

# Improving Access to Special Collections through Collaborative Digital Scholarship

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## Project Background

- ◆ The Seward Family Digital Archive (2012-present) works to digitize, transcribe, annotate, and TEI encode correspondence from the Seward family in the William Henry Seward papers, housed in the department of Rare Books, Special Collections, and Preservation at the University of Rochester
- ◆ Project members
  - ◆ Library staff from Rare Books, Special Collections, and Preservation, Digital Scholarship Lab, and Information Discovery Team
  - ◆ History department faculty, graduate students, and undergraduate students from a variety of disciplines
  - ◆ Volunteers from local retirement communities
- ◆ In 2014, a project archivist was hired to create a new EAD and DACS-compliant finding aid for the Seward papers in order to increase discoverability of the entire collection and aid in finding family correspondence for the project

## William Henry Seward Papers

- ◆ Collection spans 1776-1978 and consists of correspondence, public papers related to Seward's terms as governor, senator, and secretary of state, financial and legal papers, personal papers, photographs, and family papers
- ◆ At 32 file drawers, 139 boxes, 54 bound volumes, 3600 pamphlets, and 1 flat file it is one of the largest and most frequently accessed collections in the department
- ◆ The family correspondence being digitized for the Seward Family Digital Archive accounts for approximately 6% of the collection's correspondence, or 2% of the entire collection



## Finding Aid

- ◆ Old finding aid
  - ◆ Last updated in the 1960s
  - ◆ Description incorrect, incomplete, or inconsistent
  - ◆ Difficult to navigate
  - ◆ Family correspondence unindexed
- ◆ New finding aid
  - ◆ EAD and DACS compliant
  - ◆ Item and folder level description
  - ◆ Navigational bar anchored to left expands and collapses series and sub-series
  - ◆ Contains links to Seward Family Digital Archive website

The William Henry Seward papers finding aid is being enhanced. A digital humanities project is digitizing, transcribing, and annotating the Seward family correspondence.  
How can we bring these two projects together?

## Solutions

- ◆ Project archivist serves as liaison to Seward Family Digital Archive
  - ◆ Attends meetings, develops workflows, provides collection expertise, primary contact for all communication
  - ◆ Assists with training/orientation of new students and volunteers
- ◆ Create digital links between the new finding aid and the project website
  - ◆ Item level description enables links to digitized letters and biographical entries hosted on the Seward Family Digital Archive website
  - ◆ Programmer created algorithm that matches names in the project's personography database to names in the finding aid
  - ◆ Archivist checks matches for accuracy and provides feedback about structure and design

