National Endowment for the Humanities Digital Humanities Start-Up Grant Proposal

**Sustaining Digital History**

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**List of Participants**

Canty-Jones, Eliza. Oregon Historical Quarterly
Gaskell, Tamara. Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography
Grasso, Christopher. William and Mary Quarterly
Lewis, David. Western Historical Quarterly
Lessoff, Alan. Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era
McClymer, John. Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era
Schneider, Robert. American Historical Review
Seefeldt, Douglas. University of Nebraska-Lincoln
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**Abstract**

This project seeks to build a scholarly community for the practice of the emerging field of digital history by 1.) enhancing communication and collaboration among scholars and journal editors, 2.) creating model forms of scholarship and peer review, and 3.) establishing a clearinghouse for all peer-reviewed digital history scholarship. Digital History has grown up in the last fifteen years through and around the explosion of the World Wide Web, but historians have only just begun to explore what history looks like in the digital medium. Increasingly, university departments seek scholars to translate history into this fast-paced environment and to work in digital history; however, they have found that without well-defined examples of digital scholarship, established best practices, and, especially, clear standards of peer review for tenure, few scholars have fully engaged with the digital medium. Our challenge now is to create a wider scholarly community around Digital History.

**Narrative**

Digital History as a field emerged with the explosion of the World Wide Web, the now dominant means of information access, knowledge acquisition, and communication for the public and increasingly for the scholarly community. Because the medium is so new and the technology so quickly changing, we have only just begun to explore the new forms that historical scholarship might take. We need well-defined examples of digital scholarship, established best practices, and, especially, clear standards of review for tenure. The professional associations (the American Historical Association and the Organization of American Historians) have taken crucial steps in promoting digital scholarship and provided essential leadership. Our challenge now is to build on their foundation and create a wider scholarly community around Digital History. Our plan is to to work directly with scholars and journal editors to identify, peer review, and disseminate article length digital scholarship by placing these works in some of the leading journals, by sponsoring sessions at major and regional conferences, by publishing a directory of digital scholars and leading projects, and by using the web site Digital History (digitalhistory.unl.edu), sponsored by the History Cooperative, to index peer-reviewed works of digital history and help define and sustain the field.

One of the most important aspects of our work will be to reduce the gap between the scholarship in the profession's journals and the scholarship on the web. After significant discussions with History Cooperative journal editors over the course of the past year, we have found wide support in the group for taking some steps to close this gap. Journal editors see the burgeoning work on the web and recognize its value. They also recognize the challenges of peer reviewing this work. Currently, the journals serve as the gatekeeper and record of scholarship in the fields of history, yet most do not yet index, review, refer to, incorporate, imprint, or publish anything from the digital medium. Conversely, the independent scholarship historians have produced on the web remains all too often unconcerned with peer review, editorial control, and incorporation into the scholarly record. Because digital work is rarely featured or recognized in the profession's leading journals, among other reasons, younger historians have proven reluctant to develop born digital scholarship and departments have had difficulty evaluating this scholarship for promotion and tenure. By working directly with some leading historical journal editors on this problem, we seek to explore and create initial practices for integrating digital scholarship into the record of professional scholarly activity. And we seek to help authors, reviewers, and editors negotiate a difficult transition. This small but significant step, we believe, will open up many more opportunities for expanding the range and form of digital history work.

Using the Nebraska Digital Workshop in October 2010 as a galvanizing event, we plan to use funds from the NEH Digital Humanities Start-Up Level II Grant to add a pre-workshop meeting, to showcase article-length works of digital history, and to discuss the process for cooperative peer review and imprint publication by interested journals and scholars. Individual journals will work with a Digital History Scholarship Advisory Board to recruit, select, review, and publish born-digital historical scholarship. Because much of this work is already online and depends on idiosyncratic hardware and software arrangements, we do not intend to host the files but instead to index, collect, collate, and imprint the works in a clearinghouse managed by the site Digital History at UNL. Our project aims to establish a process for professional engagement with the digital medium and the increasing opportunities for digital scholarship in the discipline of history.

