

Letters Home: The Collective Collection of Mail from World War II

NEH Grant Proposal
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Participants

Danielle Marie Eyre
Project Director
George Mason University

Eric Anderson
Research Assistant 1
M.A. Library Science

Research Assistant 2
Undergraduate History Student

Part-time Moderator
Graduate or Undergraduate History Student

Part-time Marketing Associate
Graduate or Undergraduate Marketing Student

Jonathan Ireland
Webmaster
B.A. Communications and Information Technology

Volunteers (3)

Public Participation via registered contributors ¹

¹ Italicized positions are vacant

Abstract

There is no central repository for letters written by soldiers, if preserved at all, these valuable primary sources are located in personal collections. As the number of surviving World War II veterans decreases the effort to preserve their individual stories becomes harder. Letters Home would allow family members to retain the original documents, while making them accessible to researchers. Insights from the project would allow previously unexamined areas of research to emerge.

Narrative

Enhancing the Humanities

Letters Home: The Collective Collection of Mail from World War II is applying for a Level II grant in an effort to make these valuable sources available to all researchers, from different levels of research experience. As veterans of World War II age, not only are the oral histories at risk of being lost, but the written correspondence recounting the everyday life of a soldier to the civilians on the home front is being lost as well. Currently, letters are either separated into repositories housing other papers of the person, not necessarily by type of document. Letters are treated the same as other important papers left to specific repositories. In most cases the letters are not housed in any repository, but instead are passed down to family members who may not understand the value of the sources, may not feel anyone outside of the immediate family would have interest in them, do not wish to part with family heirlooms, or simply do not know what to do with the sources. Letters Home will solve these problems by creating an open source site where the documents can be scanned at home and then uploaded to the site, creating a collaborative collection where researchers can get access to the sources, they are preserved digitally and the owner retains the original document for their own personal collection. Additionally, professional archivists can link to their digitized documents that are relevant to the collection, without compromising their existing collections. This peer to peer sharing among collections would allow researchers greater access to documents that they may have missed in other searches.

The starting point of the Letters Home will begin with a pool of previously donated letters currently housed at The Army Historical Foundation. By using the existing letters, contributors will be shown an example of what information should be included when they upload their own scanned documents. Examples of data types, keywords, date formats, location formats and other relevant information will be provided not only by prompts when a user submits a scan, but also in preexisting examples. New users wishing to upload new content will be required to register on the site by creating a user name and submitting an email address. Because the user retains the original document, it is important to have a method by which the original document can be examined if needed. This should also help control forgeries, spam comments, and irrelevant reviews. Researchers, contributors and anyone browsing will have an opportunity to add their own comments and reviews to any public item. The use of a part-time moderator for the site would help monitor comments, data input and transcription errors. While registering should increase the self-policing nature of the site, the use of a part time moderator will insure integrity throughout.

The project will researcher from the high school level through college and beyond to post graduate and academic work. Letters Home will have two aspects by which it engages and interacts with the public. First utilizing a collective repository a new channel of source material will become open for new research possibilities. The second portion of the site will allow anyone to help “stuck” researchers find answers. User generated content is on the rise among millennial. In 2013 emarketer.com predicted nearly 155 million users consume some form of user-generated

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content, up from 116 million in 2008, ² and that number continues to grow as more people become comfortable with the emerging digital world. Marketing firm IPOS specializes in engaging younger crowds. In 2014, the company conducted a study which revealed millennials trusted their peers as reviewers “just as much as professional reviews” and User generated content is 20% more influential when it comes to purchasing, while it is 35% more memorable than other types of media. ³ It is this shift to a more crowd based research and approval ratings Letters Home will use to engage users from varying ages, backgrounds and professional fields.

Environmental Scan

The website will be based on the platform Omeka. Omeka has the capability to create exhibits and allow registered contributors in a simple easy to understand format it makes it a suitable base for Letters Home. Similar sites such as History Pin⁴, The Hurricane Digital Memory Bank,⁵ and Baltimore Uprising ⁶ have already utilized open source, user generated content to create digital collections. However, they are not as interactive and engaging as Letters Home intends to be. While they have been successful in capturing documents held in personal collections which could have been lost, the sites do not encourage peer to peer engagement on the same level. The National Archives, attempts to encourage participation through digital projects such as Citizen Archivist⁷, which allows anyone to transcribe previously digitized documents. It only allows the uploading documents already housed in the collection. It is also not built on a platform such as Omeka, but instead utilizes the social media photo sharing site Flickr.

Letters Home will utilize the positive aspects from the two different types of sites, the interactivity of Citizen Archivist with the open source user generated base of History Pin, The Hurricane Digital Memory Bank and the Baltimore Uprising sites to create a truly interactive, user generated web data base of letters to and from soldiers during World War II.

