

“You don't have to be famous for your life to be history”: The Dusenbery Journal and `img2xml`

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This poster presentation will describe a project currently underway under the auspices of the Documenting the American South digital publishing program. It has been funded by grants from the US National Endowment for the Humanities (Digital Humanities Start-Up Grants program) and UNC Chapel Hill. The project is centered around the journal of a 19th century student at UNC named James Dusenbery and aims to use innovative web-based technology to present the journal and to create modules of supplementary material around it to provide insight into Dusenbery's world.

1. Background

The journal that forms the basis of our project was written by James Lawrence Dusenbery (1821-86) during the 1841-42 academic year. Dusenbery, the son of Lydia Davis (1797-1857) and planter Henry Rounsaville Dusenbery (1794-1852) of Lexington, North Carolina, entered the University of North Carolina (UNC) in 1839. Sometime before graduating, he began copying out poems and lyrics to popular songs that he admired, and in July 1841 he began “Records of My Senior Year at the University of North Carolina,” a series of 44 weekly entries describing his activities as a University student. He graduated in 1842, received his MD from the University of Pennsylvania's Medical Department in 1845, and returned to Lexington to practice medicine. During the Civil War, he served with the Fourteenth Battalion, Rowan County Home Guard. Though he survived the

conflict, three brothers, two brothers-in-law, and a niece died during the war years. After the war Dusenbery resumed his medical practice in Lexington and served as a UNC trustee from 1874 until 1877. He died on 24 February 1886 and was buried in the Lexington City Cemetery. He never married.

Dusenbery's journal, the centerpiece of this new digital collection, provides multiple opportunities to extend his text by creating a multimedia scholarly apparatus that, when combined with an array of interpretive essays, will illuminate the academic, social, political, economic, and religious forces that shaped his world. Though Dusenbery was not “famous” in the ways that our culture assigns such prominence, like many students today he enjoyed his senior year in college. He appreciated his friends; enjoyed sports, music, and dance; and despite an active social life, completed his studies successfully and spent his life as a physician in Lexington, North Carolina. The journal is a valuable source of information for those interested in antebellum culture, antebellum literary life, and the day-to-day events that ordinarily fall through the cracks of history. Edward L. Ayers, southern historian and one of the pioneers of digital libraries, points out that new forms of digitization and spatial display enable scholars and students alike to “see things that are invisible otherwise”.¹ The Dusenbery Journal's multimedia apparatus will allow users to both see and hear a slice of American history. All of the materials included on the site will be accompanied by scholarly annotations, biographies, and essays that will provide an analytical framework for the project and forge connections between the disparate materials (and disciplines) represented. When it is completed, The Dusenbery Journal will be a fully realized, searchable, multimedia, scholarly edition consisting of manuscript materials, images, songs, artifacts, maps, newspaper clippings, court and judicial documents, and important related resources pulled together from a variety of repositories, especially the University Library's special collections; the North Carolina State Archives; North Carolina public libraries; and the private collection of a family descendant, Colonel William B. Hankins, Jr. The scholarly apparatus for Dusenbery's journal will be accessible to users by means of links within the edited text and through

various indexes for personal names, places, publications, images, topics, events, dates, organizations, genres, and authors.

2. Technology

Digital images of the pages of the journal have been captured, and the text has been marked up in TEI P5 XML. The handwritten text has been traced and output in a Scalable Vector Graphics (SVG) format. SVG is itself an XML format, which means structures (i.e. lines, words, and letters) in the image can be linked to lines and notes in the transcribed text. Open Source web mapping software (OpenLayers) is being used to provide zoomable overlays of the SVG and raster image for each page. The result is an interface in which each line of text in the transcription is linked to a line of written text on the page image. The page image and transcription are displayed side-by-side, and OpenLayers provides zoom and pan features for the image.

The `img2xml` system models tracings of manuscript text as Shapes: the SVG paths and bounding boxes; Regions: bounded spaces containing text; and Structures: the overlap of one or more shapes with a Region. Structures can be mapped to elements in a transcription or to annotations.

Since SVG is an XML-based format, it can be manipulated in a web browser using standard Javascript techniques. The final project is available at <http://docsouth.unc.edu/dusenber>.

The digital environment has the power to contextualize and fully document this ordinary life, proving, as Nell Sigmon put it, “You don't have to be famous for your life to be history”.² In that, we fully realize one of the most distinguishing features of electronic editions - “their capaciousness: scholars are no longer limited by what they can fit on a page or afford to produce within the economics of print publishing”.³

References

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Notes

1. The Chronicle of Higher Education, 10 November 2006: 33
2. Jacqueline Dowd Hall, interview with Nell Putnam Sigmon, 13 December 1979 (H-143), Southern Oral History Program Collection #4007, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.
3. Price, Kenneth (2008). "Electronic Scholarly Editions," in *A Companion to Digital Literary Studies*, ed. Susan Schreibman and Ray Siemens. Oxford: Blackwell, 2008.