

INTERIM PERFORMANCE REPORT ON “History Matters” [Grant # ED-21797-00]

Report covering January 1, 2001 to July 31, 2001

During the first year of this grant, we have made substantial progress. *History Matters: The U.S. Survey Course on the Web* has grown, increasing in both breadth and depth. We have added hundreds of new annotated websites and primary documents as well as new features, such as *Making Sense of Evidence* and scholarly website reviews. Our major redesign, unveiled in March 2001, continues to receive positive feedback from users.

Through active publicity, we have markedly increased our audience of high school and university teachers around the world. Outreach efforts have included publication of two full-length articles on *History Matters* (April 2001 in *Social Education*, the publication of the National Council for Social Studies; and May 2001 in *The History Teacher*) and a conference presentation on using *History Matters* at the April 2001 Wisconsin Conference on the Teaching of History, “Teaching and Learning in the Digital Age: Focus on the Survey.” In the coming year, several extended reviews of the site will be published and we will lead presentations and workshops at several large conferences, including the National Council for Social Studies in October and the American Historical Association in January.

Although our *WWW.History* annotations continue to be widely used, we concluded that there was also a need for more serious and scholarly *web reviews*. Thus, we initiated collaboration with the *Journal of American History* (*JAH*) to review approximately twenty-five websites per year. The reviews are co-published by the *JAH* and *History Matters* and appear in both venues. The first batch of reviews appeared in the June 2001 *JAH* and are available online on *History Matters* (<http://chnm.gmu.edu/us/www.taf>). Reviews for September 2001 will be posted shortly. Still more have been solicited for future editions. In adding web reviews to *History Matters*, we are providing a further service to our constituency of teachers. At the same time, we are also trying to improve the state of the art in digital history by creating a critical community of commentary on history websites.

During the past six months, we have made considerable progress on *WWW.History*, the annotated guide to the most useful websites for U.S. history and social studies teachers. Since January, we have added roughly 200 annotations, bringing the total to almost 500, and the list is still growing. In light of the rapidly changing field of online resources, we have decided to shift some of our resources to reviewing and updating annotations that are more than a year old. We have made substantial progress and expect to finish by the end of the summer. Once this process is complete, we will add a field letting viewers know when the website was last visited and the annotation last updated. For example, an annotation might note that a site is under construction or that new documents on a certain topic will be added by a certain date. Knowing when this was written will help users evaluate the usefulness of the site for their particular needs. To compensate for the efforts to update sites and to maintain the quality of the sites recommended on *History Matters*, we have modified our proposed goal. Rather than adding 600 new sites, we are adding 400 new sites and are updating all of our earlier annotations.

Many Pasts has also grown rapidly. The number has expanded from 150 first-person documents to 575, exceeding what was promised in the original proposal. We have added more than 30 new documents from the period before 1876 and are editing and annotating more than 100 additional

documents from this era. We are also currently in the process of digitizing, editing, and annotating more than 100 new text documents, as well as new oral history selections, from the post-World War II era. When this expansion is complete, *Many Pasts* will be even more valuable to those teaching and studying U.S. history. In addition, the new *Making Sense of Evidence* section (see below) will enhance this feature immensely by providing teachers and students with the tools to read and analyze these primary documents.

As mentioned in the previous report, *Visualizing the American Past* is now part of *Many Pasts*. The preliminary collection of images have been culled and captioned and almost one-third of these approximately 100 images have been digitized. In the coming year, these images will be carefully contextualized by professional historians and posted on the web. Additional images, including decorative arts and architectural contributions, will be added.

In our original proposal, we had two separate categories directed at helping students and teachers analyze primary historical documents—*Under the Magnifying Glass* and *Learner Guides*. As a result, we decided to combine them into a single category, *Making Sense of Evidence* (MSE). Much of the funding for MSE is being provided through our alliance with the Visible Knowledge Project at Georgetown University.

MSE includes three sections. *Making Sense of Documents* is a set of eight guides on how to work with different kinds of historical evidence—photos, oral history, maps, music, letters and diaries, advertisements, quantitative evidence, and early films. Leading scholars offer background and strategies on questions to ask when reading these documents. Also included are an annotated bibliography and a “Webography” listing the best web sources for finding these documents. *Scholars in Action* presents brief videoclips of “expert learners” analyzing different historical documents—cartoons, photographs, newspapers, letters, speeches, songs, house inventories, and short stories. Scholars illustrate the strategies they use, the questions they ask, and the additional sources they consult when trying to make sense of evidence. Finally, *How I Taught that Document* provides online Teaching Guides that take us “behind the scenes” to describe the planning and implementation involved in teaching documents. The goal is to “make visible” how instructors teach with a particular document or group of documents and provide exemplary experiences/models of teaching with primary sources.