History and Duration of the Project

The need for this project became apparent during my internship at The Army Historical Foundation in 2014. As the foundation fundraises to build a National Museum for the United States Army, they are often contacted by family members who have recently inherited uniforms, photographs, letters and many other artifacts left behind by family members who have passed away. While the artifacts are valuable, the museum already has far too many artifacts than can be displayed. Uniforms and medals are the most abundantly donated items, and therefore there are plenty of them. Letters and photographs are more personal items than the government issued

² <http://www.emarketer.com/Article/Spotlight-on-UGC-Participants/1006914>

³ <http://www.corp.crowdtap.com/socialinfluence>

⁴ <https://www.historypin.org/>

⁵<http://hurricanearchive.org>

⁶ <http://baltimoreuprising2015.org>

⁷ <https://www.archives.gov/citizen-archivist/>

uniforms, but due to space there is nowhere to house them and often, people are reluctant to hand over such personal effects to hear they will be only be stored in boxes, more than likely never to be seen again. The letters are resources that can be utilized to tell the history of each soldier, or when viewed as a whole discern trends in warfare, the everyday life of a soldier and the relationships they maintain while deployed.

Having worked on The Encyclopedia of Milwaukee (EMKE)⁸ project as an undergraduate student, the value of open source history became clear. When “stuck” on where a photograph was taken, EMKE was able to utilize social media and other channels to survey a general audience as a resource. The combination of storage problems, in ability to share valuable resources and benefits of an open source platform, inspired Letters Home.

The project will take approximately 12 months of initial set up. At that time, the successes and failures of the project will be evaluated by the project director. The future of the site is dependent on community involvement.

Work Plan

Phase 1: Base exhibit building and web design (Spring 2016)

Goals of this phase include:

- Cultivating base exhibits to serve as a model for future uploads by contributors.
- Creating clear and concise instructions for contributors to register
- Creating clear and concise instructions for uploading procedures
- Building a base of keyword data for contributors to draw upon
- Refining the look of the website

During phase 1, the primary staff will include Danielle Eyre, program director and Eric Anderson, research assistant. Volunteers will be utilized as their skill sets allow.

The feedback from phase 1, will allow metrics on ease of utilization.

Phase 2: Testing and marketing (Summer of 2016)

Goals of this phase include:

- Testing the ease of upload with volunteers of various computer skill sets.
- Marketing to targeted groups such as archives, veterans groups, known collectors and those who have made contact with the Army Historical Foundation Previously to gauge interest levels.
- Moderation of incoming documents
- Increase ease of use and refine registration data base
- Determine how to utilize registration information for marketing

During phase 2, the staff from phase 1 will be retained and the addition of a moderator, second research assistant and a marketing associate will be added.

In addition to building on the feedback from phase 1, phase 2 feedback will allow the project director to target audiences and gauge participation metrics. By researching who will be using the site and what specific skill sets they already have the project director will utilize a web designer in phase 2 to refine difficult processes.

Phase 3: Going Live (Fall of 2016)

Goals of this phase include:

- Continued refinement of goals stated in phase 2
- Opening the site to general audiences
- Increased role of the moderator as sources are shared, reviewed and edited

⁸ <https://emke.uwm.edu/>

- Editing of perviously uploaded sources by multiple contributors

Phase 3 will add the project will be fully staffed. Marketing will continue based on metrics emerging from the fully operational site. Additionally the webmaster will play an important role in pinpointing problems with registration, uploading and general functionality of the site.

Staff

Project Director, Danielle Eyre will be active in all aspects of the project from inception to completion. She will be responsible for creating the base content and data sets. She will also evaluate the metrics and feedback as the site progresses.

Eric Anderson, will work as a research assistant. He will play an important role in uploading content and using the correct military terminology and protocols. He will also help guide relevant data fields needed to insure accurate search procedures.

Jonathan Ireland will serve as a part-time webmaster, he will handle technical difficulties as contributors join the project, and will use feed back from contributors to create a user friendly site.

Positions yet to be filled include:

A second research assistant who will do many of the same duties as Eric Anderson, and help digitize the sources already acquired but not yet made digital.

A part-time moderator will address authenticity issues and work closely with the project director and research assistants. This position will be responsible for monitoring comments and content for spam and possible forgeries.

A part-time marketing associate will help pinpoint a target audience in hopes of engaging the public.

Volunteers will be utilized as their talents dictate, but primarily will be used to test contributor functionality.

Final Project and Dissemination

Because the project is driven by user generated content, there is no set completion date. Instead the project will continue as long as the audience is engaged and add content. The project will be disseminated through the not yet built National Museum of the United States Army, as an interactive part of the “Army and Society” gallery that addresses the aspects of civilian/military relations. Due to open in June 2019, the project will continue to grow as people continue to search for a repository for personal effects. The opening of the museum will provide greater interest, and allow for expansion of the materials possibly to other wars or different types of artifacts.

While waiting for the completion of the museum, the site will be showcased at the Association of the United States Army’s annual meeting which is attended by current military members as well as those interested in preserving history.

Biographies

Project Director:

Danielle Eyre is a current master's student at George Mason University. She received her B.A. in History and Religious Studies from The University of Wisconsin- Milwaukee in 2014. She has worked previously on the Encyclopedia of Milwaukee as a research assistant and started at The Army Historical Foundation as an intern, where she created a protocol to digitize the in house archives.

Eric Anderson completed his master's in Library Science in 2015 and has worked as an intern at The Army Historical Foundation since 2010. He will play an important role in uploading content and using the correct military terminology and protocols. His library expertise will also help guide relevant data fields needed to insure accurate search procedures.

Jonathan Ireland received his B.A. in Communication and Information Technology in 2009 from George Mason University. He currently works as an engineer for a government contractor in Reston Virginia.

