THE PULSE

Thoughts and opinions on the shaping of history

Digital History Round-Up

David Brandon Dennis

Two years ago, the editorial board of the *New England Journal of History*, along with our sponsors at the New England History Teachers Association (NEHTA), made the decision to transition away from traditional print to fully digitized publication. In part, this decision reflected good stewardship of financial resources, but it also aimed to position the *Journal* as the centerpiece for a broader set of exciting new digital history initiatives. Our new website not only provides areas for members and non-members to access *Journal* content, it also has a reinvigorated blog, an extensive contributor biography database, a featured article section with author interviews, and a "citizen historians" section for digital history projects that aim to engage readers, teachers, and students in history content generation. Two such projects are already underway. The first, "History in Your Backyard," which has already gone live, is a video series that calls on citizen historians to research, create, and submit short local history films for publication. The second, which is still in development, aims to enlist teachers and their students to contribute content for an open access, curated primary source archive. This approach allows students to move beyond simply using historical resources and gain skills in history content creation. We completed the technical transition for digitization in August 2020 and published our first fully digital issue in Fall 2020.

To commemorate *NEJH*'s transition into the digital history world, I have put together the following round-up with brief reviews of my top ten digital history websites. Before we get to that, though, some definitions might be in order. First, what is digital history? Writing for the American Historical Association's *Perspectives* magazine, Douglas Seefeldt and William G. Thomas defined it as follows: "Digital history might be understood broadly as an approach to examining and representing the past that works with the new communication technologies of the computer, the internet network, and software systems."[1] Looking more closely, however, digital history encompasses a variety

of genres. The Organization of American Historians lists twelve digital history genres in its guidelines for digital history reviews: archive, essay/exhibit/digital narrative, teaching resource, tool for generating or accessing content, gateway/clearinghouse to other digital history resources, journal/blog/publication, professional/institutional site, digital community, podcasts, audio/application-based tours, games, and data sets.[2] Many, but not all, of these genres are represented in my top ten list. And, as the OAH also notes, digital history websites often contain more than one genre, which is certainly true of those on my list. If you are interested in learning more about digital history, its tools, and its uses, the Roy Rosenzweig Center for History and New Media at George Mason University has excellent resources for historians, curators, and educators.

My digital history round-up is not meant to be representative; indeed, it is a subjective list that reflects my own teaching and research interests, as well as my personal network (thank you David Staley, Ray Ball, Colby Malouf, Lyra Totten-Naylor, Allie Dennis, and Brandy Kemp for your suggestions). I chose not to feature well-known sites like Khan Academy or The Crash Course because my goal is to highlight lesser-known, high quality projects based at educational institutions. In addition, I kept an eye out for sites that I have used or could imagine using in the classroom. So, this list is not meant to be definitive. Instead, I invite readers to submit their own top ten lists, which we will consider for publication as a guest contribution on the *NEJH* blog. If you would like to submit your list, please email it with a brief one-paragraph description and review for each site, as well as your resume to editors@nejh.org (attn: David Dennis). In this way, we can continue to build the digital community of practice among history researchers and educators that the *Journal*'s digitization makes possible.

1. <u>Digital Scholarship Lab</u> - **University of Richmond**

The Digital Scholarship Lab (DSL) is an impressive collection of data visualization projects created by a team at the University of Richmond. Its projects deal entirely with U.S. history, often but not always focusing on the history of the South. They take large sets of historical data and provide compelling tools for visualizing broad social, cultural, and political developments. For example, one project, "Not Even Past: Social Vulnerability and the Legacy of Redlining," shows where redlining (the racially motivated denial of mortgage loans) in urban neighborhoods during the 1930s correlates with high levels of inequality today. Specifically, the project takes the Home Owners Loan Corporation (HOLC) scores from the 1930s, the key tool for redlining, and maps them onto the Center for Disease Control's current Social Vulnerability Index (SVI) for those same neighborhoods. The user can select from 254 U.S. cities. Clicking on a neighborhood on the city's map brings up a visually appealing pathway representation between the 1930s HOLC score and today's SVI measurement. Pathways that are horizontal indicate historical continuity of relative privilege or lack thereof. Those that fall from left to right indicate a neighborhood's decline in privilege, and those the rise from left to right indicate neighborhoods that have experienced gentrification. Other DSL projects highlight the history of foreign-born migration to the U.S. at the county level, historical patterns of voting by House of Representatives district, migration patterns in the South from 1790-2020, among many

others. The visual appeal and functionality of this site make it a must-see for anyone interested in U.S. history.

