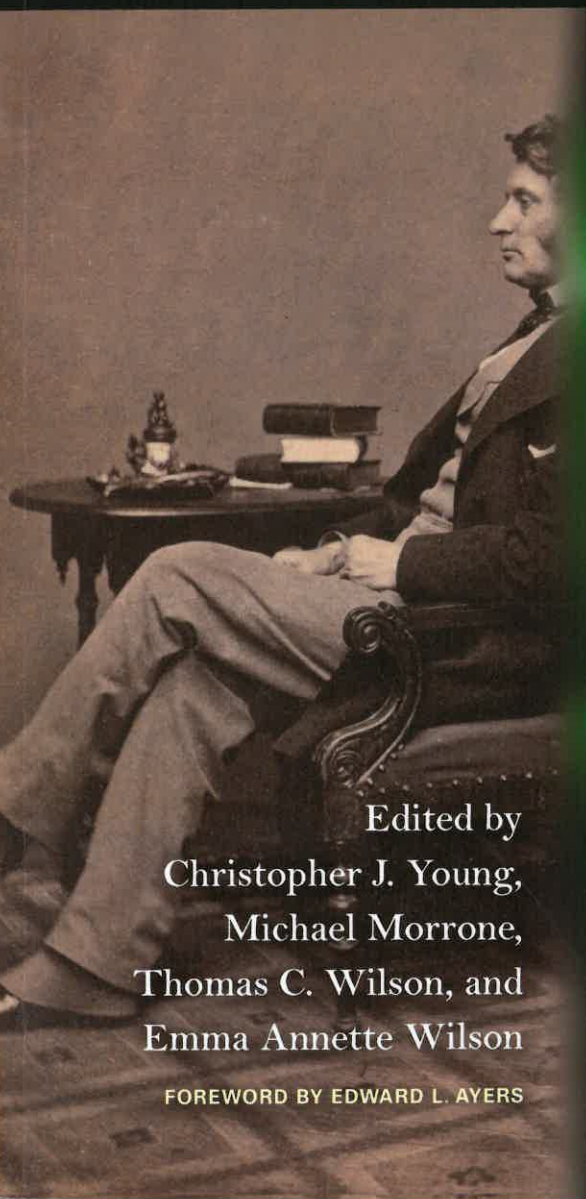


QUICK HITS

for TEACHING with
DIGITAL HUMANITIES

Successful Strategies from Award-Winning Teachers



Edited by
Christopher J. Young,
Michael Morrone,
Thomas C. Wilson, and
Emma Annette Wilson

FOREWORD BY EDWARD L. AYERS

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TWO



Close Reading and Coding with the Seward Family Digital Archive

Digital Documentary Editing in the Undergraduate History Classroom

CAMDEN BURD

*Andrew W. Mellon Postdoctoral Research Fellow
at the New York Botanical Garden*

THE SEWARD FAMILY DIGITAL ARCHIVE is a digital documentary-editing project based at the University of Rochester that focuses on the family papers of nineteenth-century politician and diplomat William Henry Seward. The project features several thousand digitized, transcribed, and annotated letters spanning three generations of the Seward family. Unlike other documentary-editing projects, the Seward Family Digital Archive is a truly collaborative endeavor that relies on contributions from faculty, graduate and undergraduate students, and volunteers.¹ As the Text Encoding Initiative (TEI) and Technologies manager for the Seward Family Digital Archive, I maintain the project's TEI standards and introduce students to the technological skills needed to contribute to the digital documentary-editing project. In this chapter, I describe the structure of project-related courses and the methods by which students contribute innovatively to the Seward Family Digital Archive through a combination of seminar-style readings, historical research, and coding.

HISTORY OF THE SEWARD FAMILY DIGITAL ARCHIVE

Since the Seward Family Digital Archive began in 2013, Professor Thomas Slaughter, along with project managers, designed a series of courses exploring

themes found within the family letters. Although we planned to incorporate digital tools into the curriculum, we never described them as “digital history” courses.² We do not emphasize the use of new technology, a focus on “tool training,” or advanced digital concepts as defining components of the courses. Rather, the project-related curriculum resembles that of many reading seminars.³ Students engage with secondary readings and discuss particular themes relating to the nineteenth-century correspondence: family, friendship, gender, and adolescence in the nineteenth century. The assigned readings and subsequent discussions prepare students for the themes found within the correspondence and provide them with the foundations to be informed digital documentary editors. Students receive eight to ten digital copies of Seward correspondence to supplement their readings. As written into the requirements of the course, we task students to transcribe, annotate, and mark up the letters using extensible markup language (XML), in preparation for publication in the digital archive.

COURSE DESIGN

The structure of the course emphasizes an in-depth study of the family's correspondence through a method of “close reading.” Designed for studying the many layers of a particular document, close reading is a method of literary criticism that encourages a deeper engagement into a smaller number of texts. One group of scholars defines close reading as “the analysis of individuals, events, and ideas, [and] their development and interaction” within a given text.⁴ The methods used in close reading resemble many of the elements identified in the Reading VALUE Rubric compiled by the Association of American Colleges and Universities, including comprehension, relationship to text, analysis, interpretation, and readers' voice. Historians utilize close reading as a method for examining all elements of a historical document. Students explore the contents of a letter in its historical context. Who wrote the letter? Where was the letter written? Who and what was mentioned in the correspondence? How does knowing the recipient shape or change how the letter was originally written? Students rely on primary source research in order to answer the questions embedded in each document. As they comb through census records, government documents, newspapers, and books, students must identify and annotate the individuals, places, and bodies of literature mentioned within their assigned correspondence.

