

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

Report covering to August 1, 2001 to January 1, 2002

During the first year and a half of this grant, we have made substantial progress. *History Matters: The U.S. Survey Course on the Web* has continued to grow, both within existing features and through the development of new features. We are completing our successful transition to a Linux server and to an open source database, ensuring greater security and longevity for the *History Matters* website. In addition to adding new annotated websites, primary documents, and scholarly website reviews, we have continued to develop the site overall to provide teachers and students with critical online resources.

Through active publicity, we have markedly increased our audience of high school and university teachers around the world. Outreach efforts have included conference presentations and workshops on *History Matters* at the National Council for Social Studies (October 2001) and the American Historical Association (January 2002). A full-length article on *History Matters* was republished in the California Association for the Gifted Journal, *Gifted Education Communicator* (Fall 2001). We have been invited to submit articles to several journals, including *The Public Historian* and the *Journal of the Association for History and Computing* and will lead a workshop entitled “Putting the Past Online: Transforming the Teaching of History” at the Organization of American Historians annual conference in April 2002.

The scholarly *web reviews* have become a regular, and much anticipated, feature of *History Matters*. In collaboration with the *Journal of American History (JAH)* we continue 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 third batch of reviews appeared in the December 2001 *JAH* and are available online on *History Matters* (<http://historymatters.gmu.edu/us/browse/wwwhistory/>). Future reviews are in progress.

As an extension of these longer scholarly reviews, we were recently invited to produce audio web reviews for “Talking History,” a thirty-minute weekly radio program that offers interviews with historians and writers. The show, co-sponsored by the Organization of American Historians, is broadcast on more than 400 stations nationwide. These web reviews, produced by the Center for History and New Media, will air monthly and will further promote *History Matters* and the use of online history resources.

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 July, we have added more than 50 annotations, bringing the total close to 600. We continue to select and annotated new websites regularly. As noted in the July report, in light of the rapidly changing field of online resources, we decided to shift some of our resources to reviewing and updating annotations that were more than a year old. We completed this process at the end of the summer and since that time, have resumed writing new annotations. To help users evaluate the information, we have added 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. We anticipate reaching our revised goal of 700 annotated websites by the end of the grant period.

Many Pasts has also grown rapidly. The number has expanded from 150 first-person documents to almost 650, exceeding what was promised in the original proposal. We have added more than 90 new documents from the period before 1876 and are editing and annotating more than 60 additional documents from this era. We have added 40 new documents from the post-World War II era, and are in close to completing the next 30. An additional 40 documents have been edited and digitized and are in the process of being reviewed and annotated. 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.

Making Sense of Evidence (MSE), primarily funded through our alliance with the Visible Knowledge Project at Georgetown University, is a much-anticipated new feature in *History Matters*. The first four of the eight *Making Sense of Documents* guides on how to work with different kinds of historical evidence—oral history, maps, quantitative evidence, and early films—are in various stages of multi-media production and will be presented publicly this spring. We have developed an online template for the guides and have completed a pilot version of the first guide on oral history (<http://historymatters.gmu.edu/mse/oral.html>). The additional four guides—photos, music, letters and diaries, and advertisements—are in the writing and editing phase and will be in production by the end of the spring. Despite the good progress on the guides, we have learned that this type of writing is more demanding than we had originally realized. We have had to do considerably more editing and rewriting than anticipated and have had to demand multiple drafts from authors. In two cases—advertising and letters and diaries—we were forced to the conclusion that the originally commissioned drafts did not (even after revisions) meet the goals of the project, and so we have had to seek out new authors, which has slowed our progress. We have completed webographies for all eight guides.