2. <u>German History in Documents and Images</u> – **German Historical Institute**

  The German History in Documents and Images is the best digital primary source archive on the web. Begun in 2003 and funded by the German Historical Institute in Washington D.C., it is a powerful tool for teaching courses on World, German, Reformation, Cold War, and Holocaust history. I have used it in my courses for over a decade. The collection is neatly organized according to eras of German history from 1500 to the present. Each era contains a historical introduction and bibliography written by top experts, a collection of documents, a collection of images, and a collection of maps relevant to that era. All documents are translated into English. All documents and images, furthermore, are organized into categories such as "foreign policy" or "gender." In addition, each document, image, and map is curated with a brief contextual paragraph written by the editors. This organizational style makes it particularly easy for novice learners to use when conducting independent primary research. When teaching a subject not related to German history, I often find myself wishing for similarly organized resources for other topics.

3. <u>Slave Voyages</u> – **Rice University**
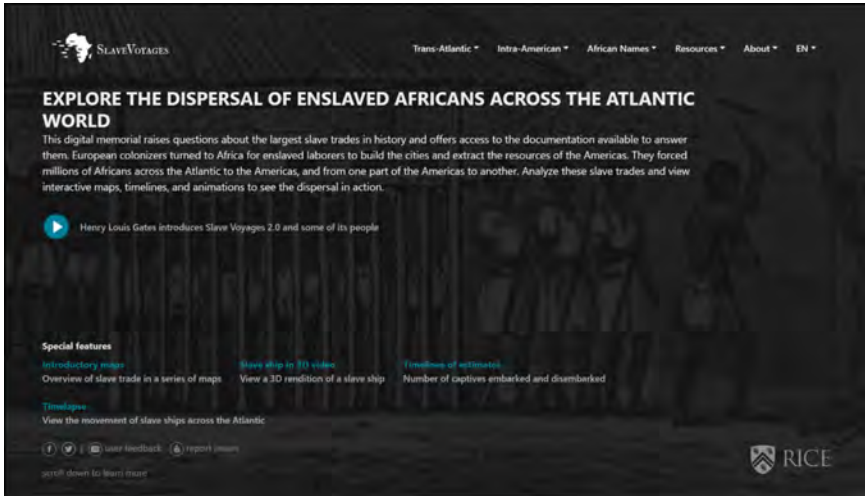

      Slave Voyages is a powerful database tool focused on the history of the slave trade to and within the Americas. It is housed at Rice University but was built through collaboration among numerous historians, librarians, cartographers, and web designers and sponsored by Emory University, the University of California Irvine, the University of California Santa Cruz, and Harvard University. The site features three easy-to-use databases: (1) the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database, (2) the Intra-American Slave Trade Database, and (3) the African Names Database. The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database, for example, contains records of over 36,000 slaving voyages between 1514 and 1866. Users can look at data for each voyage record, access summary statistical tables, see charts maps, and timelines. The most compelling tool is a timelapse interactive map that allows users to visualize the voyages of over 31,000 slave ships by nationality from 1660 to 1866. The site also features introductory essays on the slave trade, image galleries, and lesson plans for teachers.

