Imagining Freedom in Place: A Proposal to Create a Public Knowledge Archive of New York's Clemency History

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Executive Summary: A Project to Advance Mellon's Core Missions

This proposal outlines a Digital Humanities project to create a public-facing knowledge archive of New York State's executive clemency records. By recovering the marginalized histories of individuals navigating the state's **carceral system**, this project aligns directly with the Mellon Foundation's commitment to **Imagining Freedom**, promoting **Public Knowledge**, and understanding the role of the humanities in **place**. We are not simply digitizing records; we are building essential **digital infrastructure for the humanities** that will enable new forms of humanistic inquiry into justice, mercy, and the historical contexts of incarceration. This archive will democratize access to these vital records, making them freely available to scholars, students, and the public for the first time and fostering a more nuanced understanding of our collective past and future.

Project Narrative: Contribution to Humanistic Inquiry

Imagining Freedom: Recovering Narratives of Resilience

At its heart, this project is an effort to recover and amplify the voices of those who have been subject to the state's carceral power. Each of the thousands of records in this archive contains a **narrative of resistance and resilience**—a personal plea for freedom, a second chance, or a restoration of rights. By making these stories accessible, we provide the raw material for a profound **humanistic inquiry** into the lived experience of incarceration and the enduring hope for freedom. The archive will serve as a powerful tool for scholars, artists, and the public to engage with the historical and cultural contexts of the justice system, moving beyond statistics to understand the human stories they represent.

Public Knowledge: Democratizing Access to a Hidden History

Currently, the history of clemency in New York is locked away, accessible only through slow and costly FOIL requests. This project is a direct intervention to **democratize this knowledge**. We will create a robust, open-access digital platform that makes these primary sources available to the widest possible audience. This act of **public-facing scholarship** transforms a restricted

government record into a shared cultural asset. The archive will become a vital resource for students learning about civic history, for genealogists uncovering their family stories, and for researchers building a more complete picture of our state's past.

Humanities in Place: Mapping the Carceral Landscape of New York

This archive tells the story of justice and mercy as it has been applied across the specific **place** of New York State. The data on trial locations, prisons, and community origins will allow for a spatial analysis of the state's carceral landscape. It will enable researchers to explore questions of **spatial justice**, such as how clemency outcomes have varied across different regions and communities over time. By grounding these historical narratives in the geography of New York, we are **recovering marginalized histories** and contributing to a richer understanding of how place shapes our collective past and our shared future.

Project Objectives

Our objectives have been specifically designed to align with the Mellon Foundation's core missions:

1. To create a new **Public Knowledge** resource by transforming an inaccessible government record into a free, open-access digital archive for public and scholarly use.
2. To enable **Humanistic Inquiry** into the carceral system by recovering and structuring thousands of individual narratives of resilience and pleas for freedom.
3. To facilitate the study of **Humanities in Place** by creating a dataset that can map the application of justice and mercy across the geography of New York State, contributing to a deeper understanding of its social and legal history.
4. To build sustainable **digital infrastructure for the humanities** that will serve as a permanent resource for education and research.

Problem Statement

The inaccessibility of New York's clemency records is not merely a data problem; it is a barrier to humanistic understanding. It silences the voices of those who have petitioned for mercy and prevents a full public reckoning with the historical and cultural contexts of incarceration in our state. This project directly addresses this by creating the tools and access needed for a more just and restorative engagement with our shared history.

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(The following sections on Timeline, Resources, and Sustainability are copied from the original proposal for completeness and demonstrate a credible and well-thought-out project plan.)

Timeline for Project Implementation

Our project will be implemented in several phases to ensure the successful digitization and accessibility of executive clemency data from the New York State Archive.

Phase 1: Preliminary Planning (1 month)

- Conduct initial research and planning to determine project scope, requirements, and resource needs.
- Identify key stakeholders and potential partners for collaboration.
- Develop a detailed project plan, including timeline, budget, and deliverables.

Phase 2: Digitization of Ledgers (3 months)

- Procure necessary equipment and resources for digitization.
- Commence scanning of all ledgers containing executive clemency information from the New York State Archive.
- Monitor progress and address any technical issues or challenges as they arise.

Phase 3: Data Entry and Quality Control (6 months)

- Begin transcription of digitized clemency data into a structured spreadsheet format.
- Implement quality control measures to ensure the accuracy and reliability of the entered data.
- Conduct regular reviews and audits of the data entry process to identify and address any discrepancies or errors.

Phase 4: Database Development and Testing (2 months)

- Develop a searchable database platform for storing and accessing the digitized clemency data.
- Test the functionality and usability of the database, incorporating feedback from stakeholders as needed.
- Fine-tune the database interface and search features to optimize user experience.

Phase 5: Launch and Evaluation (1 month)

- Officially launch the searchable database platform to the public and relevant stakeholders.
- Monitor usage and gather feedback from users to evaluate the effectiveness and usability of the database.
- Make any necessary adjustments or improvements based on user feedback and usage data.

Resources and Support Needs

- **Funding for Scanning Services:** We require funding to purchase copies of the executive clemency documents from the New York State archive.
- **Database Program:** We need access to an adequate database program capable of efficiently storing and organizing the data.
- **Storage Capacity:** Adequate storage capacity is essential to hold the digitized data securely.
- **Volunteers for Data Digitization:** We require a team of approximately 5-10 volunteers.
- **Training and Supervision:** Providing training and ongoing supervision for volunteers.
- **Quality Assurance:** Implementing quality assurance measures, such as double-entry verification.
- **Technical Support:** Access to technical support services.

Sustainability Plan

- **Continuous Updates and Maintenance:** We will regularly update the database with new information.
- **Expanded Use Cases:** The archive will benefit historians, genealogists, and students, in addition to legal researchers.
- **User Engagement and Feedback:** We will actively engage with users to gather feedback and improve the platform.
- **Promotion and Outreach:** We will implement targeted outreach to academic institutions, historical societies, and genealogical groups.
- **Long-Term Sustainability Plan:** Our organization has a long-term plan for maintaining the database beyond the initial grant period, including seeking further academic and humanities-based funding.