As students undergo the process of historical research, they begin to unravel the many layers of personal connections of this prominent nineteenth-century family. We ask them to discuss the significant themes in letters and the

Tuesday morning
7th June 1864

My dear Sir,

This is the names
of who I have already
spoken.

He was understood
sometime ago that he
was to have a Cer-
tificate in the West
Indies. But he now
inclines to remain
in Boston. I hope he
can have it.

Faithfully yours,
Charles Sumner

Figure 2.1. Letter from Charles Sumner to William Henry Seward, June 7, 1864. Seward Family Archives, University of Rochester.

personal connections behind them. Is a named individual a religious leader, politician, neighbor, distant family member, or simply an acquaintance? How does that affect how the author or recipient might discuss slavery, politics, or business? Students follow traces of town gossip, political happenings, physical ailments, business plans, and the varying aspects of family life as they appear in the correspondence. The seminar-style readings, assigned throughout the semester, help place the individual themes and named individuals into a larger historical context. The combination of close reading and seminar discussions allows students to fully grasp the Seward family in their social, cultural, and political milieu.

The students' research also contributes to the overall structure of the Seward Family Digital Archive. Every time they identify new individuals, books, or

geographic locations, they enter the information into our extensive databases of nearly 5,000 individuals, 1,300 geographic locations, and 4,000 published works. Student research offers a unique opportunity to discuss the production and distribution of historical information in the digital age. Students quickly become aware of the inherent biases of the historical record when they struggle to find supplemental documentation for house servants, slaves, and freedmen mentioned in the correspondence during the research process. Additionally, students realize the difficulty of identifying the young, unmarried women mentioned in their letters due to nineteenth-century naming conventions. Although census records, birth and death certificates, church records, and county histories offer insights in some cases, students are forced to identify these individuals as "unknown." Through a close read and research of the assigned correspondence, students recognize the potential shortcomings of digital documentary-editing projects that still rely on traditional sources to share information—an important lesson that demonstrates the limits of technology in the digital age.

FINDING THE APPROPRIATE XML TAGS

In addition to research, students of varying technical and disciplinary backgrounds learn basic coding in order to publish their historical findings in the archive.⁵ Digital humanists favor TEI due to its limited set of XML tags used to describe literary texts, historical documents, and other materials that might be of interest to scholars. TEI tags describe the contents of a text rather than the document's appearance on the web. Digital projects maintain unique project guidelines based on the larger standards supported by the TEI consortium. Although every project focuses on different aspects of the documents, they each follow a set of rules laid out by the TEI consortium.⁶ Using a basic coding schema, students in project-related courses transform their transcriptions into digitized and machine-readable documents. XML, in particular, provides an entry point for undergraduate students. Although the structure of the code is similar to more advanced languages, the vocabulary is straightforward and legible to students with less coding experience. After spending one class discussing the most common tags used to identify individual people (<persName>), places (<placeName>), and bodies of literature (<bib>), students begin to mark up their XML files only referring back to the Seward Family Digital Archive guidelines for the less common editorial elements. We dedicate an additional four class sessions for collaborative markup and to discuss the code's structure and capabilities. Unlike many humanities courses that focus on isolated

archival research, the Seward Family Digital Archive encourages collaboration and group dialogue throughout the research and digital-editing process. Undergraduate students come to rely on one another through peer learning in order to troubleshoot certain elements of code and complete the markup of their letters. Through collaboration and group coding sessions, students successfully research, transcribe, annotate, and mark up their assigned correspondence. Before the semester ends, students are able to view their published letters on the Seward Family Digital Archive.

CONCLUSION

The Seward Family Digital Archive serves as a model for those historians looking to incorporate digital tools into the classroom. Through a close read of nineteenth-century correspondence, students engage in historical research methods familiar to traditional history courses. Rather than assign students a conventional research paper, though, we provide a platform for undergraduates to contribute to a grant-funded and collaborative digital documentary-editing project. The incorporation of TEI and XML coding into the classroom allows students to engage with course material and share their research in innovative ways. Additionally, by introducing basic coding into the undergraduate classroom, students discover, learn, and master new digital skills necessary to share this unique collection with a wider audience—skills that students will be expected to know in an increasingly digital age. Over the past three years, the Seward Family Digital Archive has successfully incorporated digital tools into the classroom as a means of deepening historical study while providing a platform for introducing students to new technological concepts and tools.

NOTES

1. Seward Family Digital Archive Project, University of Rochester, Seward Family Digital Archive, <https://sewardproject.org/>. On the impact of digital projects as a collaborative work, see Matthew K. Gold and Jim Groom, "Looking for Whitman: A Grand, Aggregated Experiment," *Debates in the Digital Humanities* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012), 406–408.
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3. Kara Kennedy, "A Long Belated Welcome: Accepting Digital Humanities Methods into Non-DH Classrooms," *Digital Humanities Quarterly* 11, no. 3

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5. Neil Selwyn, "The Digital Native—Myth and Reality," *Aslib Proceedings* 61, no. 4 (2009): 364–379.

6. *Text Encoding Initiative*, accessed February 11, 2020, <https://tei-c.org/>.