4. <u>Relaciones Geográficas</u> – **University of Texas Austin**

  Relaciones Geográficas is a digital archive and mapping tool created by the Benson Latin American Collection at the University of Texas at Austin to visualize the collection of historical reports and local maps from New Spain known as the *Relaciones Geográficas*. These were produced by a vast geographical and cartographical study undertaken by Spain to map its growing empire during the 1570s and 1580s. The endeavor relied heavily on indigenous knowledge in the Americas and many of the maps were drawn by indigenous artists using local cartographic techniques. After a brief overview of the historical context, users explore the collection using an interactive modern map of Mexico and Central America by clicking on the location where the historical report and local map were created. There are 71 records, about half of which contain a historic local map. Some of the reports are transcribed, but, while it appears that the Benson Collection intends to translate them into English, they are currently available only in the original Spanish. The local maps lend themselves nicely to visual analysis for non-Spanish speakers; it quickly becomes clear quickly artists relied on European mapmaking conventions and which used local indigenous styles.

5.   <u>National Security Archive</u> – **George Washington University**
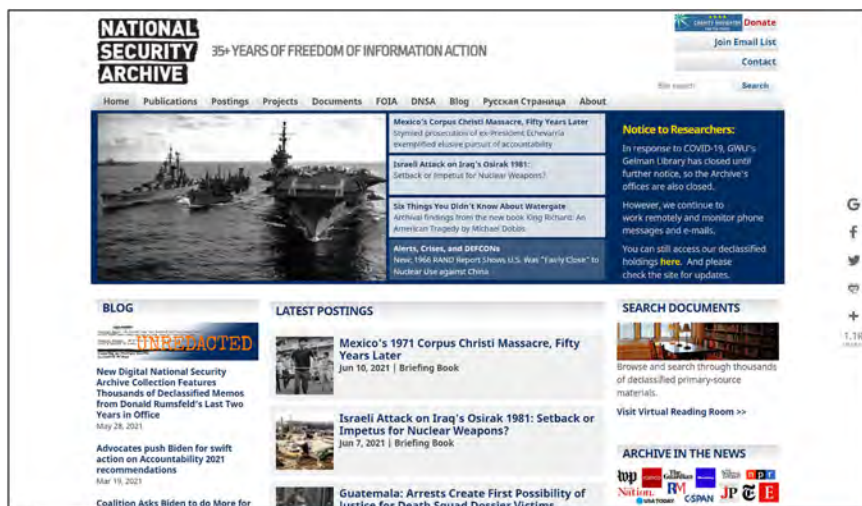
 I can think of few digital history sites that are more significant to advancing freedom of information than the National Security Archive based at George Washington University. Part primary source archive and part advocacy organization, the organization seeks to ensure that significant classified U.S. government documents (since World War II) pertaining to national security are released for public review as mandated by the Freedom of Information Act. The website contains considerable educational and advocacy information on the subject of freedom of information, but at its heart is the archive of declassified documents. Users can search the archive in a "virtual reading room" or browse specific collections (known as "Projects") such as the "Guatemala Project" or the "Nuclear Vault." At first glance, the site seems most relevant to students or scholars of U.S. foreign relations or the Cold War, and it is. However, I have found it to be an equally invaluable resource when teaching about Latin America or the Middle East, given the significance of U.S. foreign policy to the history of those regions in the 20th century. For example, I always assign excerpts from the CIA's secret history on the 1953 overthrow of Iranian prime minister Mohammad Mosaddegh in my Modern Middle East course. Each "Project" also includes relevant works of scholarship, videos, news reports, and a blog.

