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The John Jay Papers: Re-envisioning a 20th-Century Editorial Project for a 21st-Century Audience

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*J*ohn Jay's papers have had a far more tortured history than they deserve—and more than seemed their destiny at his death in 1829. Then it seemed likely that his career and contributions would be studied as carefully and enthusiastically as any other Founding Father's—certainly as closely as his friends John Adams and Alexander Hamilton. His family's archive had survived the Revolution in war-torn Westchester County and New York City. His personal papers had successfully crossed the Atlantic when he returned from diplomatic missions abroad in 1784 and 1795. Jay's will placed those papers in the custody of his devoted family, and his younger son, William, published a creditable two volume "life and letters" of his father in the 1830s. As the years passed, Jay's documentary record still seemed to be blessed. His descendants, unlike those of Madison and Jefferson, did not fall on hard times, and there were no emergency sales of historical manuscripts for cash.

At times the manuscripts seemed too well guarded for the good of scholarship. The bulk of the archive remained with the Iselins, descendants of the same William Jay who had recorded his father's life. In the 1930s, the Iselin family made the manuscripts available to Frank Monaghan, a young Yale scholar who wrote the only remotely scholarly biography of Jay, but otherwise, the manuscripts remained generally unavailable to scholars until the late 1950s, when the Iselin heirs sold their collection of Jay Papers to Columbia University.

This seemed to promise a new lease on life for Jay's papers—and for Jay scholarship. In 1959, Richard Morris, Gouverneur Morris Professor of History at Columbia University, announced that he would head a John Jay Papers project that would collect photocopies of Jay documents from around

The Papers of John Jay

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The home page of the Papers of John Jay
http://www.columbia.edu/cu/lweb/eresources/archives/jay/

the world, catalogue them in tandem with Columbia's manuscripts, and provide scholars with a finding aid that would give access to Jay materials from hundreds of sources.

Then, Morris promised, he and his staff would prepare an annotated select edition of the papers to ensure Jay's recognition on a level with other statesmen of his generation–and subjects of papers projects of the era. But the promises were left largely unfulfilled. In the first fifteen years of the project's existence, Richard Morris published several books and dozens of articles based on the Jay Papers; his graduate students were encouraged to base dissertations on the archive, but other scholars were less lucky. Morris's publication contract with Harper & Row specified that his would be an edition of "hitherto unpublished" materials, and he was reluctant to allow other historians to quote letters or state papers owned by Columbia that fell into this category. Grumbling at these restrictions grew as it became obvious that publication of any Jay volumes would be far behind schedule. The first volume of the Jay Papers was completed in time for publication in late 1975. The second volume appeared in 1980. And then ... nothing.

Richard Morris fell ill and died of malignant melanoma in 1989, leaving Ene Sirvet, his assistant editor, to handle the Jay edition alone. By the mid-1990s, it became apparent that volumes 3 and 4 of the Jay series could not be published without a major investment of funding and new staff. Ene Sirvet retired from Columbia, and the Jay Papers office in Butler Library was emptied of its files of photocopies, transcribed documents and notes, and drawers with slips that indexed the Jay archive. The Jay Papers project was, temporarily, out of business altogether.

On learning of plans to suspend operations of the Jay Papers, I mounted a campaign to make the "Jay Papers" archive accessible to the public in a Web-based publication. Documents in the Jay Papers archive came with not only basic bibliographic indexing (date, names of correspondents, location of original manuscript) but also with brief abstracts of contents prepared by generations of Morris graduate students. In short, the Jay Papers project archives was the perfect candidate for an electronic image edition with ready-made keyword access as well as basic indexing tools.

Columbia obtained funds from the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) for just such a project in the summer of 2000. This Web site was opened to the public in December 2002. Since then, Columbia has been trying to find funds to complete the select letterpress edition of Jay's papers–an effort that may or may not succeed. I have been hired as a part-

time consultant working on plans for a possible letterpress edition and on needed improvements to the Web edition of Jay's papers.

The task of analyzing the methodology by which that Web edition was created is simplified by the fact that the NEH-funded electronic edition focused on the "John Jay" series of "control files" and photocopies. The file drawers of abstracts were used to create a database with these fields and entry of the database information was outsourced to a vendor responsible for keying in the information and proofreading the results. The folders of photocopied documents, in turn, were sent to another outside vendor for scanning, with the image files identified by the unique accession numbers assigned to each. Once the database had been completed, image files were linked as they were returned from the vendor.

With the present interface, the resulting electronic edition can be searched in ways expected—by date, by author/recipient, by repository—and, as a bonus, by keywords appearing in abstracts.

There are some limitations—one of which was dictated by the Jay Papers project files themselves. The Jay Papers format created in 1959 did not, for instance, require that processors indicate the form of manuscript represented by each new accession—autograph letter signed, draft, letterbook copy, and so on. Given the limits of budget and schedule, there was no time for this information to be retrieved and provided in the NEH electronic edition. This creates an inevitable inconvenience for researchers using the Jay Web edition. The problem was exacerbated by the staff of the "electronic edition" when a decision was made not to include a field for "collection" in the database. This means that there is no way, for instance, to tell which documents retrieved by a search for correspondence between Jay and Gouverneur Morris at Columbia come from Jay's papers and which from Morris's. Only by calling up images of individual items can you tell which is a draft in the author's papers and which is a recipient's copy from the addressee's files. Regrettable as this omission is, it can't be remedied. And most users find more than ample compensation in the existence of those abstracts.

