3

Legacy Websites: The Case of *Slavery Images*:

A Visual Record of the African Slave Trade and Slave Life in the Early African Diaspora

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In the field of African diaspora studies, online educational resources emerged shortly after the public opening of the World Wide Web in the 1990s. Reflecting a rapid proliferation of digital humanities projects in the new millennium, the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) opened its Office of Digital Humanities in 2008. The founding director, Brett Bobley, explained that supporting digital projects was "high risk, high reward," wherein "the risk was that an experimental project might not succeed, but the reward was that if it did succeed it could have a positive impact on the field" (Hindley 2018). Having recently surpassed the ten-year anniversary of the establishment of the NEH's digital office, it has now become mandatory that all digital humanities projects demand data management and sustainability plans

to ensure long-term preservation and address the need for ongoing financial support to host websites as technologies rapidly and continuously evolve. A more pressing issue, however, is that some of the oldest digital humanities projects are at a major crossroad in terms of their long-term survival. The pioneers who created and developed some of the earliest digital resources have or are about to retire from their academic positions, and they have had to consider succession plans due to the human life cycle, or natural death.

As morbid as this reality is, younger scholars are having to fill directorial roles to conserve decades worth of collaborative research built into versions of software developed for rapidly advancing digital realities. At the turn of the twenty-first century, African diaspora historians, such as Gwendolyn Midlo Hall and David Eltis, published CD-ROMs built around impressive primary source datasets which quickly became obsolete due to new digital publication mediums via the internet (Eltis 1999; Hall 2000; Hall 2001; Eltis 2008). Scholars experimented with new computational technologies and different digital publication platforms to showcase academic output and to develop new tools which specifically address humanities-based problems. While the new innovations involving interdisciplinary collaborations have often been positive and impactful on the field, scholars are continuously wrestling with standardizing digital humanities best practices, which are quickly evolving as fast as the internet-based technologies around them.

This chapter explores the case of *Slavery Images: A Visual Record of the African Slave Trade and Slave Life in the Early African Diaspora* (www.slaveryimages.org). This website, which Jerome Handler and Michael Tuite created and developed starting in the late-1990s, came under the direction of Henry Lovejoy in January 2018. Long-standing digital humanities projects, which often involve large, interdisciplinary collaborations, should require digital project histories that explain the collaborative creation and development of the digital resource, data updates, transitions of directorships, and migration of digital resources.

The Making of *Slavery Images*

When Handler began accumulating images of slave life in the Americas and the Atlantic slave trade, the prospect of building a website was the furthest thing in his mind. In fact, the concept of "website" was not even in his consciousness. In retrospect, however, the collection of multimedia and metadata development for *Slavery Images* began at Southern Illinois University, Carbondale in the late-1980s. At the time, Handler was a professor of anthropology and had introduced an undergraduate anthropology course which focused on the Atlantic slave trade and the everyday life of enslaved Africans and their descendants in the Americas. Such a course was not then

(nor now) a conventional topic in anthropology. Handler attempted to illustrate every lecture with slides and overheads – a goal that was only partially achieved. His sole intention was to give students visual perspectives on the topics discussed in class. In hindsight, Handler was naïve in approaching visual images of slavery in published works. Little thought was given to historical accuracy or bibliographic issues. He selected images from a variety of well-known published secondary sources on New World slavery and the Atlantic slave trade (e.g., Davidson 1961; Mannix and Cowley 1962; Aguet 1971; Blassingame 1981). An archive of 100 to 150 photographic slides were accumulated with the help of Southern Illinois University's Learning Resources Services. These early efforts formed the core of the imagery on the current website, although Handler developed metadata over subsequent years.

After retiring from Southern Illinois in the fall of 1995, Handler moved to Charlottesville, Virginia, where he took up a fellowship at the Virginia Foundation for the Humanities, now known as Virginia Humanities. During this time, he had an idea for an NEH Summer Institute for College Teachers, which was to focus on the slave trade, particularly the middle passage and life aboard slave ships. A year later, he collaborated with a prominent Africanist historian at the University of Virginia, Joseph Miller (d. 2019), who suggested a somewhat different, albeit related, focus for the Institute. For four weeks during the summer of 1998, this co-directed program, called "ROOTS: the African Background of American Culture Through the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade," took place under the auspices of the Virginia Foundation for the Humanities. During the Institute, Handler gave a lecture using some of the slides he had collected at Southern Illinois. His talk focused on the lives of enslaved individuals for whom images and biographical information were available from primary or secondary sources (later amplified and modified; see Handler 2002).