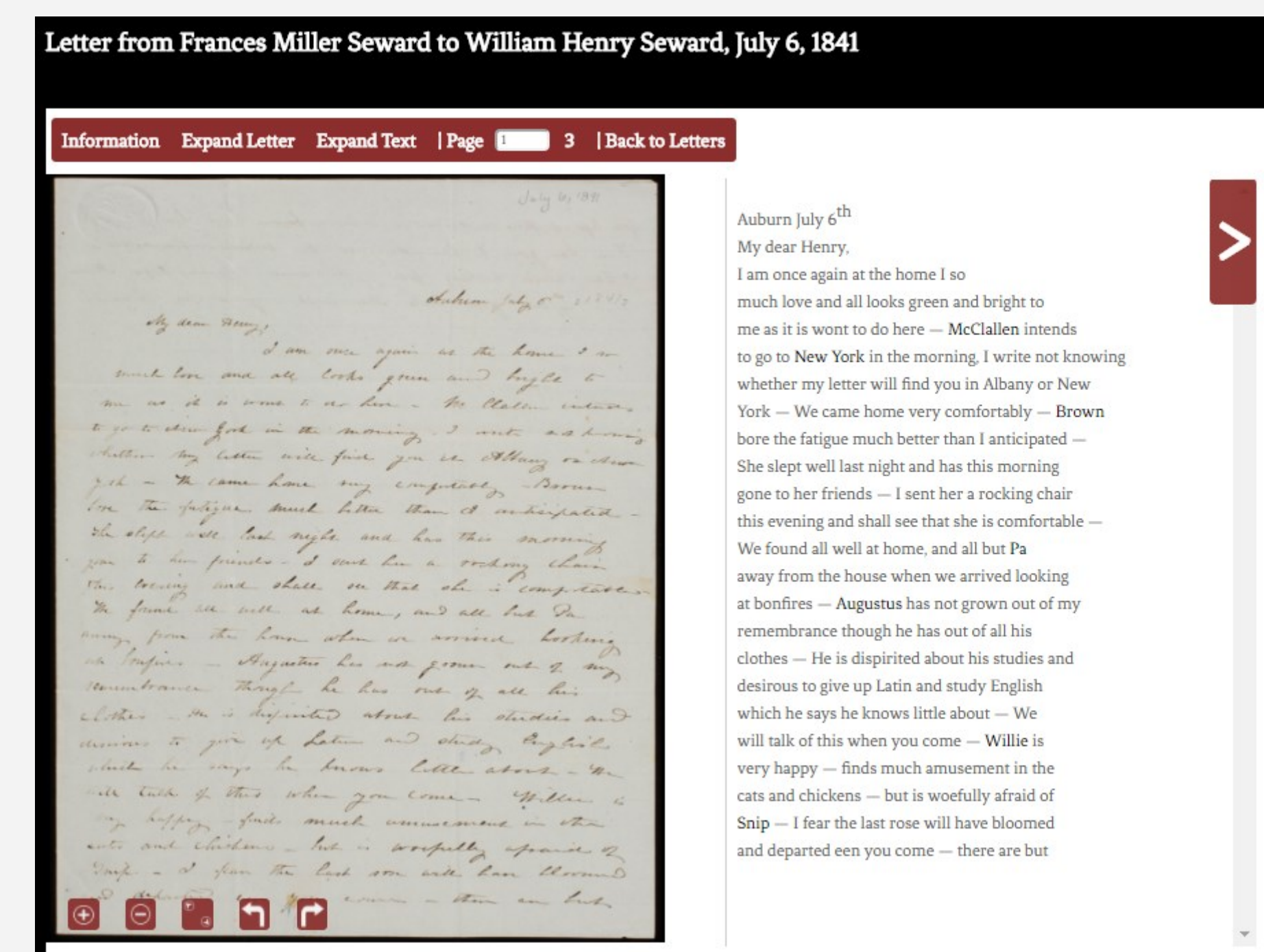
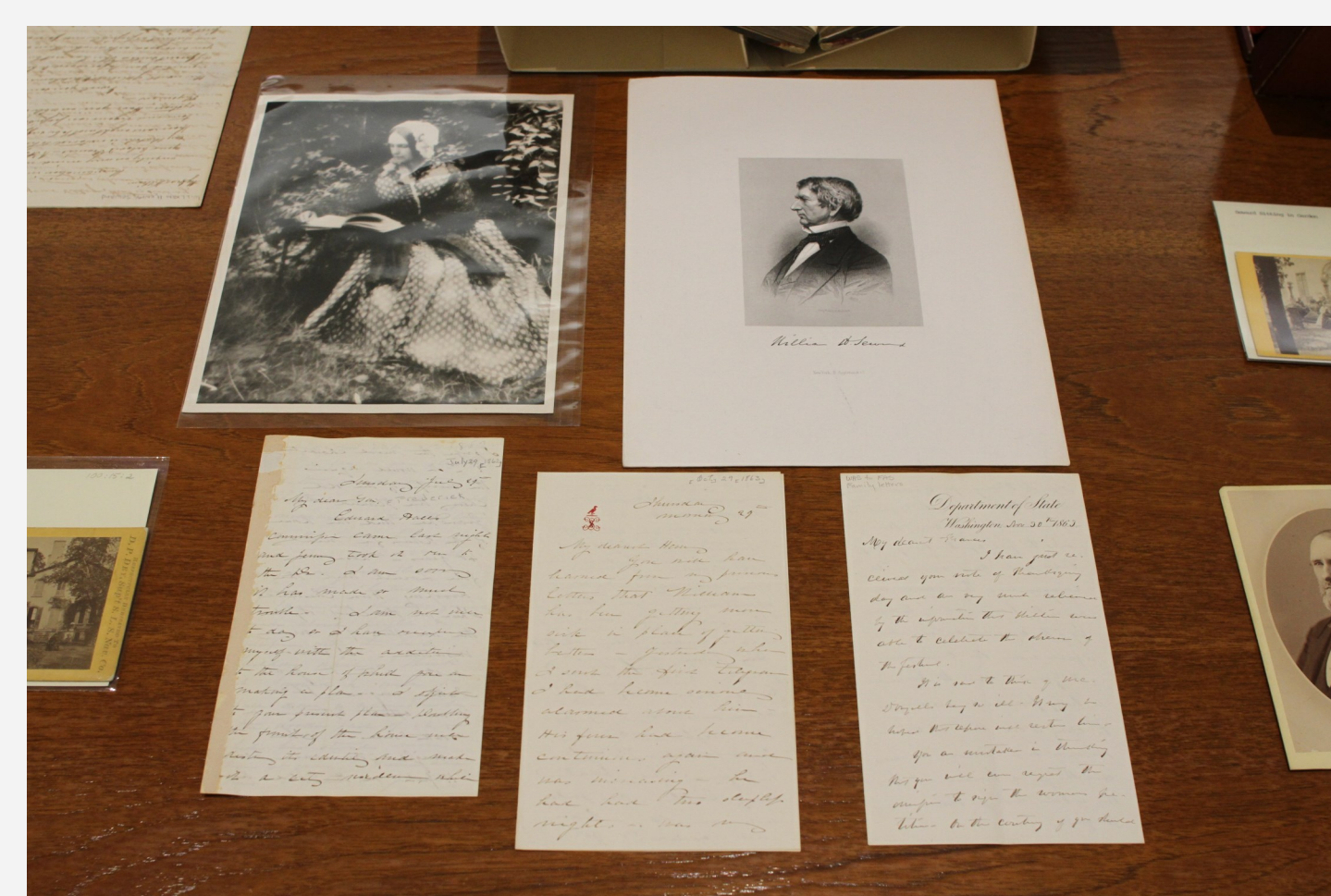
Folder	Description
Folder 16	William Henry Seward to Augustus Henry Seward, 1837-1871, undated
	1837-1854
	March 8, 1837
	March 29, 1837
	August 27, 1843
	March 11, 1844
	December 11, 1844
	December 15, 1844
	June 9, 1845
	May 29, 1846
	February 4, 1847
	April 11, 1847
	June 7, 1847
	October 10, 1848
	September 3, 1849
	October 22, 1850
	Also addressed to Seward's nephew Clarence Armstrong Seward.
	August 7, 1852
	December 1852
	July 15, 1854