There is a significant gap in the social and cyber-infrastructure for supporting digital scholarship in history. Young humanities scholars, especially in history, are not experimenting in the digital medium in large part because the wider professional culture has been slow to change. We hope to make it possible for scholars to create, publish, and review digital scholarship and, in effect, to mainstream this work within the disciplines and through the leading professional journals.

The University of Nebraska has helped create a pipeline for digital scholarship through its centers and concentrated initiatives, yet scholars both here and at other comparable institutions often cannot "place" this work with a press or a leading journal. Many scholars at other institutions with less administrative support for digital scholarship remain understandably skittish of involvement in digital scholarship as long as there are few peer reviewed venues for it. The center-based model, while a boon for humanities faculty at George Mason University, the Universities of Virginia, Maryland, Michigan State, Stanford, and Richmond, and a handful of others, does little to support digital scholarship by historians at hundreds of other institutions. In fact, centers can come and go as university finances and leadership change. The recent announcement of the closing of the Virginia Center for Digital History (VCDH) in the summer of 2010 is a case in point. Founded in 1998 by Edward L. Ayers and William G. Thomas as an independent center within the College of Arts and Sciences at the University of Virginia, VDCH has been a world leader in digital history scholarship. Projects developed by VCDH have been awarded

over $500,000 in grants by the NEH and other sources, and its projects have garnered several awards, including the first eLincoln Prize in 2001 from the Gettysburg College and the 2002 James Harvey Robinson prize, awarded by the American Historical Association for the Valley of the Shadow project. Ayers's book based on the research in the Valley of the Shadow project won the Bancroft and the Beveridge Prizes and was a finalist for both the National Book Award and the Pulitzer Prize. Yet, new leadership at the University of Virginia in administration has decided to close VCDH. Center-focused and maintained digital scholarship remains no more integrated into the profession's leading journals than free-floating independent scholarship on the web, and its longevity and security can easily be threatened by administrative changes and budget cuts.

A whole range of social and cultural barriers confront scholars who consider digital scholarship. Their departmental colleagues know little about digital technologies, practices, or methods, and their promotion and tenure committees, outside reviewers, and upper administrations often consider peer-reviewed monographs the sole basis for advancement. While several funding institutions have committed significant resources to the development of digital collections and tools, most prominently the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation and the National Endowment for the Humanities, scholars perceive few options for publishing digital work and university presses and leading journals have been slow to embrace "born digital" scholarship. The journals, *Southern Spaces* (www.southernspaces.org/) and *Vectors* (www.vectorsjournal.org/) are two of the more successful projects, but they publish humanities content broadly defined rather than history specifically.

The current problem is multifaceted—administration leaders often seek to promote digital technologies in teaching or research, yet department tenure committees often rank digital work below a published monograph; libraries have taken the lead in creating digital research platforms for faculty, yet university presses and scholarly journals remain the gold standard for tenure and promotion; senior faculty often feel liberated to embrace experimentation, yet junior faculty often prudently avoid risks. In fact, of all the applications by advanced graduate students, postdocs, and pre-tenure faculty for the previous four years of the Nebraska Digital Workshop, only twelve have been submitted by historians. This is a disconcerting trend. Calls for submissions are advertised in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, *The New York Review of Books*, the *American Historical Association Perspectives*, and online via H-Net. At the recent Council for Library and Information Services (CLIR) meeting at the National Center for Supercomputing Applications at the University of Illinois (February 2009), the slow production of digital history scholarship was the key focus, something that the paucity of applications by historians to participate in the Nebraska Digital Workshop seems to bear out.

We know that time has not solved the problem; indeed, scholars in many humanities departments are as wedded as ever to traditional forms. As digital technologies advance rapidly, as vast repositories of information come online, and as more and more people participate in the digital revolution around the world, humanities scholars face a very important set of decisions about the nature of scholarship and its forms. Yet, few venues exist for scholars to conceive, produce, and distribute their digital work, or to communicate with one another about the forms and practices of the digital medium.

For presses and leading journals the difficulties have been well documented. Both the ACLS Commission on Cyberinfrastructure for the Humanities and Social Sciences Report "Our Cultural Commonwealth" (www.acls.org/cyberinfrastructure/OurCulturalCommonwealth.pdf) and the Ithaka "University Publishing in a Digital Age" Report (www.ithaka.org/strategic-services/university-publishing) demonstrate the challenges university presses have contended with in the last ten years.