The abstracts themselves carry some limitations—which we are addressing now at Columbia. These summaries were prepared to address the interests of Richard B. Morris. You could not ask for closer attention to politics and diplomacy and the law. However, some multipage letters between female members of the Jay family carry summary lines reading "Family matters." Work on providing more complete and detailed abstracting information began nearly a year ago, and continues now.

Cartons of document folders lay around the Jay Papers office and were bundled up with "unorganized" labels in 1997. By the time the preparation of the electronic edition began, memories had faded, as memories do. The folders in these cartons were never interfiled back into the chronological document files that were shipped out for scanning. Although the records for these "unorganized" documents were entered in the database, there were no matching images scanned. This problem, too, is being addressed now.

A problem that no one anticipated was the increased time needed to obtain permissions from owner-institutions to reproduce images of their documents. As the copies had been collected decades ago, with no thought of even a microform edition, everyone involved expected that some extra time and effort would be needed, but we were unpleasantly surprised by the number of institutions that required extra time–extra information–extra reassurance–before facing the very notion of publishing any of their holdings on the Web. The Jay Papers paid the price of being the first project to ask dozens of manuscript repositories for this privilege–and Jean Ashton, head of Columbia's Rare Book and Manuscript Library, is still waiting for several libraries to adopt official policies in this regard. Thus many Jay documents in the Jay Web edition boast full records with abstracts but cannot provide document images until their owner-institutions adopt official statements on Web publications of their holdings and grant permission to display the Jay manuscript images.

A related problem is that of institutions whose policies require that substantial fees be paid for reproduction of any of their holdings on the Internet. Columbia wisely–and immediately–decided that no such fees will be paid. Images from this small group of institutions will remain permanently "Blocked."

As for the design of the Web edition's user interface, some failings did not become apparent until Jay researchers subjected it to heavy use. Until one scholar searched for materials relating to John Jay's older, sadly neurotic sister Eve Jay Munro, the Web site designers had not realized that they had imposed a system that "overmatches" like a banshee. Searching for "Eve" calls up every word containing the syllable "eve"–even, every, evening, everything. Moving between documents retrieved through the same search is more time-consuming than needs be–there's no easy "next document" button. But these are on the list of things to be corrected by the Columbia Library systems staff this year.

The electronic Jay edition has been available to the public for less than a

year. Our own observations–and comments from satisfied and dissatisfied customers–already provide a few lessons for others who may be tempted to follow in our footsteps–perhaps by converting some of the dozens of existing NHPRC-sponsored microfilms (most nicely indexed) to electronic form or to converting files of photocopies gathered decades ago and never published in any surrogate form.

1. Inspect your prospective intellectual as well as physical "input" carefully to ensure that you don't exaggerate its limitations unnecessarily. This, of course, is what happened when the "collections" field was omitted from the Jay database for a group of materials that already lacked "form of manuscript" information. For the Jay Papers, it converted an annoyance into a minor problem. For another group of records, the result could be far more serious.

2. Never assume that anything will work without scrupulous checking and cross-checking and checking again. For an edition of this kind, "quality review" has to go far beyond making sure that scans of documents are legible. The electronic Jay edition has more bibliographic records than images because no one made sure that every record found its scanned "mate" at an early stage of the game (those pesky "unorganized" cartons). This problem is being remedied–but it would have been easier to do the checking at the outset.

3. Remember that what you are doing may seem more novel to others than it does to you. I would never have guessed that requests from the electronic Jay Papers would serve as an introduction to electronic publication of documents for so many libraries along the world.

4. Be prepared to improve your product as you go along, and keep an eye out for what can and should be improved.
a. The Jay Papers will only be better as more and more of those abstracts are proofread and revised and as we correct misspellings of proper names and standardize usage.
b. The user interface will improve by the end of the year–and if our users do their job, we'll hear about more changes needed to make it perform even more efficiently.

5. Be prepared for more and more demands from your users. Although Columbia thought it could congratulate itself a year ago on producing an electronic documentary edition with

searchable text of documentary abstracts, and took even more pride in announcing plans to add converted texts of transcripts of Jay materials prepared for eventual publication, we are already getting complaints because every word of every document has not been transcribed to provide full text search capability.

In short, users of twenty-first century electronic editions will never be satisfied—and I would be a little disappointed in them if they were.

Epilogue: More than 1,000 unmatched bibliographic records and document images have been added to the Jay Web edition. When quality review of the newly added scans is complete, the Jay Web edition (now known familiarly as "E-Jay") will provide users with everything that the old paper files of the Jay Papers office did—and much more quickly and conveniently.

In May 2004, the NHPRC voted funds to support the beginning of a revised and complete select edition of Jay's papers, with texts and annotation meeting modern standards. The multivolume "paper" edition will be intimately tied to the electronic edition, providing a laboratory for new methods to meet old needs.

There is still an element of suspense, however. The proposal to the NHPRC listed me as Editor-in-Chief-designate. Personal matters, however, mean that I'll be moving to Charlottesville, Virginia, and all agree that the new, improved John Jay Papers demand a full-time editor on the spot in Manhattan. Stay tuned to learn who will be guiding Jay's papers to completion.