Someone, perhaps Miller after he heard Handler's talk, suggested that Handler's slides should be digitized. At the time, Handler did not fully understand what "digitize" meant, but was directed to Michael Tuite, director of the Multimedia Resource Center, later renamed the Digital Media Center after it became part of the University of Virginia library. Tuite converted the slides into JPGs and TIFs, and suggested developing a database and later, building a website to bring the images to the attention of a much wider audience. Thus, the website, or idea of the website, was born in late-1998 or early-1999. In September 2000, the website launched with about 150 to 200 images and corresponding metadata arranged into ten topical categories. By November 2001, the site expanded to host close to 300 images; by spring 2002, 500 images; by August 2006, 1,200 images; by November 2010, 1,275, and in March or April 2011, it reached 1,281 images, the total number of images on the site when it was taken over by Henry Lovejoy in early 2018.

The images were arranged into eighteen topical categories, which, it should be stressed, were not mutually exclusive because many images fit into more than one category.

Handler and Tuite decided upon the domain name, www.slaveryimages. org, and titled the website, *The Atlantic Slave Trade and Slave Life in the Americas: A Visual Record*. From the beginning, there was a clear division of labor. Handler was responsible for the "scholarly" portion of the website. He located the images through research in scores of libraries and archival repositories, selected the images to be placed on the site, and obtained permissions, when necessary, for their publication online. In addition, he arranged for their scanning or photographing at the repository, created textual metadata accompanying each image, and developed the topical categories in which the images were organized. Tuite was entirely responsible for the technical aspects of the website. He designed it, built it, maintained it, and uploaded images. He first developed the database with Filemaker, but a few years later, he switched to MySQL. After Tuite left the project in 2006, the website was supported by the University of Virginia's Digital Media Lab, and then by the Virginia Foundation for the Humanities between 2007 and 2018.[2] When Lovejoy became director, *Slavery Images* functioned on PHP 5.6, which since December 2018 has gone unsupported for security fixes.

Handler's background, as a cultural anthropologist specializing in Caribbean and West African societies and cultures, informed his subjective and often arbitrary criteria for the project's scope, which shifted over time. The four key criteria, which remained constant over Handler's direction of the website, included: 1) The site would be selective and not strive to include every single image of enslaved Africans or even of pre-colonial continental Africans; 2) In all cases, efforts, not always realizable, were made to achieve some geographic and temporal balance to give a diaspora perspective on the lives of enslaved Africans and their New World descendants. In other words, Handler wanted to avoid overloading the site with images of enslaved people in the antebellum U.S. South, a corrective to conceptions of slavery held by most North Americans. 3) Ideal images were those based on eyewitness drawings, even if embellished by engravers/publishers before publication, emphasizing cultural features, social life, and material culture. Such images were especially desirable if they were accompanied by a textual description. 4) Images that were patently racist and grossly portray Africans or their descendants in negative stereotypes were not considered. Also, with a few exceptions, images that were political satires or cartoons produced during emancipation and abolition controversies were ignored. Such images were considered outside the scope of a website that focused on portraying, as realistically as possible, the everyday life of enslaved peoples and their experiences.

Accurate bibliographic information was of fundamental importance throughout the development of the metadata. It was felt essential that users should be able to trace individual images and have a starting point to judge their historical and pedagogical value for their own purposes. Every effort was therefore made to identify the original sources of the images and subsequent reproductions in published secondary works. It was discovered early on that commercial image repositories, which resell prints of historic images, often incorrectly cite the original sources of images, even if they bother to provide one at all. Moreover, these reproductions online, as well as in published works, often contain incorrect or misleading metadata. Authors/publishers who use these images compound the errors when they uncritically and unwittingly depend on such sources (Handler and Steiner 2006).

The most difficult images to acquire were portrayals of social scenes relating to the enslaved in the New World, for example, funerals, marriages, religious rituals, recreational activities, family, and community life. Images easier to obtain showed economic activities, such as plantation labor in sugar or cotton, local markets, and other aspects of slave societies, including physical punishments, fugitive slaves, and revolts. Finally, images were often included which were evocative of a particular cultural practice or event, even though their authenticity was problematic, i.e., the image was not based on direct observation or was a fabrication loosely based on some historical event.[3]

Over time, Handler's metadata increasingly located the images in historical context and included direct quotations from the caption and other textual materials that accompany the printed image, when available, and biographical information about the author and/or artist. For example, it can be useful to know if either the author or artist were first-hand observers, or whether they supported or opposed slavery and/or abolition. As with many digital projects, metadata revisions have been continuous and constant, while updates have occurred in real time, often without any public announcement.