These include, most prominently, reduced funding and an ever shrinking margin for experimentation and technological advancement.

Our first principle is that we need to mainstream digital scholarship in the disciplinary practices of historical scholarly communication and, therefore, to create acceptance and raise visibility within the discipline as quickly and as effectively as possible. We propose several initiatives here, each designed to sustain, develop, encourage, and support future digital history scholars and their work, each conceived as a model for further growth and development.

**Institutional Context & History of the Project**

At the University of Nebraska we have taken several key steps to support this project and to provide leadership in this area. First, the Center for Digital Research in the Humanities (CDRH) (cdrh.unl.edu) has provided the key institutional framework for developing digital projects on campus and providing key organizational structures for collaboration among digital scholars. Among other significant activities for this proposal, the Center has issued a white paper guiding humanities departments on promotion and tenure in evaluating digital scholarship (cdrh.unl.edu/articles/promotion_and_tenure.php). Second, tl (cdrh.unl.edu/opportunities/neb_digital_workshop/index.php), an annual venue for young scholars in digital humanities to workshop their research and gain critical engagement from senior scholars in the field. Now in its fourth year, the Nebraska Digital Workshop provides a critical step for pre-tenure digital humanities scholars. Third, at Nebraska the PIs have created one undergraduate and two graduate digital history courses, made Digital History a field of Ph.D. specialization, and ran a major symposium on "History in the Digital Age" (digitalhistory.unl.edu/lectures.php).

In the summer of 2007 we created a state of the field web site on the practice of digital history (digitalhistory.unl.edu). "Digital History" contains a multimedia archive of public lectures by leading figures in digital history, a growing collection of short videotaped interviews with practitioners reflecting on digital history, a collection of graduate student authored tool reviews and digital history project reviews, a series of commissioned essays on key topics in digital history specifically and digital humanities generally, and a blog, "Doing Digital History," that focuses on the methods and practices of digital historians. During the last 12 months, the site has received 30,000 pages loads from 14,300 unique visitors from around the world, including Kenya, Brazil, India, Thailand, Indonesia, Russia, Europe, the United States and Canada to name a few. UNL's John and Catherine Angle Chair in the Humanities funds have supported the initial creation of the site and sustained the ongoing base level editorial work. The NEH Digital Humanities Start-Up Grant monies would significantly supplement this over the course of the eighteen-month grant period and the current level of financial support will continue during and after the grant period. We want to build on these efforts by engaging beyond the University of Nebraska and working with the professional historical associations and individual scholars in the discipline. To do this we need the support of the NEH Start-Up Grant.

**Work Plan**

We plan to work within the disciplinary structures much more intensively and directly to sustain and spread digital scholarship. The emerging field of "Digital Humanities" has attracted scholars interested broadly in humanities computing and provided one form of scholarly organization, but it has not penetrated very deeply into the discipline of history as an subfield or domain. Instead, history has taken its own direction and scholars have pointed to a specialization they are calling "digital history" (see

Daniel J. Cohen & Roy Rosenzweig, *Digital History: A Guide to Gathering, Preserving, and Presenting the Past on the Web* (U. Pennsylvania Press, 2006); "Interchange: The Promise of Digital History," *Journal of American History* 95, no. 2 (September 2008); and "What is Digital History? A Look at Some Exemplar Projects," *Perspectives on History* (May 2009)). The promise and opportunity of digital scholarship has interested many in history, and we intend to organize our workshops, conferences, and digital scholarship in the leading history journals to serve this community of scholars.

The growth of digital history, it should be stated, has been given shape and encouragement most directly by the leading professional associations and the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH). The *American Historical Review* offered a pioneering set of peer-reviewed digital articles, the *Journal of American History* has reviewed leading history web sites, and the NEH has funded important history projects, from The Valley of the Shadow to Zotero, and created a portal for leading digital sites (Edsitement). These steps have provided absolutely critical opportunity for scholars to work in the digital medium.