During the past six months, we have made substantial progress on the different elements of MSE. On *Making Sense of Documents*, we have received at least partial drafts of six of the eight guides. We have developed a basic online template for the guides and have completed a pilot version of the first guide on oral history (<http://historymatters.gmu.edu/lg/website/oral.html>). We have also completed webographies for four of the eight guides and begun research on the next four. In addition, we have outlined the multimedia elements of the film guide, which is now in production. During the next six months, we will post text versions of the first four guides and will have multimedia versions completed by the end of the year. We plan to have the other four guides fully completed by June 2002. All of the videotaping for *Scholars in Action* is completed, as is an overall template and the rough (paper) edit of the eight document analyses we plan to include. We have a pilot version of one of the “readings,” Michael O’Malley discussing a Thomas Nast cartoon (<http://historymatters.gmu.edu/lg/website/cartoon.html>), on the Web and plan to have at least two more done by the end of the year.

Past Meets Present contains articles and resources that link the past with current issues and events. In the last six months, we have surpassed our initial goal of six essays and now offer seven. Recent essays have explored gun control, capital punishment, federal funding for “faith-based” social service programs, and the Cuban missile crisis film *Thirteen Days*. We plan to solicit several new essays in the coming year.

The *Digital Blackboard* feature provides successful Web-based, teacher-tested assignments from individual teachers, the new “Teaching the JAH” resource, the Library of Congress, and the National Archives and Records Administration. We have added several new lesson plans in the past six months and are in the process of soliciting and evaluating up to 30 new submissions. *Syllabus Central* provides annotated syllabi for the survey course that offer creative approaches to teaching, with particular emphasis on using technology. We have received several submissions and are in the process of evaluating them and soliciting additional syllabi. *Students as Historians* presents examples of the kinds of projects history students, from high school to graduate school, have accomplished on the Internet. We are currently soliciting new projects and are searching the Web for outstanding examples of student work and creativity.

We have also worked to develop the *Secrets of Great History Teachers*. In the past six months, we have posted two new interviews: with Vernon Burton, Distinguished Teacher, Carnegie Scholar, and professor of history and sociology at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign; and with Beverly San Agustín, a junior and senior high school social science teacher in Guam who recently received the State Teacher of the Year award. Our goal in selecting teachers is to include a diverse group of teachers who represent various grades, teaching situations, and experiences. We are in the process of interviewing two high school teachers and plan to conduct new interviews in the coming six months, including at least one with an international teacher of U.S. History.

The *Talking History* forums remain a huge success. We hosted five successful forums during the 2000-2001 academic year, with increasing numbers of subscribers and lively conversations. Moderators included James Horton (African-American), Emily Rosenberg (Imperialism), David Montgomery (Labor), Alan Brinkley (Depression and New Deal), and Frederick Hoxie (American Indians). We have four forums scheduled for the 2001-2002 school year: Eric Foner on Reconstruction (October), Tom Bender on Internationalizing US History (November), Christine Heyrman on Religion (December), and Linda Gordon on Families (March).

The *Reference Desk* continues to serve as a gateway to quality websites for information on using new media in the classroom. Pre-screened, annotated links lead to valuable guides on citing digital resources, understanding copyright and fair use laws and how they apply to classroom practices, evaluating digital materials, and addressing national and state history standards. These resources will help teachers sharpen their own skills and provide guidelines for student researchers. We plan to update this feature periodically.

Our historical puzzles, *Puzzled by the Past*, continue to draw a constant supply of responses and engaged participants. Over the past six months, we have consistently posted a new puzzle every two to three months, including “In Fashion,” a puzzle that challenges visitors to match pieces of clothing with the era in which they were fashionable.

The number of visitors to the *History Matters* site has increased significantly since work on the NEH grant began in the fall of 2000. In the spring 2001 semester, the average number of visitors (not hits) was about 49,000 per month, almost double the number for the previous spring (25,000). Among the reasons for the increase were: 1) the expansion of the site (more documents, annotations, etc.); 2) increased publicity efforts (especially announcements sent to all H-NET lists, journal articles designed for teachers, conference presentations, etc.); 3) the redesign of the site; and 4) active “Talking History” forums. Visitors come primarily from the U.S., but the logs record visits from at least fifty different nations.

History Matters is still maintained on a Macintosh Web server running WebStar and a separate database server. We use Filemaker Pro for our database and Tango to serve the data to the Web. We have moved almost all elements of the site into our database, which makes them easily searchable. Although this platform has worked well so far, the original supplier of Tango is no longer selling or supporting the software, which causes concern for the future. As a result, we are now working on moving all elements of our site into open source software—a MySQL database served by PHP on a Linux server. This is a major and costly effort, but will insure long-term stability.

In sum, we believe that the project is moving along extremely well. We have made enormous progress during the first year of this grant: developing new material for the *History Matters* website, expanding our audience, creating new features, and putting in place the mechanisms to continue improving the site in the coming year.

We would, of course, be delighted to provide more detailed information on our progress. We would particularly welcome a visit from NEH staff to the project at George Mason University at any convenient time.

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