

Omeka Commons: Preserving and Sharing Our Dispersed Digital Commonwealth

In recent years, large collecting institutions have made good progress in preserving and presenting their digital collections. Yet far greater—in numbers and even richness—are the combined collections of small museums, libraries, archives, and historical societies around the world. In the year since its initial public beta launch, *Omeka*—the Center for History and New Media's (CHNM) free and open source web publishing platform for cultural heritage and scholarship—has enabled thousands of these smaller institutions and individuals to mount their collections online. Now, in partnership with the Internet Archive (IA), CHNM aims to enable the centralized preservation and discovery of those collections by networking the thousands of local *Omeka* collections and aggregating their contents into a single, permanent, open access repository: *Omeka Commons*. In doing so *Omeka Commons* will help answer two key research questions for the humanities and cultural heritage fields:

- **Problem 1: How do smaller museums, libraries, archives, and historical societies achieve an open, low-cost, long-term digital preservation solution?**

Few smaller cultural heritage institutions have adequate provision for digital preservation. To address this need, CHNM will give every current and future user of *Omeka* a one-click, no-cost option for adding her collections to a central preservation grade repository maintained by IA. Institutions will decide for themselves which collections to share and the terms by which those items are accessed and used by the public. Additionally, *Omeka Commons* will provide a central discovery portal, providing increased visibility for local collections, building community around cultural heritage, and driving traffic back to participating institutions' home websites. *Omeka Commons* will provide institutions with an easy, long-term preservation pathway and improved visibility for their digital collections without sacrificing local control over cultural heritage.

- **Problem 2: How do scholars and researchers discover and access locally held collections?**

Facilitating research is a main goal of all cultural heritage digitization and web projects. Yet digitized collections are only useful to researchers if they can find, use, and share these materials with peers and colleagues. *Omeka Commons* will provide a central, open access portal for researchers to begin their work with digitized cultural heritage material. *Omeka Commons* will not only expose scholars to new material for their work, it will also facilitate increased collaboration in collections-based research through intuitive sharing, tagging, and recommendation tools. *Omeka Commons* will thus provide scholars and other researchers with centralized discovery, open access, and collaboration tools for working with the dispersed digital collections of smaller cultural heritage institutions.

Solving these problems will require significant practical, hands-on research in three areas: enhancements to the core *Omeka* software, a new *Omeka Commons* server, and the design and production of the *Omeka Commons* discovery portal. CHNM requests \$399,521 under NEH's special initiative for digital preservation to accomplish these important preservation tasks, disseminate the new products, evaluate the results, and publish our findings.