

Journal of Contemporary Archival Studies

Volume 6

Article 29

2019

Exploring Rockingham County's Past: Recapturing Local History and Promoting Accessibility

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Recommended Citation

Heslin, Kayla (2019) "Exploring Rockingham County's Past: Recapturing Local History and Promoting Accessibility," *Journal of Contemporary Archival Studies*: Vol. 6 , Article 29.

Available at: <https://elischolar.library.yale.edu/jcas/vol6/iss1/29>

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Cover Page Footnote

ERP contributors: Craig Schaefer, Tristan Nelson, Kayla Heslin, Kevin Hegg, Kevin Borg, Selena St. Andre, and Chaz Haywood

EXPLORING ROCKINGHAM COUNTY'S PAST: RECAPTURING LOCAL HISTORY AND PROMOTING ACCESSIBILITY

In 2008, Charles (Chaz) Haywood became the circuit court clerk of Rockingham County, Virginia. Almost immediately, he began implementing new policies and practices aimed toward better serving the county community. One such practice came through his attention to, and care for, the collection of historical documents housed inside the courthouse. He recognized the potential stories that lie within the confines of the courthouse's walls, waiting to be uncovered. A major issue presented itself: how could he bring aging, delicate documents to the public without threatening their integrity and preservation?

Additionally, the courthouse could not physically sustain large swathes of researchers visiting each day. The small, nineteenth-century building is not equipped to serve as a large archive constantly open to the public, nor does it have the staff members necessary to effectively run such an operation. With such a dilemma, Haywood appealed to James Madison University (JMU) and offered graduate students within its history department the opportunity of a lifetime. Thus, Exploring Rockingham's Past (ERP) was born.

Essentially, ERP seeks to identify, digitize, and make widely accessible, via an online platform, records from the courthouse. Through this local collaboration of the digital humanities, the history department, and the circuit court, the project hopes to highlight long-forgotten documents, cultivate new perspectives, and develop new interpretations of history. The following discussion presents how this cultural institution manages and provides access to its materials through nontraditional formats, and how this project seeks to move forward with greater accessibility and discoverability through improved online finding aids for new and existing collections.

From Chaos to Coherence

The state of the circuit court's records in 2008 could only be described as abysmal, not through the fault of one individual but through many years of neglect. Essentially, everything was kept, and while I recognize that some information should be retained due to its intrinsic value, I also know that not everything should be maintained. Some records have little use beyond what they were primarily created for, and as keepers we are forced to acknowledge this. Having too much extraneous "stuff" can be just as detrimental as keeping too little. It boils down to this: if the records are not looked after, there is no use in keeping them. They decay and deteriorate, rendering them useless.

Unfortunately, the courthouse records were neither organized nor well-preserved. Rooms were filled with file cabinet after file cabinet and box stacked upon box. Finding anything would have been practically impossible, and public access to these documents was out of the question. Over two centuries of Rockingham County's past sat collecting dust and could do little to inform the community of its history. Again, blame should not be laid on the clerks of the circuit court. None of this was intentional. On the contrary, it was clear the records held some significance and importance; otherwise, they would have been destroyed. Retention schedules do dictate some of the decisions made on what is to be kept permanently and what may be disposed of, but even with

such schedules in place, *how* the records should be held is left ambiguous. Nonetheless, by 2008, a little over a century after its erection, the courthouse was in pressing need of archival management. Luckily, Haywood recognized this need. Through his collaboration with graduate students and faculty at JMU, he was able to bring the community's past into the present.

The Current Status of Exploring Rockingham's Past

Exploring Rockingham's Past was born out of this desire to identify, organize, and make accessible the stories locked within the circuit court. As it stands, ERP is an online, open-source digital archive presenting high-resolution scans of the original documents. These images provide accessibility to the highest proportion of the population by giving all remote users access. With users always in mind, ERP determined that artificial collections arranged by series and subseries would best suit the needs of researchers. While the arrangement of artificial collections runs counter to the archival practice of *respect de fonds*, the collections had lost their original order long before the project was undertaken. Thus, to best facilitate accessibility, these artificial collections were (and continue to be) created. Additionally, the digital documents are keyword searchable, which we hope will provide nearly endless access points.

Initially, the project started with M.A. candidate Tristan Nelson, who digitized some six thousand documents relating to the creation of Shenandoah National Park (SNP) and Skyline Drive in the Blue Ridge Mountains of Virginia. To establish the park, the commonwealth of Virginia needed land; however, the land it wanted was not uninhabited. SNP records tell the stories of local families who were forced off the mountain through their properties' condemnation. Users may browse the online collections to read for themselves the complex stories of the families involved. Documents housed under the SNP Collection range from land assessments and government correspondence to personal letters and newspaper clippings.

In March 2018, ERP and the SNP Collection were released at an event held at the Massanutten Regional Library. Many of the families who attended this gathering were descendants of those moved off the mountain. For the first time in nearly eighty years, they were interacting with parts of their families' history. Some were even moved to tears. This collection truly spoke to the heart of the project. The goal was to give back to the families affected by the establishment of the SNP by helping to reinsert their ancestors into the historical narrative. These families would no longer haunt the archives but now have their hardships recorded and preserved.

Next, in August 2018, graduate student Craig Schaefer became part of the ERP project and identified his own set of documents to highlight. After a full summer interning with the circuit court, Schaefer settled on the Prohibition Collection. This body of records presents a less emotional interpretation and representation of the county's history but one just as important. Over the next seven months, Schaefer digitized nearly 6,500 documents related to the trials of individuals charged with making, transporting, or selling ardent spirits in Rockingham County from 1921 to 1935. In May 2019, they too were made accessible online through ERP. Users may browse through the collection, which consists of four series (cases, affidavits, liquor inventory, and general records). These documents help to illustrate the significant role Rockingham County played in the history of prohibition in the United States while providing a more realistic interpretation of prohibition. Also, as mentioned earlier, the keyword search feature allows users to search for a

name or term, which then pulls records from each collection housed on the site. This offers researchers the opportunity to engage with multiple records housed in separate collections, providing a higher chance of discoverability.