From its very inception, *Slavery Images* has been envisioned as a tool and a resource that can be used by teachers, researchers, students, and the public – in brief, anyone interested in the experiences of Africans who were transported to the Americas and the lives of their descendants in the slave societies of the New World. By 2018, when Handler transferred *Slavery Images* to Lovejoy, Google Analytics had demonstrated how successful this website had become. Since 2007 (when the analytics code was first added), the site had attracted over 1.5 million new users on average at about 15,000 per month; and single page views totaled above 12 million hits. The analytics also show that this website is a popular educational resource with more users active during academic fall and winter semesters. The main visitor age categories are 18-24 (27 percent) and 25-34 (33 percent), suggesting it was primarily used among university students and likely among K-12 students too.[4] Frequent users

also include publishers seeking images to reproduce in books, college and university level teachers giving PowerPoint lectures in their classes, scholars giving PowerPoint presentations at professional meetings, etc.[5] Two-thirds of users originate in the United States, followed by thousands of users in the United Kingdom, Australia, Canada, France, Brazil and Germany. Persons in many other countries had also accessed the website.

Current Status of *Slavery Images*

After PHP 5.6 ended in late 2018, *Slavery Images* risked going offline and required redevelopment for longer term preservation. For financial and personnel reasons, Virginia Humanities no longer wished to host the website. Tuite had moved to California several years earlier, leaving Handler without a collaborator who had the technical expertise to maintain the website as well as redevelop it. Handler (who maintains his relationship with Virginia Humanities as a senior scholar) sought out a new director to lead this initiative and through mutual acquaintances he met Lovejoy, who had the scholarly interest and digital expertise to assume the directorship of the website. Lovejoy is an Assistant Professor of African diaspora and digital history at the University of Colorado Boulder (CU Boulder). With support from CU Boulder, Lovejoy collaborated with Brumfield Labs (www.brumfieldlabs. com), which specializes in developing software for historic documents and image repositories. By January 2019, Slavery Images had been updated to operate with Omeka-S (www.omeka.org/s), a web publishing platform capable of linking digital cultural heritage collections with other online resources. For example, Omeka-S can integrate coding from the International Image Interoperability Framework, commonly known as IIIF (www.iiif.io); and also with image viewers, such as Mirador (www.projectmirador.org). IIIF is a framework that has standardized the protocols on how an image should be saved/organized; thus, the Handler-Tuite image collection can be accessed uniformly from around the world.[6] Applying open-source web applications, frameworks and code to *Slavery Images* is helping to preserve this legacy website through wider distribution networks.

Maintaining and updating a digital project requires five-to-ten-year sustainability plans. *Slavery Images* currently resides on a privately-owned server, but it will migrate to CU Boulder soon. In order for the website to reside on a CU Boulder server, all metadata and imagery must adhere to strict accessibility regulations for the visually and hearing impaired.[7] While implementing these standards are in the long term plans, the current focus is on revising, editing and expanding Handler's metadata to conform to DCMI: DublinCore standards (www.dublincore.org). This data contained only five columns: URI, date, image title, image description and source. Since 2018,

Lovejoy, Tiffany Beebe and Travis May, graduate students in the History department at CU, began to parse out Handler's metadata into a more detailed spreadsheet whose columns are: URI, image creator, description, language, resource type, source, rights management, contributing institutions, object type, researcher, additional notes, approval to display and spatial coverage.

During the website's revision, its overall scope has maintained Handler's initial criteria for the selection of images and adherence to bibliographic accuracy. To preserve a complete record of background research, Lovejoy scanned and posted Handler's research notes, constituting two banker's boxes of paper files organized alphabetically.[8] He also partnered with UNESCO's "Slave Route Project: Resistance, Liberty, Heritage," to promote *Slavery Images*, during the United Nations' International Decade for People of African Descent (2015–2024). Efforts have been made to maintain the major elements of the website's original scope, but small modifications have occurred. For example, the project's short-title has been changed "*Slavery Images*" to reflect the URL www.slaveryimages.org. In addition, Lovejoy has replaced Handler's original image titles with the original caption found on the images. Using original titles facilitates learning, teaching, and citing each image more precisely.[9] The map category on the original website was deleted due to the existence of major cartography-focused digital projects (Hedges 2019; and Rizzo 2019).

As noted above*, Slavery Images* will continue to make every effort to ensure bibliographic accuracy and the correct identification of both primary and secondary sources from which the images have been obtained. Nonetheless, errors remain, especially when assigning precise dates to the historical imagery. In many cases, it is only possible to assign date ranges to certain images. In terms of Handler's textual descriptions, Lovejoy has been revising and editing these data into a standardized template, starting with: 1) a translation of the image title into English which is reconciled with previous transcriptions, translations and cataloguing; 2) an explanation of each image, which oftentimes includes a quote from the accompanying text; and 3) a short blurb about the author/artist to highlight bias of pro- or anti-slavery perspectives; and/or to indicate whether or not the author/artist had visited the location depicted. The descriptions also appear in alternative boxes for the visually impaired. Handler's references to secondary sources have also been cleaned, verified, and move into a separate field. Finally, each image has been assigned a geographic hierarchy to visualize image locations using Leaflet, which is now a major feature of the site's landing page. Lovejoy applied a geographical hierarchy based on continent, region, and city/town (for African regions see H. Lovejoy et al. 2021).