6. <u>Witches</u> **– University of Edinburgh**
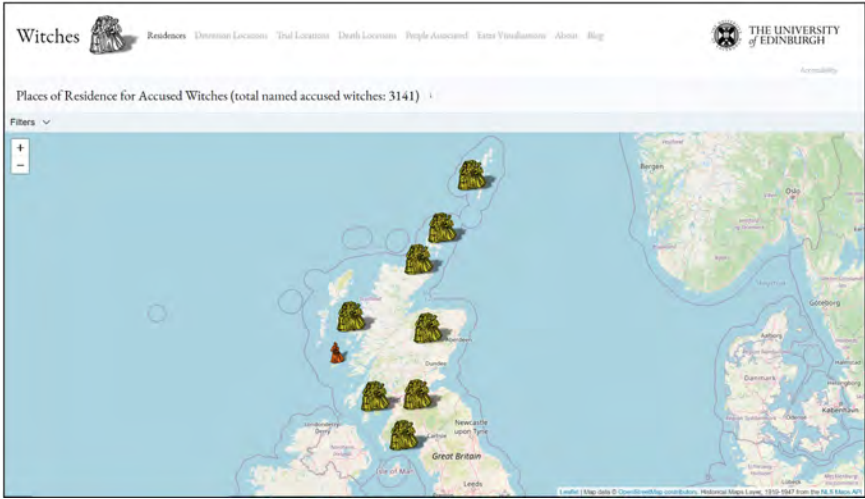
   Witches is a small but significant data visualization tool pro-
vided by the University of Edinburgh. It provides interactive maps to
envision a wide array of historical, demographic, and legal data from
the Witchcraft Survey Database, which contains all surviving records
of people accused of witchcraft in Scotland from 1563 to 1736 (over
3000 records). Maps include the residences of the accuses, where they
were held in detention, where they died, trial locations, and types of
torture used, among others. This scope of the website is relatively nar-
row, but it lends itself well as a case study for the European Witch
Craze of the early modern period.

7. <u>Cuba in the Classroom Digital Archive</u> – **University of Alaska Anchorage**

This digital archive hosted by the University of Alaska Anchorage focuses on Colonial Cuba. The documents are organized by topic, including Havana town council minutes, convents and monasteries, slavery, piracy, global economies and conflicts, early modern medical practices, and Cuban newspapers. Each topic has an introduction, and each document is translated into English. In most cases a photo of the original document is included. The archive is useful for courses in world, Atlantic, and Colonial Latin American history. While this digital project is relatively narrow in scope, what stands out about it is the way in which it was created through collaboration between a faculty member and undergraduate students. Historian Ray Ball located the unpublished documents through archival research in Havana. She then assembled a team of students, some of whom had also traveled to Cuba for study, and the team transcribed, translated, and contextualized the documents. They also assembled the website. The team then co-authored a peer-reviewed paper about the process of creating a digital archive through undergraduate research, which was published in the *Bulletin for Spanish and Portuguese Historical Studies*.[3] The model of faculty and student collaboration demonstrated in this article helped to inspire the digital primary source archive project that is currently under development for the *NEJH* website.

8. Influenza Encyclopedia – **University of Michigan**
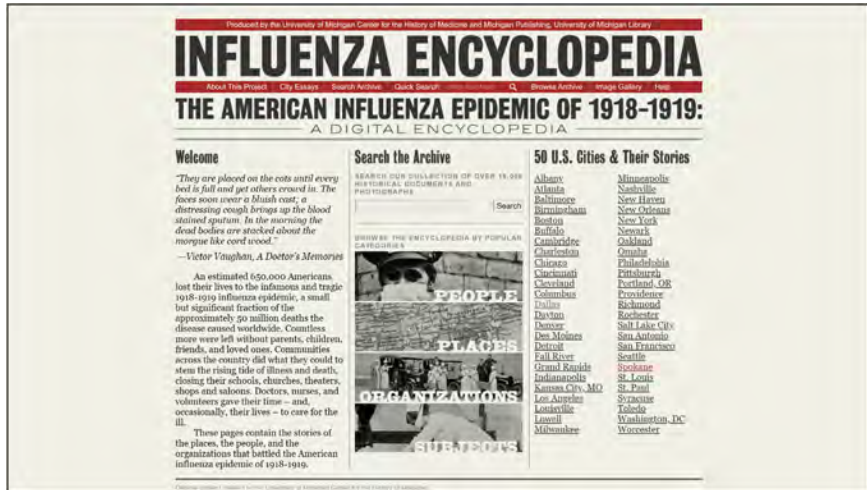
Few historical topics have garnered as much popular interest during the COVID-19 Pandemic than the Influenza Pandemic of 1918. The Influenza Encyclopedia, created by the University of Michigan Center for the History of Medicine, in the definitive digital resource on the event as it happened in the U.S. In addition to the wonderful encyclopedia articles on individual cities, people, organizations, and relevant topics, the website has a searchable archive that contains over 16,000 historical documents and images. The archive and encyclopedia articles focus on historical newspaper coverage at the local level of the Influenza Pandemic. This focus on journalism is made even more clear by the website's design, which looks like an old newspaper.