The other central component of MSE, *Scholars in Action*, presents brief audio clips 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. We created a pilot version using video clips of one of the “readings”—Michael O’Malley discussing a Thomas Nast cartoon (<http://historymatters.gmu.edu/mse/cartoon.html>) this summer. This process was incredibly time consuming and after testing, we learned that the video did not add considerably to the content and required significant download time. In revising the template and format for this, we decided to use audio clips supplemented by visuals (primary documents and related materials). This change will speed up the production process, increase the usefulness of the segments, and increase usability. Audio segments have been selected and digitized and are awaiting final production. A pilot version of one of the “readings,” Michael O’Malley discussing a Thomas Nast cartoon (<http://historymatters.gmu.edu/mse/cartoon.html>), is available on the Web and we plan to have at least three more done by summer 2002.

Past Meets Present contains articles and resources that link the past with current issues and events. We have surpassed our initial goal of six essays and now offer seven. Essays in the past year have explored gun control, capital punishment, federal funding for “faith-based” social service programs, and the Cuban missile crisis film *Thirteen Days*. We hope to solicit several new essays in the coming year, including essays that address the events of September 11, 2001,

and their aftermath. 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 25 new submissions.

Syllabus Central provides annotated syllabi for the survey course that offer creative approaches to teaching, with particular emphasis on using technology. Five teachers are currently developing annotations for a variety of survey courses organized around themes such as Native American history, international perspectives on U.S. history, and biography. We continue to solicit additional syllabi from teachers at the community college and college levels. *Students as Historians* presents examples of the kinds of projects history students, from high school to graduate school, have accomplished on the Internet. We currently have twenty-four outstanding examples of student work and creativity, including several oral history projects conducted by high school students from across the country.

We have also worked to develop the *Secrets of Great History Teachers*. In the past six months, our two most recent 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), were posted on *History Matters* and published in *The History Teacher*. This process, however, has proved to be more difficult than originally anticipated, in part because the interviews we have completed have exceeded expectations in terms of depth and breath. Locating excellent teachers who have the time to participate in this lengthy interview process has been a challenge; several teachers agreed to be interviewed but were then overloaded with other commitments. We have therefore decided to adjust the format slightly in order to accommodate these needs to reach more teachers. We will now conduct shorter interviews, while retaining the focus on teaching the U.S. History survey. Our goal in selecting teachers is to include a diverse group of teachers who represent various grades, teaching situations, and experiences.

The *Talking History* forums remain a huge success, with a steady increase in subscribers. During the fall 2001 semester we hosted Eric Foner on Reconstruction (October), Tom Bender on Internationalizing US History (November), and Christine Heyrman on Religion (December). In spring, 2002 we will host Linda Gordon on Families in U.S. History (March). We are currently exploring funding opportunities to continue this popular *History Matters* feature beyond the period of the grant.

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 posted new puzzles regularly, including our current puzzle, “Did They Actually Say It?” that challenges visitors to select three accurate

quotes from a batch of frequently misattributed ones and correctly identify the president who said them.

The number of visitors to the *History Matters* site has increased significantly since work on the NEH grant began in the summer of 2000. In fall of 2001, the average number of visitors (not hits) was more than 50,000 per month, almost double the number for the previous fall (27,000). 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.); and 3) active “Talking History” forums. Visitors come primarily from the U.S., but the logs record visits from at least fifty different nations.

This fall, *History Matters* embarked on a major system upgrade. This work was not funded by NEH, but allows us to better serve teachers and students by providing a more robust, stable *History Matters*. We are currently finishing the transition from a Macintosh Web server running WebStar and a separate database server (using Filemaker Pro for the database and Tango to serve the data to the Web) into open source software on a Linux server. We have created a MySQL database served by PHP on a Linux server and successfully imported all the data. This was a major and costly effort, but will insure long-term stability. The transition is moving smoothly and we are currently finishing the browse page programming. The public database will officially be transferred by the end of January 2002.

In sum, we believe that the project is moving along extremely well. We have made enormous progress during this grant: developing new material for the *History Matters* website, creating new features, expanding our base of regular visitors and reaching out to new audiences, and putting in place the mechanisms to continue improving the site after the grant period ends.

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.

Roy Rosenzweig
Center for History and New Media
George Mason University