinterland communities as Rochester and Utica, New York. Linked to Boston, Providence, and New Bedford by rail, Norton participated in the economic and cultural changes of the region and the nation. In addition to their ties to other members of the town's elite, the Wheatons were employers of household workers and farm laborers as well as the women and men who worked in the cotton mills and straw hat manufactories owned by Laban Morey Wheaton and his business associates.



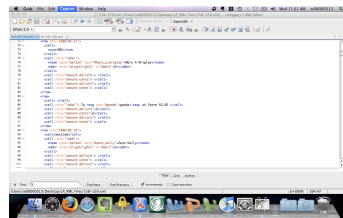
History 302—Methods

In spring 2009, students in History 302, the research methods course for History majors, transcribed and coded pages from the daybook that Laban Morey Wheaton kept between 1828 and 1859. This account book records transactions that took place at the store Wheaton kept in Norton, and the transactions reflect some of the range of his business interests during these thirty years, including agricultural pursuits and rentals for land and houses as well as tax collections, legal services, and the operation of a general store.



The Assignment

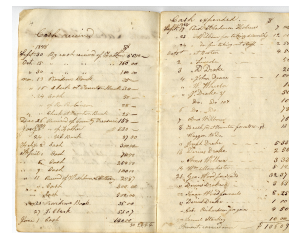
Each student was assigned a two-page spread to transcribe into a Google spreadsheet that had been set up by academic technologist Patrick Rashleigh. In an in-class workshop, students coded the transactions using a standardized list of names and goods. In another class meeting, Rashleigh demonstrated some visualization tools to show students examples of results of querying the files. Students wrote papers based on the data and secondary sources.



Cash Books

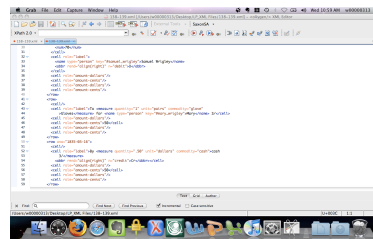
During the same semester that students in History 302 were transcribing and coding the daybook, Research Assistant Lauren Pfendner (Class of 2010) began transcribing Laban Morey Wheaton's cashbooks.

Combined with the daybook, the cashbooks offer a view not only of the business practices behind the wealth that supported Wheaton Female Seminary through its first thirty years of operation but also of economic relations in the town of Norton during the second quarter of the nineteenth century.



Data Cleanup

Pfendner and Tomasek attended the Digital Humanities Summer Institute at the University of Victoria in summer 2009, where they learned a model for standardized coding of transactions. Pfendner began to clean up the daybook data by using standardized coding for commodities, units, and amounts.



Challenges

Statistical data, Rashleigh notes, can be a hard sell. Many students need considerable assistance to see the potential in such data. In earlier courses, students transcribed diaries, and the pleasures of learning the details of another person's life fueled their interest in the project. Such details also appear in account books, but the structures of the texts are less narrative and consequently place a greater interpretive burden on the student as historian.

In this course, in-class discussions and workshop sessions in which students transcribed and coded data collaboratively built intellectual community. One discussion in particular engaged students in the interpretive process when they suggested categories for coding in order to answer their questions about the transactions. Students wanted, for example, to code for gender of the purchaser.

Conclusions

For teaching, collaborative contributions to the digital archive offer instructors opportunities to help students understand mediations that are intrinsic to the archival, research, and editorial processes. As students transcribe, mark, and proofread documents, they learn about the nature of historical sources and what they can and cannot tell us as historians, and such lessons evoke theoretical questions about the nature and purposes of archives.

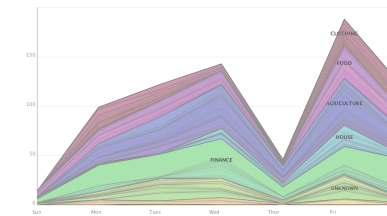
Students do need assistance in using the resulting data, yet all primary sources are foreign to students in one way or another. As Margaret Kantz has noted, students need help learning how to use textual sources persuasively. Skills in selecting quotations, framing them, explicating them, and explaining their role in an argument are far from transparent. Thoughtful pedagogy can open up to students the interpretation and analysis of past accounting practices, and treating account books as texts through transcription and coding can assist in this process.

Next Steps

Tomasek will teach History 302 again in spring 2010. Since Laban Morey Wheaton's daybook includes over two hundred pages and records thousands of transactions, there is no dearth of material for students in the course to transcribe and code. Having piloted this project in spring 2009, the teaching team now has an opportunity to clarify goals and revise such instructional materials as assignment sheets and lists of names and commodities.

Since visualization tools help students consider possible uses of the statistical data that can be extracted from account books, students will spend an additional class meeting working with Rashleigh, learning how to query the data and present visualizations to support their interpretations. As we continue to transcribe and code more and more of the transactions in Laban Morey Wheaton's day book, we will have increasing amounts of data available for manipulation and analysis.

In its spring 2010 iteration, the assignment will also integrate transcription and coding of the daybook with writing for the History Engine, the digital tool for teaching research and writing in history that was developed at the University of Virginia and is now housed at the University of Richmond. After students transcribe their two-page spread from the day book, they will each choose a transaction to describe and explicate in an episode that will be published on the History Engine. Students' episodes will undergo in-class peer review, which will contribute to their learning about how to use information from accounting sources in historical writing.



Selected Sources

Kantz, Margaret. "Helping Students Use Textual Sources Persuasively." *College English* (1990), 52/1: 74-91.
McGaw, Judith. "Accounting for Innovation: Technological Change in the Berkshire Paper Industry." *Technology and Culture* (1985) 26/4: 703-725.