### Person Information

Person	Birth	Death
Frances Adeline Seward (Miller)	10/05/1833	02/16/1935
Birth: 9-24-1805	1/01/1837	3/19/1837
Death: 6-21-1865	11/09/1838	9/24/1839
Nickname: Mother	-/-/1839	5/04/1840
	6/30/1840	9/18/1840
	10/10/1840	10/13/1840
	10/14/1840	10/16/1840
	10/21/1840	2/01/1841
	2/03/1841	3/01/1841
	7/12/1841	7/18/1841
	8/21/1841	

## Outcomes

- ◆ Finding aid serves as a comprehensive reference tool and sets the foundation for future digitization projects
- ◆ Website [sewardproject.org](http://sewardproject.org) launched in April 2016 and currently includes digital images, transcriptions, and annotations for approximately 2000 family letters spanning 1815-1874
- ◆ Collaborative model, digital platforms, and code serve as framework for future digital scholarship projects
- ◆ Students become fully immersed in the correspondence and their excitement spreads to friends, creating learning opportunities and positive associations with the department
- ◆ Project received local and regional media attention, additional national grants, and resulted in donations from alumni to fund more student employees



## Successes

- ◆ Experiential learning opportunities for students across disciplines
- ◆ Providing less restricted physical access to the collection for student transcribers
- ◆ Presence of archivist to provide suggestions for descriptive practices and knowledge of collection
- ◆ Project supported by library administration through allocation of staff time and resources for long-term storage and administration of website
- ◆ Frequent communication with project managers to discuss progress, needs, and goals



## Challenges

- ◆ Frequent turnover of graduate and undergraduate project staff
- ◆ Lack of documentation of practices and procedures in early years of project
- ◆ Metadata altered by project without communicating changes to archivist
- ◆ Differences in standards and expectations between archivists and historians
- ◆ Scope creep—changing definition of Seward family and friends



## Suggestions for Future Projects

- ◆ Get students involved in the work – create class assignments based on transcription, annotation, or coding
- ◆ Take an active role. Don't merely supply materials, be vocal in how they are being used and take advantage of associated opportunities for community outreach
- ◆ Train archivists in digital humanities in order to communicate more effectively with programmers, staff, and scholars in the field
  - ◆ Become familiar with various platforms, programs, apps, and trends
- ◆ Make sure an archivist is on board to participate in project planning and advocate for how the project can be used to improve metadata, description, instruction, or outreach for the collection