The Vault at Pfaff's: An Online Archive of Works by
American Bohemian Writers and Artists of the Nineteenth Century

A proposal for the NINES 2005 summer workshop submitted by
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in collaboration with the Lehigh University Digital Library Team (http://digital.lib.lehigh.edu/)

I. ONE-SENTENCE PROJECT DESCRIPTION
The Vault at Pfaff's is an online archive of the texts and images produced by the group of self-styled bohemian writers and artists—including Walt Whitman, poet/actress Adah Mencken, journalist Henry Clapp, playwright John Brougham, and artist Elihu Vedder—who frequented Charles Pfaff's pub in lower Manhattan during the mid-nineteenth century.

II. DETAILED PROJECT DESCRIPTION
Scholarly Rationale for the Project
From about 1855 to 1870, Pfaff's beer cellar on 653 Broadway was a gathering place for a group of New York writers and artists who attempted to recreate the bohemian lifestyle that Henri Murger described in his *Scènes de la Vie de Bohême* (1851). The Pfaff's bohemians have been briefly mentioned in literary histories and biographies of Walt Whitman since the early twentieth century, but no resource has ever brought together all of the Pfaffians' novels, poems, artworks, plays, and travelogues in a context that showcases their achievements as a literary movement and their contributions to nineteenth-century American culture. *The Vault at Pfaff's*—its title taken from an unfinished Whitman poem that begins, "The Vault at Pfaff's where the drinkers and laughers meet to eat and drink and carouse"—collects these texts and images in an effort to recover a neglected moment of American literary history. In addition, *The Vault at Pfaff's* allows users to explore how a group of writers and artists whose bohemian subculture clashed with the values of the larger nation were able to negotiate their status as social outsiders with a desire to have their creative works accepted into mainstream culture.

The Pfaffians, who simultaneously rejected cultural norms while they clamored for public acceptance, were as adept at flaunting social taboos as they were at claiming a place for themselves in the wider society. For example, at Pfaff's Whitman was part of the "Fred Gray Association" (a group of young men who pushed the erotic boundaries of male homosocialty) at the same time that he promoted *Leaves of Grass* as a book of popular American poetry. Similarly, Adah Mencken achieved celebrity status as an actress and poet in part because of her reputation of appearing virtually nude on stage and her high-profile romantic relationships with such men as Alexandre Dumas and the boxer John Heenan.

The Pfaff's bohemians are an early example of the tendency for counter-cultural movements in the United States to become eventually co-opted into the popular culture. *The Vault at Pfaff's* presents scholars with the materials for investigating the dynamics of this phenomenon, along with providing the resources for understanding how New York writers and artists in the nineteenth century created a model for the kind of anti-establishment urban identity that would dominate the fields of art, literature, and drama in the twentieth century. While traditional histories of American literature identify the utopian communities of transcendentalist New England as the origins of American literature, *The Vault at Pfaff's* brings to the fore a group of writers and artists who pioneered a bohemian utopia that many literary movements in the United States have since patterned themselves after.

Technical and Theoretical Problems Facing the Project
The major technical and theoretical problems facing the project regard presenting the relationships among the Pfaffians themselves and the Pfaffians' position within a society whose values they rejected but whose praise they nevertheless sought out. For example, how can digital media be used to illustrate the reciprocal influence between Adah Mencken's poem "Myself" and Whitman's "Song of Myself"? How can digital media be used to conceptualize the relationship between John Brougham's anti-patriotic play *Columbus, El Flilbustero* and the high-profile theater company—a company that staged performances for both business tycoons and U.S. presidents—that produced it? Merely gathering all of the art and literature that the Pfaffians produced onto a single website does not sufficiently communicate the complex relationship of one Pfaffian to another, nor does it adequately describe the position of the Pfaff's bohemians within the larger culture. *The Vault at Pfaff's* needs to devise a way of visualizing the web of connections surrounding this body of work in a way that adequately illustrates these writers' relationships with each other and with the nation they sought both to escape and to embrace.

Expected Duration, Phases, and Current State of the Project
The planning stage of this project began in the fall of 2004, a stage that involved researching the Pfaffians, compiling a list of writers and artists to include on the site, and identifying works for digitization. (The Director of Special Collections at Lehigh University, who is collaborating on this project, has already acquired many of these works; getting access to those works that are not available for purchase will require collaborating with other institutions at a later stage of the project.) One of the goals for the spring of 2005 is to apply for a number of different grants. We have already sent a brief description of the project to a program director at the NEH, who has expressed interest and has provided helpful advice about how to write a winning grant proposal. Another goal for the spring of 2005 is to upgrade the beta site that we are currently using to hold and sort information and build the basic architecture of the site itself. We also plan to design a set of preliminary pages by late April in preparation for a presentation I will make about *The Vault at Pfaff's* at Rutgers University's "Whitman and Place" conference.

Completing the core of this project—digitizing the texts, illustrating the connections between the writers and their culture, and providing a rich historical context for the writers and their works—could take four or five more years. Once the core of the project has been completed we have a number of supplementary projects that we plan to work on for several years after that, such as creating teaching modules for situating the Pfaffians in U.S. literary history and the history of international bohemian movements.

Technical Support Available
The Digital Library Team at Lehigh University—which is composed of two full-time employees who are aided by Library Services' professional staff in development and implementation of projects—is committed to providing the necessary technological infrastructure to create and maintain a viable Web presence for *The Vault at Pfaff's*. Lehigh's Digital Library owns a Microtek ScanMaker 9800XL flatbed scanner (which captures images at up to 48-bit color and has an oversized bed that allows for tabloid-size material scanning), a Minolta PS700 overhead scanner (which captures up to 600 ppi, 8-bit, grayscale images and allows for the imaging of fragile books whose binding or brittle paper would prohibit flatbed scanning), as well as a variety of digital cameras. The Digital Library uses Adobe Photoshop for imaging and ContentDM as its digital collection management software. (For more information about the Lehigh University Digital Library Team see http://digital.lib.lehigh.edu/.)