We plan to extend these efforts and create the means for scholars to stay up on the field and its development by doing the following:

1. Host a meeting titled "Sustaining Digital History" the day prior to the fifth annual Nebraska Digital Workshop in the fall of 2010 and invite potential authors, peer reviewers, and interested scholarly journal editors to participate. Consider the questions of hosting, collecting, imprinting, and indexing digital scholarship with the three groups (authors, peer reviewers, and editors) and examine models for incorporating digital scholarship.

2. Assemble a digital history scholarly journal publishing advisory group that includes key scholars active in the field, such as Edward L. Ayers, Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, Daniel Cohen, Amy Murrell Taylor, William Turkel, and Richard White, and others listed in our directory of digital historians, who might serve as first peer reviewers working with journal editors.

3. Identify, peer review and publish a number of digital history projects in a number of scholarly journals.

4. Expand the Digital History site by building on our directory of digital historians and experimenting with digital "digital history reviews" of projects and tools that take full advantage of the medium. Establish Digital History as the clearinghouse for the best digital history scholarship.

5. Sponsor and organize sessions to share this work at both the AHA and OAH annual meetings during the winter & spring of 2011, with one panel of journal editors on the topic of "the future of the journal in the digital era" and another panel of scholars presenting their own digital history scholarship at each meeting.

We have been in conversation with several journal editors through History Cooperative meetings during the spring and summer of 2009 and have received encouragement from them to pursue this project. Six (6) editors have volunteered to participate in this project, including:

> Robert Schneider, <u>American Historical Review</u>
> Christopher Grasso,  <u>William and Mary Quarterly</u>

Alan Lessoff or John McClymer, <u>Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era</u>
David Lewis, <u>The Western Historical Quarterly</u>
Tamara Gaskell, the <u>Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography</u>
Eliza Canty-Jones, <u>Oregon Historical Quarterly</u>

These editors and journals have agreed to work with us to collaboratively develop models of peer reviewed digital scholarship in their respective areas. Each has agreed to participate in the Workshop and consider ways to integrate digital scholarship into the regular practice of the journal. Differences will no doubt emerge in how to handle born-digital scholarship, but the discussions so far with these editors have given rise to several broad areas of emphasis. First, journals will likely seek to host some born digital content on their respective web sites as well as review and integrate other digital scholarship in their fields. Second, journals will likely consider some form of imprinting and versioning agreements with digital authors (rather than collecting and hosting content) whose work is peer reviewed in their journals. And third, journals will likely take various approaches to integrating digital work into their practice, including indexing reviewed digital works, publishing short overviews in the print edition, and where appropriate incorporating  longer narratives. In addition, journals are expecting in this project to experiment with sponsoring, indexing, and sometimes hosting digital forums (as the JAH has already done) and teaching discussions and modules.

The Digital History web site will serve as a centrally maintained record of these activities and as a portal for peer reviewed scholarship undertaken by and in cooperation with these journals. Videotaped interviews and solicited short essays with workshop participants will be made available on the Digital History website. The enhanced directory of digital historians database will be a valuable resource for making connections and possible collaborations for future projects, panels, and peer review. One of the key features in this effort will be a "digital abstract" for each born digital work the journals publish-- created in collaboration with the author, journal editor, and the Digital History staff--that takes advantage of new media tools to present the salient digital features and convey the contributions the piece makes to digital history in particular and the discipline in general.

The University of Nebraska has made an important commitment to digital scholarship that almost no other Research I university has made: it has hired, tenured, and promoted humanities scholars entirely on the basis of their digital scholarship as research. We seek to extend this leadership. Few research universities have considered digital work at all in hiring, promotion, and tenure in the humanities, and it is no wonder that young scholars have only trickled into the field—they are profoundly aware of the prevailing persistence of academic cultures. The problem we face now is institutional, structural, and social, and all of our efforts are aimed at discovering and lowering these barriers in the discipline of history. We hope to develop these initiatives over the next two years and to provide the soil and sunlight for growing the next generation of digital scholarship.