9. <u>World War II Alaska</u> **- Holly Miowak Guise, University of New Mexico**


There are countless digital resources about World War II on the internet. One of the most unique and refreshingly different is World War II Alaska. This website was created by Historian Holly Miowak Guise, who teaches at the University of New Mexico. It focuses on the experiences of Alaska Native elders and veterans who were stationed in Alaska during the War. These experiences come to life through oral history videos. It reminds us of the Japanese military actions in the Aleutian Islands and highlights the forced internment of Unangax̂ people by the U.S. government during the War. These stories are not included in standard narratives of World War II history, which makes this gem of a website event more significant.

10. <u>Seth Dixon's Scoop. It!</u> **– Seth Dixon, Rhode Island College**
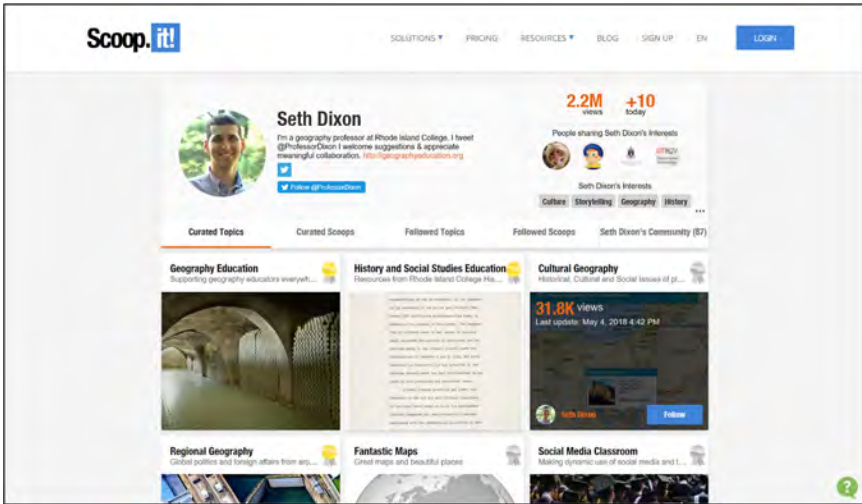

Seth Dixon's Scoop. it! site is the one digital content gateway/ clearing house that made my list. Dixon is a geographer who teaches at Rhode Island College. The site includes channels on geography education, history and social studies education, cultural geography, regional geography, maps, and social media in the classroom, among other topics. Each channel contains a host of educational content and resources. Given the focus on geography, history, and social studies, the site is a wonderful resource for middle school and high school teachers. It has certainly garnered a lot of public attention with over 2.2 million views.

Honorable Mention: <u>Digital Aponte</u> – **New York University**
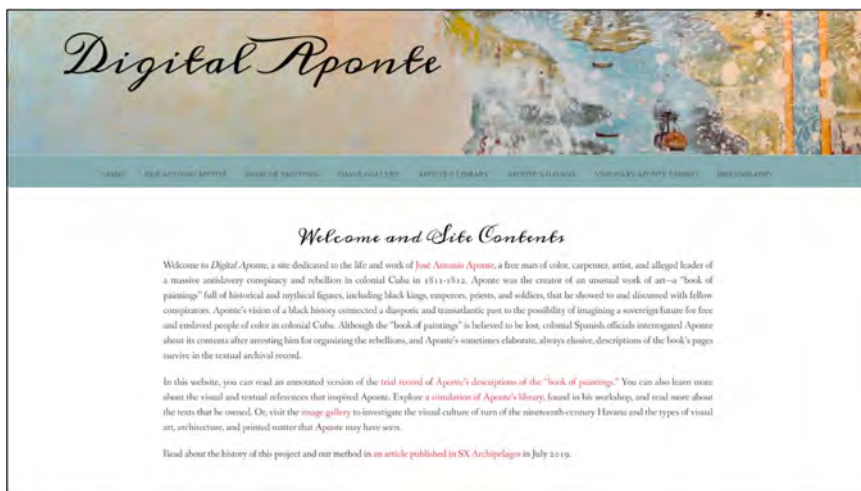
  Digital Aponte tells the story of José Antonio Aponte a free man of color who was accused of planning a large antislavery rebellion in Cuba in 1811-1812. He also was the creator of a fascinating work of art he called the "book of paintings," which celebrated black history and projected a future of black freedom and political agency in the Caribbean. Although the book is now lost, Aponte described it in detail to Spanish authorities during his trial for insurrection. Digital Aponte provides an annotated version of his trial transcript, as a way to capture the imagery in the lost book through its creator's descriptions. The site was built by a team of scholars based mostly at New York University. While the trial transcript has been transcribed and annotated, it has not been translated into English, making it difficult to use for novice learners who do not read Spanish. Still, the website includes plenty of content available to non-Spanish speakers, including an image gallery, an essay about Aponte's library, a map of places in colonial Havana that were significant in his life, and a useful bibliography.

