

George Mason University, Center for History and New Media
Papers of the War Department, 1784-1800
Progress Report, August 1, 2009—December 31, 2009

Now in its fourth year at George Mason University, *The Papers of the War Department 1784-1800* continues to make steady progress towards its overarching goal: making the entire archive available online in a fully-searchable database with attached high-resolution images by June 2010. The first six months of the third and final year of the current grant saw continued progress in a number of areas related to those goals.

Most important is the continuing work entering data into the digital database. The project staff, now expanded to five Assistant Editors, continues to input the basic finding data about the documents using the conventions developed in conjunction with NHPRC in the spring of 2007. Thus far, our target for each year of the grant has been to complete one-third of the documents in the total collection. In the past six months, Assistant Editors completed data entry for some 7,800 documents, a total that keeps us on track to finish basic data entry for the entire collection in the next six months. (Our data entry totals for this six-month period were slightly lower than the previous six months, due to the addition of a new Assistant Editor who required some time to learn the protocols involved in the complex process of document reading and data entry. Fortunately, after three months on the project, the new editor now completes data entry at a rate comparable to our other, more experienced editors.) Continuing work in the database allows us to get a more precise fix on the total number of collections and documents contained within it. Initial estimates in 2006 placed the total number of documents in the collection at about 54,000 documents, which fixed our three one-year targets at 18,000 documents. As we proceed through the database document-by-document, our editors have discovered a number of duplicate entries and placeholder entries in the database, and we continue to collapse these entries as we locate them, cleaning up the database and ensuring that each entry in the collection refers to a specific and unique document. A more thorough inventory of the remaining documents in the collection conducted in December 2009 suggests that the collection numbers about 47,500 documents in total; however, we will not produce a firm figure until we have completed data entry for the entire collection.

Experience to date suggests that we will continue to revise the number downward as data entry progresses.

A second objective in the revised workplan of 2007 directed us to replace the old and illegible image files with high-resolution files wherever possible. That work concluded over the summer, with the addition of the final high-resolution images to the database. In total, we were able to locate and replace 24,500 low-resolution images with the vastly more detailed high-resolution images. George Mason University's technical staff continues to encounter some difficulties providing the server space necessary to post all the images online due to the size of the database, but we are assured that the necessary expansions will be completed well in advance of our June 2010 deadline for this facet of the project.

The June 2008 launch of the website itself continues to be of enormous benefit to the project as a whole. The site, www.wardepartmentpapers.org, has drawn steady, and steadily increasing, traffic in the eighteen months since its launch. In 2009, nearly 50,000 unique visitors viewed the site, and we continue to draw between 3,500 and 4,000 unique visitors each month. Robust and continuing traffic to the website indicates substantial enthusiasm for the project from a variety of communities, including scholars, teachers, and amateur researchers. Traffic to the site continues to generate e-mail traffic to the project, often from researchers notifying us of other documents and collections that appear to belong in the collection. Several visitors have offered us copies of documents they know to be missing; others have pointed us to digital copies that we have acquired at minimal cost. This has been a terrific boon to the project: ever since the project arrived at George Mason University in 2006, we have been aware that there are documents missing from the collection, and we have struggled with cost-effective ways to expand the collection. The documents that have come to our attention since the launch of the site are by no means comprehensive, but since we can acquire them virtually for free, the online launch has generated this useful and unanticipated dividend without additional cost. We expect that this kind of traffic will continue as the project becomes more widespread.

Finally, as the first phase of the project approaches maturation it is satisfying to note that it is moving outside the walls of the Center for History and New Media, receiving notice for both its historical content as well as its status as one of the first

online-online documentary projects. That attention is visible in two conference papers that place the collection at the center of their discussion. In October 2009, Editor-in-Chief Christopher Hamner presented the paper “Taking Documentary Editing Online: Launching the *Papers of the War Department* Website” as part of the panel “Digital Documentary Editing in the 21st Century” at the annual meeting of the Association of Documentary Editors. In May 2010, Hamner will present a paper on using the archive to examine the early efforts of the War Department to provide pensions as part of the panel “Negotiating Losses” at the annual conference of the Society for Military History. Both invitations indicate the high degree of interest the project enjoys among scholars and documentary editors.

Overall, the *Papers of the War Department 1784-1800* continues to progress towards its overarching goal of making the entire collection available online in a fully-searchable database, with links to high-quality digital images, by June 2010. We are excited to be close to finishing the first phase of the project and look forward to increasing the profile of the collection.

Christopher Hamner

Editor-in-Chief