Visualizing Objects, Places, and Spaces: A Digital Project Handbook •

Archiving Women and Slavery in Virginia

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Author & Project Role

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Roles: Assistant Professor

Learning Objectives

What did you want students to be able to do by completing this assignment?

- Develop familiarity with archival research methods.
- Synthesize primary sources about women's experiences of slavery.
- Navigate digital research databases.

Technology-Dependent Learning Outcomes

Was there anything this assignment taught students that you felt they wouldn't have been able to learn through other types of class assignments?

This assignment taught students how to use online research databases that they are not typically familiar with and that many of them had never used before. They also learned how to experiment with search terms to produce the desired results.

Historians frequently visit physical archives and special collections at libraries, museums, and historical societies to identify primary sources. However, COVID-19 has required researchers—whether they are professional historians or students of history—to draw on innovative methods because of travel restrictions and limited physical access to archival materials. This project required students to exclusively use digital materials, which they would not have done for other types of assignments.

Skill Level

What is the course title and level?

“Women and Slavery in the Black Atlantic” is an intermediate, 200-level undergraduate history course.

What kinds of prior knowledge is necessary to complete this assignment? How do students gain this knowledge?

Students do not need prior knowledge about archival research in order to successfully complete this assignment. Many students enrolled in this course were non-majors, and some were first-year students. Students entered the course with varying levels of exposure to history as a discipline. Nevertheless, they all gained the necessary background knowledge to complete the archival research project through completing in-class assignments with databases about slavery on a regular basis throughout the semester.

Assignment Description

This research project tasked students with creating an archival collection about enslaved and slaveholding women's experiences in Virginia using digitized primary source materials. Smaller in-class activities using digital archives culminated in a larger, final research project. Each student was required to select 10 primary sources and to write a short description (around 1 paragraph) of each document that summarized it and briefly explained what it tells us about women and slavery. Students submitted a list of their respective sources with links to each document in addition to their descriptions. I provided students with a list of existing digital archives as a starting point and encouraged them to do independent research beyond the collections I identified as they completed the project.

Time Needed

How much time did you allot to this project?

I advised students to begin working on their projects in the final four weeks of class. Two weeks before our final class meeting, students had approximately 30 minutes of class time to work on their projects in small groups and to discuss their progress with each other. They then had a week to complete this assignment during the final exam period.

Support & Training

What kinds of support or training did you provide to help students learn to use new techniques or specialized tools?

In order to prepare students for the final project, I led frequent tutorials on how to use different primary source databases about slavery including [Accessible Archives](#); [Slave Voyages](#); [Freedom on the Move](#); [Slavery and Anti-Slavery: A Transnational Archive](#); [Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project](#); and more. After introducing students to a database and walking them through its key features, students perused it for 10-15 minutes. Then the class broke into small groups to answer specific questions together. For example, after introducing students to the Freedom on the Move database, which contains newspaper advertisements for fugitives from slavery, students were asked to interpret the primary sources they encountered. Discussion questions included “What types of labor did enslaved people perform?”; “What qualities were valued among enslaved people, in general?”; and “What qualities were valued among enslaved women?” While discussing other databases, like Accessible Archives, small group discussions examined students’ search process, what kinds of challenges they faced, and how they narrowed down their results. We then held a whole-group discussion about the strengths and limitations of the database. Exposing students to different primary source collections every 1-2 weeks provided them with the hands-on experience to work with the databases independently for the archival research project.

Resources

Did you need any specialized equipment, tools, or human resources to make this assignment feasible? If so, please describe.

This assignment did not require specialized equipment, tools, or human resources. Students are able to complete the project with a computer and an internet connection.

Assessment

How did you assess or grade this project?

Students' grades were based on the appropriateness of their document choice and their descriptions of the documents. I provided a rubric to students at the beginning of the semester.

The documents were graded on a scale of 1-4 with points being awarded as follows:

4 – primary source that explicitly discusses women and slavery in Virginia; clear fit for class's archival collection;

3 – primary source that discusses slavery in Virginia or women but not both; implicit connection to class's archival collection;

2 – 19th-century primary source that does not discuss slavery; unclear connection to class's archival collection;

1 – source is not about the 19th century; unrelated to class's archival collection.

Descriptions were graded on a scale of 1-3 with points being awarded as follows:

3 – exceeds expectations;

2 – meets expectations;

1 – needs improvement

Challenges & Opportunities

If you assigned this project again, would you change anything? If so, what?

When I assign this project in the future, I would like to hold an informational session with library staff towards the beginning of the semester so that they can introduce students to databases and other resources that are available through the university, including databases related to African American history and women's history. My ultimate goal with this project when I assign it in the future is to compile students' sources into a public resource. Towards that end, I envision collaborating with my institution's archivists or digital humanities librarian to arrange individual students'

submissions into a complete archival collection that would be accessible to the general public.

All students submitted their lists as Word documents including the bibliographical information for their documents; however, they did not use a standardized format. Some students submitted a list with links to their sources, others included screenshots of their sources, and some submitted both. Students who submitted images primarily did so for sources that did not have stable links, such as newspaper articles on Accessible Archives. In the future, I would provide students with a Google form, spreadsheet, or Word document template that would offer them a standard structure for their final submissions. I anticipate that this change would facilitate the process of compiling sources into a publicly-available finding aid. I would also build time into the course for students to work collaboratively at the end of the semester compiling their sources. Alternatively, an undergraduate research assistant or workstudy student might be tasked with compiling the sources after the semester is complete.

Describe any trouble spots or complications someone else might want to be aware of before trying a similar assignment in a course of their own.

A potential issue that others may encounter in reproducing this assignment is that links to individual sources might not be stable. Some databases, like [Accessible Archives](#), do not allow users to send or reuse links that go directly to a specific document. As such, some students identified sources they would have liked to use and saved the link, but could not access the document after that. Possible solutions to this problem are for students to save screenshots of the documents they are referencing, or for students to save their documents as a PDF.

Banner Image Credit: [Washington and Lee University Special Collections and Archives](#)