Honorable Mention: <u>The New Bostonians</u> – **Boston College High School**
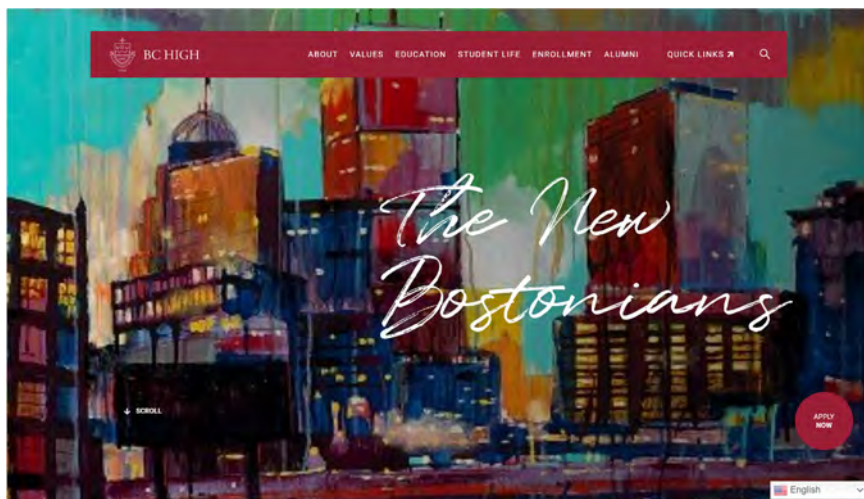
      Roy Zhu, a student and Begley Scholar at Boston College High School completed this digital history website in 2020 under the guidance and mentorship of faculty and staff at the school. The site maps the historical and cultural geographies of four often-overlooked immigrant groups that the City of Boston has called the "New Bostonians," namely the Cape Verdeans, Chinese, Dominicans, and Haitians who call the city home. The project uses data from the City of Boston and the U.S. Census Bureau, interviews with community members, and neighborhood photographs to situate these communities in the urban space of Boston via Google Maps. It is particularly useful as a tour guide resource for those looking to explore Boston history beyond the Freedom Trail. Even more significant, however, it highlights the possibilities and challenges for students aiming to create digital history projects as part of their educational experience. These are discussed in depth in an <u>interview with Zhu and his mentors</u> that was recently published on the *NEJH* blog.

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Notes

1. Douglas Seefeldt and William G. Thomas, "What is Digital History?" *Perspectives* 47, no. 5 (2009), accessed 11 June 2021, www.historians.org/publications-and-directories/perspectives-on-history/may-2009/what-is-digital-history.

2. "Digital History Reviews," Journal of American History Online, Organization of American Historians, accessed 11 June 2021, jah.oah.org/submit/digital-history-reviews/.

3. Rachael Ball, Caroline Streff, Brittney Anderson, Lauren Caraghar, and John Macy, "From the Spanish Atlantic Archives to the Classroom in the Arctic: Perspectives on Linking Digital Projects and Undergraduate Research in History," *Bulletin for Spanish and Portuguese Historical Studies* 43, no. 1 (2018): 70-93.