"American Memory" Re-Imagined: Alternative Interfaces for Online Historical Collections
Phase I: "Everyday Life in Extraordinary Times, 1861-1865"
Proposal for NINES Workshop in Digital Scholarship
January, 2005

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"'American Memory' Re-Imagined: Alternative Interfaces for Online Historical Collections" is a demonstration project to present previously digitized items from Library of Congress' online collections in alternative formats that expand their potential uses for digital scholarship and education. "Everyday Life in Extraordinary Times, 1861-1865" is our first document set, drawn from materials already available in digital form.

As two scholars with Ph.D.'s in American Studies, working primarily among librarians, we have often wished we could just *show* our colleagues what an alternative, scholar-friendly interface to currently digitized materials would allow. At some point it occurred to us that we could—but probably only if we did the work ourselves! Our interest was further inspired by a visit we made to Charlottesville last February to meet with Jillian Galle of the Digital Archaeological Archive of Chesapeake Slavery (DAACS), where we learned about the versatile features of their Web site, and the close involvement of scholars in their initial database design.

Text searchability alone has revolutionized study of historical documents of all kinds. In its rush to digitize an incredibly rich range of materials, making them accessible to ever wider audiences, the Library of Congress has not had the luxury to consider the full potential of SGML, and now XML—together with creative use of relational databases—as further aids to research, interpretation, and educational use of our materials. Custom tags within a document might, for example, flag correspondence to LC subject terms, or allow users to sort the contents of a document by theme, to juxtapose documents from separate online collections, or to search on conceptual categories that can't be retrieved using conventional search strings. Further, although libraries have long organized their holdings into "collections," these sometimes-artificial groupings don't necessarily correspond to the needs of a particular scholar or project. Nor do libraries realize the extent to which their grouping of materials is interpretive. What if users of our Web site could group together items in a way that best suited their own research needs rather than our institutional ones?

We envision a future where digitized historical documents of all kinds might be gathered into a sort of scholarly conversation, extracted from their permanent online framework and available to individuals or collaborative communities of scholars for markup, searching, sorting, annotation, and analysis according to their own criteria, not ours. In librarian terms, we hope to construct a vocabulary of scholarly metadata and an implementation for searching it that both complements and enhances the cataloguing rules prescribed by conventional Library Science. We also hope our expanded approach to metadata can enhance the searchability of graphic materials, including photographs, maps, scrapbooks, and the like.

Our first challenge, of course, has been to identify a set of appropriate documents within the Library of Congress's vast *American Memory Historical Collections* (<http://memory.loc.gov>). "Everyday Life in Extraordinary Times, 1861-1865" will be our first assemblage of materials. We have settled on the time frame of the Civil War because of its broad coverage on the

American Memory site, along with the variety of document types available and the wide-ranging interest among Library staff and Web site users in this period. Wanting to draw attention to a "usual" topic in unusual ways, we are selecting several groups of manuscript/unpublished sources that share an original logical grouping, and yet arise from markedly different contexts, in the hope that juxtaposing these materials will encourage new ways to think about them.

Our "Everyday Life in Extraordinary Times" document set so far includes:

- from *A Civil War Soldier in the Wild Cat Regiment,* 46 letters from one family;
- from *Washington during the Civil War: The Diary of Horatio Nelson Taft,* 3 volumes;
- from *Words and Deeds in American History*, Civil War photograph album, 200 photographs assembled during the War;
- from *Civil War Maps*, selected images;
- from *The Frederick Douglass Papers, The Abraham Lincoln Papers, The Alexander Graham Bell Family Papers,* selected letters.

Should we later decide to include either printed materials or previously printed transcriptions of manuscript items (or to do our own transcriptions of existing "page images" in order to enhance the project), hundreds of additional items are available in some dozen collections—a large group that would allow us to diversify our document set in terms of gender and race as well as perspective.

Our challenges in this project are several. First, institutional support is limited, and we will be doing the XML markup and HTML display for this demonstration project on our own. We can also expect that if, at a later stage, the project is picked up by the Library's leadership, it will face many challenges and changes before it becomes public. How do we create something that is weighty yet flexible, of a professional quality yet still somewhat provisional—therefore suited to the exigencies of our institution's political climate?

On a more theoretical footing, how do we decide what it is we're marking? How much annotation should we include? In order to explore this question further we have settled on three trial approaches, which we label Library, Literary, and Cultural, respectively. They are:

- Library: thematic marking of texts according to Library of Congress subject headings;
- Literary: markup used to signal the intertextuality and enhance the hypertextual uses of juxtaposed texts, with annotations that both analyze and contextualize the works;
- Cultural: systematic marking of texts using cultural categories from the *Outline of Cultural Materials* employed by Yale's Human Relations Area Files project in cultural anthropology.

Our first implementation is marking the diary of Horatio Nelson Taft, one volume at a time, in each of these ways. We are only at the start of the markup.

Like many academics in more "traditional" research environments, we have started this project with great enthusiasm and limited local support. If selected to join the NINES workshop, we hope to arrive in Charlottesville with at least a beginner's level of experience and a sample in hand—some version of some degree of markup of Taft's diary. We see the workshop as an opportunity to evaluate our project so far, and to draw on the collective wisdom of the other participants as we move forward. The scope of our longer term goals will in part depend on our ability to gain support from our peers. Our participation this summer will not only provide us an