**Staff**

Douglas Seefeldt will serve as the Director of the project and William G. Thomas as the Co-Director. They will host the "Sustaining Digital History" meeting at UNL in 2010 and work with potential authors and reviewers for the journals. They will organize the sessions at the AHA and the OAH meetings, and they will also direct the Graduate Research Assistant at UNL who will be dedicated to developing the Digital History site, coordinating the Workshop, and creating and maintaining the index of digital history abstracts. The following history journal editors have indicated their intent to

participate in the "Sustaining Digital History" meeting: Robert Schneider, <u>American Historical Review</u>, Christopher Grasso, <u>William and Mary Quarterly</u>, Alan Lessoff & John McClymer, <u>Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era</u>, David Lewis, <u>The Western Historical Quarterly</u>, Tamara Gaskell, the <u>Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography</u>, and Eliza Canty-Jones, <u>Oregon Historical Quarterly</u>.

**Final Product and Dissemination**

The NEH Digital Humanities Start-Up Level II Grant funding will result in a greatly enhanced web site Digital History with its state of the field focus on the practice of digital history serving as a clearinghouse for peer review and publication of digital scholarship that is disseminated through participating history journals. The fall 2010 workshop on "Sustaining Digital History" and the sponsored sessions at the major disciplinary conferences will also support the continuing development and dissemination of digital history via our professional associations. The ongoing and immediate publication of some digital scholarship in the six professional journals will disseminate our work into the profession broadly and integrate digital material more directly into the practices of the profession. We will produce a white paper, published on Digital History, and linked to the journals which will explore the key issues raised in the Start-Up effort.

**Biographies**

Douglas Seefeldt is an Assistant Professor of History and Faculty Fellow at the Center for Digital Research in the Humanities at UNL. He teaches 20th-century U.S. history and specializes in the North American West, Environmental History and Digital History. He took his Ph.D. From Arizona State University in 2001 and spent three years at the University of Virginia as a Woodrow Wilson Academic Postdoctoral Fellow in the Humanities at the Virginia Center for Digital History and Media Studies Program and the last two of those as the Director of UVa's Lewis & Clark Bicentennial Project. His published work, both print and digital, focuses on the intersections of landscape and memory in the American West. He is co-editor, with Jeffrey L. Hantman, and Peter S. Onuf, of the book of collected essays, *Across the Continent: Jefferson, Lewis and Clark and the Making of Americ*a (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2005; paper, 2006). Doug has created the thematic digital archive project, *Biddle Edition Archive* (www2.vcdh.virginia.edu/lewisandclark/biddle/splash.html), and most recently the digital history project, *Envisaging the West: Thomas Jefferson and the Roots of Lewis and Clark* (jeffersonswest.unl.edu). Seefeldt has recently returned his attention to the mid-nineteenth-century Mormon frontier and resumed work on a thematic digital archive project titled *"Horrible Massacre of Emigrants!!": The Mountain Meadows Massacre in Public Discourse* (mountainmeadows.unl.edu), and is currently working on a book manuscript titled "'Let the Book of the Past Be Closed': The Mountain Meadows Massacre and Public Memory."


William G. Thomas, III is the John and Catherine Angle Chair in the Humanities and Professor of History at UNL. He teaches 19th-century U.S. history and specializes in Civil War, the U.S. South, and in Digital History. He earned his Ph.D. in History at the University of Virginia. From 1998 to 2005 he served as the founding Director of the Virginia Center for Digital History at the University of Virginia. He was the Project Manager of The Valley of the Shadow project at the Institute for Advanced Technology in the Humanities at U.Va. from 1996 to 1998. Thomas is a Lincoln Prize Laureate in 2001 from the Civil War Institute at Gettysburg College for the Valley of the Shadow project (valley.lib.virginia.edu/) with Edward L. Ayers and Anne S. Rubin, and with them was awarded the

James Harvey Robinson Prize from the American Historical Association in recognition of the project as an outstanding contribution to the teaching of history. Thomas has recently been awarded a Digital Innovation Fellowship in 2008 from the American Council of Learned Societies. He was awarded a fellowship from the British Association of American Studies for 2008-09 and was the Visiting Professor of North American Studies at the Eccles Centre for American Studies at the British Library. He is currently working on a book titled "The Civil War and the Making of Modern America" (Yale University Press) and a digital project on "Railroads and the Making of Modern America," a web-delivered set of sources on railroads, technologies, culture, and social change (railroads.unl.edu/).