ERP's Future Vision

During this process, I joined the ERP team, and as my predecessors had done, I identified a collection of records that I believe will highlight the unique history of Rockingham County. The next iteration of ERP will focus on the records of the Overseers of the Poor for Rockingham. The Overseers of the Poor were local officials elected to supervise social welfare in their communities. Thus far, I have digitized 500 documents, which will eventually go on the ERP website alongside the other two collections. These records consist of various documents created, maintained, or given to the overseers between 1787 and 1870. They include but are not limited to meeting minutes, expense receipts, official correspondences, and so on. Just as with the other two digital collections created by JMU history graduate students, the Overseers of the Poor Collection illuminates a once-forgotten piece of local history while also bearing significantly on national history. After researching the collection extensively and diving into the subject of the Overseers of the Poor, it seems a significant gap exists in current scholarship.

Scholarship on social welfare before 1930 has been primarily dominated by studies conducted on the large industrial cities of the Northeast. Authors focused their inquiries into cities such as New York, Philadelphia, and Boston.¹ Because of this, our understanding of social welfare and poverty prior to 1930 is somewhat skewed. We understand the poorhouse and the institutionalization of poverty from the perspective of an industrialized, white, middle-class society. The effects of industrialization on society are indisputable. Perceptions of society and culture shifted along with advancements in technology, economy, and labor. Distinctions between white/black, male/female, rich/poor, and powerful/powerless hardened with the changes afforded by market and transportation revolutions. With this conversion, perceptions of poverty and social welfare shifted too. The new middle class worked to distance itself from the impoverished lower class. To justify and solidify the new social and cultural hierarchies put into place by reliance on the use of human bodies who were once neighbors, this new middle class developed novel perceptions of poverty and poor relief. For the first time in the United States, individuals sought to define a clear cause or culprit of poverty. Unfortunately, members of the middle class found the answer in the poor themselves. According to nineteenth-century ideology, the poor were poor because of their moral character flaws. The impoverished were seen as individuals unable to realize the American dream because they were intemperate and immoral degenerates.

Yet, what happens in a society where industrialization and social stratification happened much later? Would perceptions of poverty and the development of social welfare look any different? This is what the Overseers of the Poor Collection illustrates. By making this collection available online, scholars can better understand not only the history of Rockingham County generally but also the history of social welfare at large.

¹ For more on this topic see David Rothman's *The Discovery of the Asylum*, David Wagner's *The Poorhouse*, Michael B. Katz's *In the Shadow of the Poorhouse*, and June Axinn and Mark Stern's *Social Welfare*.

In addition to digitizing a new collection, I have a secondary vision for ERP and how it can serve local and national communities. While the project has accomplished so much with the digitization of once-inaccessible records, I hope to elevate it to another level. I want to offer an inviting, user-friendly, and intuitive digital archive where a variety of users have access to the type of information found in any other archive. My predecessors have already bridged a significant gap. They have brought the documents to the user, but now ERP requires fine-tuning. As it is, ERP functions merely as an online repository where digitized records have been dumped and forgotten. There are little to no wayfinding or bridging tools. Thus, over the next several months, ERP will undergo a significant revision with the implementation of finding aids and extensive metadata. In doing so, I seek to facilitate enhanced discovery and interaction, creating a more usable past. While digitization and online access is a significant step in the right direction, it is merely a starting point. Without extensive metadata, description, and access tools, users are flooded with a mass of information with no context and no explanation. These tools provide a way for archivists to still communicate what they know about the collections without requiring physical interactions between archivists and patrons.

The uniqueness and diversity of archival collections, their complicated provenance and context, and their often-intricate hierarchical structure all make an effective presentation of archival information on the web a challenge. Yet, with close attention to design and continual consideration of user accessibility, online finding aids offer a solution to the complexity of online archival material.² To ensure effective implementation of online finding aids, archivists are currently faced with finding innovative ways to present archival information while trying to preserve traditional archival description and practice. It is not as simple as adding descriptions and content summaries online. The finding aid must be easily navigated and used by remote individuals without guidance or clarification from the archivist. With limited knowledge and expertise, remote users must be able to find the information they are looking for *and* have the opportunity to interact with related information and collections. Essentially, archivists are faced with creating a finding aid that provides enough context to collections that are largely isolated due to their electronic format. However, it can be done. Princeton University's approach provides the basis for ERP's system. Princeton's digital collections and finding aids present information in a hierarchical format that adheres to the fundamental values of archival description yet enables researchers to choose what information they view at any given time. Their tools also provide various access points through a "Find More" tab, which connects remote users to information related to their inquiries. Princeton University clearly had users in mind while developing this tool and effectively created a way to ensure enhanced accessibility.

Conclusion

While much of this article focuses on future endeavors—what I hope to do—it is worth sharing the project and following ERP as it refines the process. Rockingham County is a relatively small community, yet this project seeks to make an impact locally and nationally. As we move into a remote world, where the internet promotes greater democratization through accessibility, ERP seeks to illustrate ways small repositories can solve significant problems. By providing access to once-neglected pieces of community history, highlighting the labor and passion it takes to do so, and actively engaging with the community through mutual communication, ERP does just this.

² Walton, "Looking for Answers," 32.

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