

19th-Century Concord Digital Archive, <<http://www.digitalconcord.org>>

Amy E. Earhart, Texas A&M University

The 19th-Century Concord Digital Archive (CDA) joins an interdisciplinary team from the Department of English, Texas A&M University; the Digital Humanities Initiative, the College of Liberal Arts, Texas A&M University; the Map and GIS Collections and Services, Texas A&M University Libraries; and the Concord Free Public Library, Concord, Massachusetts, in the development of infrastructures that allow the entities to easily share metadata, develop innovative, visually-based search functions, and make visible and accessible the cultural record of Concord, Massachusetts in an interactive, free access digital archive. This project leverages resources and skills across the team to develop a model of interaction between academic, museum and library, and community partners, developing multiple ways of displaying information about the town of Concord that will allow scholars to produce innovative research.

The 19th-Century Concord Digital Archive (CDA) partnership is an excellent test bed for exploring such issues, as our site draws upon the rich humanities materials housed on multiple servers located at Texas A&M University and the Concord Free Public Library, Concord, Massachusetts. Materials slated for inclusion in the archive include literary texts, historical documents, maps, photographs, census materials, educational minutes, broadsides, physical artifacts, and town records. Concord, Massachusetts figures centrally in critical discussions of 19th-century literature, philosophy, abolition, women's literature and history, architecture, and government. Scholarly production reflects the importance of this location. Since 2000, WorldCat lists over 450 published books that include Concord in their description. When the search is expanded to include figures that lived or worked in Concord, the numbers grow exponentially. Concord is also an interesting test case for this work as it is a location that helped to define the critical framework of American literature and history. The depth of this small town's historical record proves important to the study of literature, history, government, architecture, philosophy, digital humanities and other fields. By digitizing a broad range of materials we will provide scholars with additional materials to rethink the way in which we conceptualize these fields. For example, initial digitizing efforts have revealed the broad transnational impulses of the town's inhabitants, suggesting that our traditional understanding of Concord as a quaint New England village is flawed. Concord is an interesting choice for a digital archive as it bridges the divide between canonical, well studied figures and unknown figures that flesh out the historical and literary record. Ralph Waldo Emerson, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Louisa May Alcott, Henry David Thoreau, and Bronson Alcott resided in Concord and interacted with those groups less frequently represented by digital archives: free African-Americans, Irish immigrants, the poor, and the criminal class. In addition to

the tremendous scholarly interest in Concord, Concord attracts broad general interest as a historical tourism center. The booming tourism trade attracts tens of thousands of tourists a year, many of whom explore Concord virtually before their visit. Given the interest in 19th-Century Concord, the Concord archive should experience tremendous use and generate a substantive impact.

However, the CDA does not seek to validate the “cult of the New England Village” as coined by Lawrence Buell, who argues that towns like Concord functioned “as a social model and as literary and mythic images—thanks partly to the New England influence, in each case—throughout much of America as a whole” (305). It is indeed the replication of the literary and social model of small village New England that the CDA invites the scholar to revisit. The archive structure resists a focus on an individual author, such as a Thoreau or Emerson single author archive, and it works against viewing Concord through a narrow lens, narrowly defining itself as, say, a Transcendental Digital Archive. Instead, the archive represents a much broader approach to thinking about how we understand literature and literary history and invites new and emerging critical approaches to scholarly work.

Another important issue that the Concord Digital Archive seeks to reveal is the way that transnationalism plays out within the particular literary and historical moments of the town. Current work on the CDA suggests that the African and Irish Diasporas reveal themselves in town materials and that interactions between these groups impact the literary production of Concord writers. Rather than focusing on the few authors that lived in Concord for most of their lives, the CDA materials invite the scholar to see those who immigrate, who traverse national boundaries, and who look outward, out of Concord, Massachusetts and the United States to a broader world. The mapping segment of the project is designed to show patterns of movement in Concord by both Irish and African-Americans and the response of Anglo ConCORDs to both groups by digitizing place of residence, nationality, race, and socioeconomic factors over time. In other words, while the Concord project does indeed look to one particular element of literary history that has been interpreted as “American,” the materials found within the archive challenges this simplistic reading.

While many scholars who work with Concord discuss the importance of location, physical structures and landscape, there remains a limitation in the way that textual materials might be explored. Digital archives have historically replicated much of the print book structure, from presentation of text to user interface. One of the goals of the CDA is to reimagine the book-based interface (index, table of contents) in a digital environment. Too often the digital archive is merely a digital repository of a broad number of texts, rather than a carefully constructed set of data that includes innovative interfaces and/or interpretive visuals. And, given the importance of the location, geography and landscape of Concord, a visual means of

addressing the humanities information allows for interesting possibilities and should provide new ways of researching the related areas. The CDA has tested a simple map visualization, but we are currently developing map interfaces that visualize the town, landmarks, and people over time. Using Google Earth and GIS, historical and contemporary maps as well as digitized town reports, census, and literary materials, we are hoping to develop a map and timeline that allows users to manipulate time and place as well as sift the materials to locate textual data. GIS specialists from the Map and GIS Collections and Services, Texas A&M University Libraries, have been partnering with the CDA to implement the maps. We hope to use maps to visualize relationships of people to buildings and landmarks, reveal issues of class, race and nationality, and migration patterns.

Future work includes continued editing and markup of literary and historical documents, the challenge of attaching metadata to the deep and important image collection owned by the Concord Free Public Library, and continued experimentation with data mining and visualization. I have long admired the work of Johanna Drucker and Matthew Kirschenbaum, as well as the faculty and staff at the University of Nebraska, and believe the emphasis on visualization and data mining in this year's workshop would benefit the CDA tremendously.