Going Digital:
Presenting UT Campus History in the 21st Century

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Background

This project continues to explore the feasibility and challenges of using a digital platform to promote and present archive-based research, while also considering the ways people interact with history, especially on digital platforms. The Campus History site features an interactive, geo-temporal map exhibit that combines historical maps and materials from the UT Archives housed at the Dolph Briscoe Center for American History. Since 2015, the project has moved from a basic Omeka platform to a customized site that enhances the functionality of the map exhibit. Thus, besides serving as an example of a creative use of UT's archival materials, the site also identifies and provides insight into the challenges of communicating history in the 21st century.

Research Questions

1. How can digital platforms present archival research in an interactive, user-friendly format?
2. How can this project increase knowledge of the UT campus and accessibility of primary sources?
3. What are the challenges and limitations of presenting history digitally?

Methods

Liberal Arts Instructional Technology Services, particularly Mr. Stacy Vlasits, worked closely with me to build the current version of this site. The site's map exhibit, which is the primary focus of the project, is modeled on the National Mall's digital history site. Historical maps from 1923, 1941, and 1961, as well as a current map, have been layered and geo-referenced. On these maps, digitized primary and secondary sources from the Briscoe Center, such as photographs and letters, appear as pins that viewers can click to learn more. Experimenting with the site's organization and aesthetic has been important in maximizing user experience and understanding challenges.

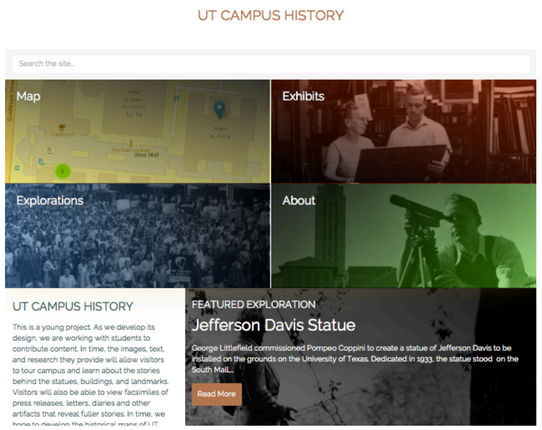

Figure 1: Front page of the Campus History site, which has four main sections.

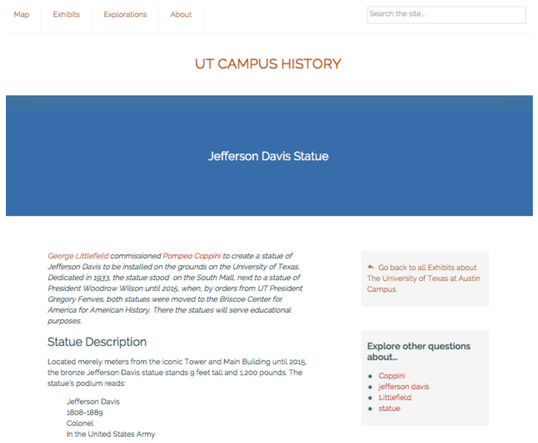

Figure 2: Example of a written and archive-based exhibit that complements the map exhibit

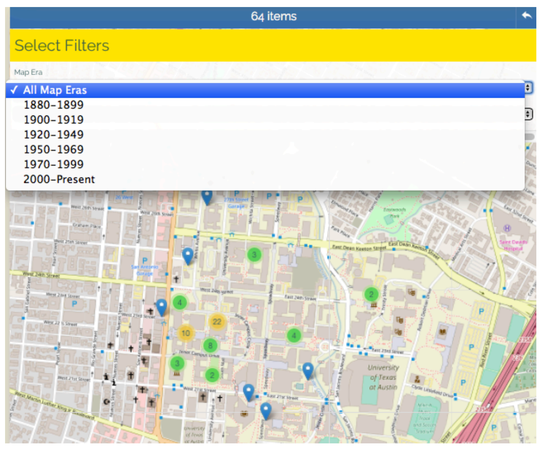

Figure 3: Front page of the map exhibit, which allows visitors to select a time period to explore.

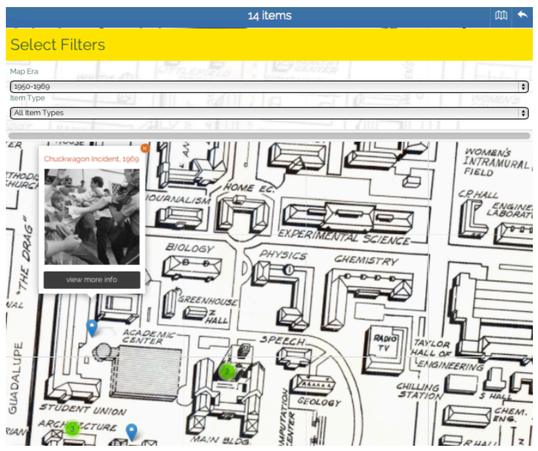

Figure 4: 1961 map of the UT campus, which features 14 primary sources, as represented by pins.

Findings

The project's interdisciplinary and collaborative nature has revealed the importance of developing an intuitive site navigation system that centers on history and primary sources and their display in the map exhibit. The current site, built in 2017, sets these sources into their time and geographic space, which is a critical element in understanding and interpreting history. As a result of the new focus on the map exhibit, the project has also shifted from its earlier emphasis, that of featuring buildings, statues, and landmarks, to people, places, and events at UT. Together, these elements allow us to consider and enhance the presentation of history, while also examining the development of UT. In addition, maintaining a rational and consistent format is necessary to ensure cohesion and clarity for viewers. Pinpointing an area of focus—in this case, the map exhibit—is also important, considering this project's broad potential and the sheer number of archival materials available.

Conclusion

The Campus History site serves as a prototype for the ways in which students can present historical and archival research in a digital format. Digital history brings the advantage of increased accessibility. It allows users to interact with layered historical maps and archival materials with a high level of flexibility. Visitors can consult the site to learn more about UT's rich history, and students can build the site while developing valuable digital skills. In this way, the Campus History site can serve as both a teaching and learning tool. The continued development and maintenance of the site will rely on the expertise of archivists, map specialists, and software developers, as well as a team of students and faculty dedicated to further expanding the site by providing more content and context for specific people, places, and events at UT.

Acknowledgements

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References

The UT Archives, Dolph Briscoe Center for American History. The University of Texas at Austin. Austin, Texas.

Historical Campus Maps, Perry-Castañeda Library Map Collection. The University of Texas at Austin. Austin, Texas.

Website

Visit the site and explore the map exhibit at campushistory.la.utexas.edu