With most image repositories copyright is a major issue, but less so with *Slavery Images* because most images fall outside of copyright laws.[10] Almost all

historical images published on this website are in the public domain since they were produced before 1923 and are of fair use in many countries, especially for educational purposes. Although copyright law varies from country-to-country, significant portions of the images currently online were acquired in the U.S. at the John Carter Brown Library, Library Company of Philadelphia, Library of Congress, and the UVA Library, including its Department of Special Collections, among other institutions in Western Europe, particularly Great Britain. Other images were digitized by or donated to Handler specifically for re-publication online. As a final disclaimer, a lengthy permissions statement is adapted and based on the Library of Congress's policies surrounding the re-publication of open-source historical imagery.[11] All image metadata fall under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International license (www.creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0).

Conclusion

Most, if not all, African diaspora-related websites provide explanations about the scholarly resource, the project team and acknowledgments. These project descriptions often appear online as static webpages generally called, "About," "Project Overview," "Acknowledgements" and/or "Contributors." However, these sections frequently change with each new website release and/or at other key milestones, especially as collaborators join or leave the digital project. By publishing a project history at key intervals, such as this chapter, not only ensures a durable record of the project participants created at a moment in time, but also it provides a chronological marker of major developmental phases to help gauge past accomplishments and future directions. Having a record of the decision-making process behind educational website development, including providing recognition to the interdisciplinary collaborative process, is best practice. Without project histories, the collaborative process, especially the names of people involved in the backend development at different stages, may be overlooked and/or disappear from memory.

Endnotes

1   We would like to acknowledge Tiffany Beebe, Ben Brumfield, Sara Brumfield, Matt Gibson, Worthy Martin, Travis May, and Will Rourk for helping with the relaunch of the website in January 2019. The relaunch and sustainability of *Slavery Images* would not have been possible without the support of the University of Colorado Boulder's Center for the Humanities and the Arts, College of Arts and Sciences, Department of History, Graduate School, Office of Research Computing, and Research and Innovation Office.

2   In late 2006, Tuite left the Digital Media Lab in the University of Virginia library to pursue a PhD in Environmental Studies at UVA. He received the degree in 2012 and joined the Jet Propulsion Lab at CalTech, where he now manages the Astrobio-

geochemistry Lab. For more information see J. S. Handler, "Project History" and "Acknowledgments," *Slavery Images*, www.slaveryimages.org/s/slaveryimages/page/history and www.slaveryimages.org/s/slaveryimages/page/acknowledgements (accessed 2020).

3   A good example, often reproduced in historical works of the United States with the implication that the event was directly observed by the artist, is an image of the landing of enslaved Africans in Virginia, an event that took place in 1619; the image itself, however, was created around 1900 by a well-known American illustrator, Howard Pyle (1853-1911). See "Untitled Image (Enslaved Africans Landed at American Port)," *Slavery Images* (Accessed 2019), H022, www.slaveryimages.org/s/slaveryimages/item/1977.

4   Unfortunately, these statistics do not include the period between 2000 and 2007, or data for users in the K-12 demographic, which would likely increase user totals overall.

5   Even though scholars and publishers frequently reach out to request permissions to reproduce images, *Slavery Images*, and particularly its metadata, are rarely, if ever, acknowledged.

6   Email with Kartikay Chadha, 15 October 2019.

7   See "Digital Accessibility Program," *University of Colorado Boulder* (accessed 2019), www.colorado.edu/accessible-technology/digital-accessibility-program.

8   "Jerome S. Handler's Research Notes," *Slavery Images* (accessed 2019), www.104.200.20.178/s/slaveryimages/page/handler-notes.

9   If a source did not include a title or caption for an image, then "Untitled Image" is specified followed by a brief description of the image in parenthesis.

10   See the Copyright Term Extension Act; *Bridgeman Art Library v. Corel Corporation*, 36 F. Supp. 2d 191 (S.D.N.Y. 1999); and Intellectual Property Office of the United Kingdom, and by extension the Court of Justice of the European Union, "Copyright Notice: Digital Images, Photographs and the Internet" (November 2015).

11   See "Copyright," *Slavery Images* (Accessed in 2018), www.slaveryimages.org/s/slaveryimages/page/copyright; Anonymous, "Copyright and Other Restrictions That Apply to Publication/Distribution of Images: Assessing the Risk of Using a P&P Image," *Library of Congress* (Accessed 2018), www.maint.loc.gov/index.html; Anon., "Legal Disclaimer," *Library of Congress* (accessed 2018), www.loc.gov/legal.