



Innovative Case Study

BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS: KANSAS CITY PUBLIC LIBRARY'S AWARD-WINNING CIVIL WAR WEBSITE

In anticipation of the 150th anniversary year of the Civil War, the Missouri State Library approached the Kansas City Public Library (KCPL) to create a digital resource that would capture its history in the region from start to finish. Accepting the challenge, KCPL staff wanted to go beyond what their current digital asset management tool offered in terms of the amount and types of content, data description, and overall user experience. The resulting digital asset resource, *The Civil War on the Western Border: the Missouri-Kansas Conflict (1854-1865)*, won several awards including the prestigious Roy Rosenzweig Prize for Innovation in Digital History from the American Historical Association.

If a key goal of many public libraries is to be used to their fullest, then building relationships with the community is essential. For this project, relationships with local archives and expert researchers would have to be built and leveraged. The library also approached Innovative to provide a digital asset management tool. Innovative's Vital digital asset management system was a perfect solution to handle a unique, specialized set of metadata and improve the user experience.

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— Jason Roe,
Digital History Specialist

Challenge

The various archival items of value were scattered across the state. Most of the items had not been digitized nor made available on the Web. This was also a specialized topic and the scholarly literature was not abundant enough to complement what they had.

Another need was to transform the user experience of a digital collection. According to David LaCrone, Digital Branch Manager at KCPL: “We wanted to get away from a model where a generic display of documents appear randomly in isolation.” The challenge was to create not only a great discovery experience but also a rich learning experience for its users. In the past, KCPL had a history resource but it did not offer historical objects in the context of other objects, nor connect with related research like scholarship, analysis, images, timelines, and maps. The proper data relationships were needed to make the archive a more engaging and immersive experience.

It is difficult for a user to extend a browsing session when the broader relationships of a given item are not available on the record browse. What was needed was a way of encountering a digital object their its greater context rather than as an end result of a search session. For example, two people may have photographs, but there is not an immediate way to tell if one met the other in battle or had a family relationship. The ability to link directly to related items would be a new experience and have promotional value. LaCrone says: “We wanted this kind of internal promotion that you see on news sites when related articles are displayed along with the main story.” Staff also wanted to draw attention to the institutions that contributed content.



Solution

The first step was to gather new resources and stimulate knowledge creation on the topic. The staff built new relationships with the history community, making in-person visits to 25 regional organizations as far away as 250 miles, from large academic libraries to small volunteer-run historical societies. Items previously unavailable on the Web were first scanned on-site.

Library staff also facilitated knowledge creation by approaching scholars and soliciting their contributions on this very specific topic. "Each of these essays was tagged with thematic categories and events," says Digital History Specialist Jason Roe, "and Vital pulls in the relevant documents to the relevant record."

In addition to relationships with scholars and archives, the relationships among items in their digital collection came into play. Staff created new authority content and metadata that would express new connections between digital objects. New connections ranged from who-faced-whom in a Civil War skirmish to who witnessed a robbery. These new sophisticated, relational metadata categories were loaded into the Vital repository and would inform the relationships between digital objects. This required a significant time investment but the result is stunning for the user. The process included examining the objects, identifying possible connections, and creating metadata for Innovative's Vital implementation. "We got creative," LaCrone says, creating metadata that joined people, events, timelines places and organizations. Here are just a few:

- parent of - child of
- commanded - commanded by
- witnessed - witnessed by
- encountered the aftermath of - aftermath encountered by
- killed - killed by
- killed in - saw death of
- captured - captured by
- captured in - saw capture of
- imprisoned in - saw imprisonment of
- attacked - attacked by
- wounded in - saw wounding of

When visitors read an article they will see a historical object link, entries from the timeline, and the map. This minimizes dead ends and promotes happy accidents for the searcher. "Displaying relationships captures the way historians read documents," Roe says.

The new connections among documents allow users to verify their accuracy, making the resource a prime research tool. "We can concretely prove the relationships with digital objects or reliable academic sources," says LaCrone. "For example, we can know that one person killed another, because five related documents mention it. Gradually, the researcher uncovers new connections during a search session."

The response to the website from the community has been strong, in terms of visits - 11,000 sessions in April, 2015 - and attention from scholars and historical organizations. Most importantly, the community has a rich resource that makes the most of the content of the collections and know-how of its librarians. KCPL has created a digital library that goes beyond the presentation of information. Says LaCrone: "The biggest benefit we provide is a rich educational experience for our users."

On the web: <http://www.civilwaronthewesternborder.org>

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— David LaCrone,
Digital Branch
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"Libraries such as KCPL are taking advantage of Vital to create a more complete user experience, by leveraging its ability to present a rich variety of content in an Web environment that fits their community's needs."

— Heather Myers
Director, Portals
and Platforms
Development
at Innovative

