Week 3 - A Project of Our Own

In this module, we will start on our class-crowdsourced project featuring a dataset that captures the essence of Princeton University: the Princeton University Historical Postcard Collection. Part of this collection has been digitized and is available through the Princeton University Digital Library. We will outline the various stages of this project, from conception to completion, and identify the tools and techniques that will assist us throughout. We will also pay a visit to the Mudd Library where we will view the collection up close. In the second meeting of this week, we investigate the critical procedures involved in data cleaning, and how OpenRefine can be used in this process.

▶ ↪ Feb 13 Field Trip Exploring Princeton's Postcards

1. If available, find the same postcard on a different online platform. Note differences in color, detail, or cropping. What do these variations suggest about digitizing analog materials?
2. Assess the quality of the digital images. Are there details potentially lost or misrepresented in the digital version?
3. Look at the metadata provided alongside the digital surrogate. How does this information affect your understanding of the postcard?
4. Reflect on your experience navigating the digital collection. How does the digital interface impact your exploration and understanding?
5. Hypothesize about how viewing the postcards digitally might differ from viewing them in person.
6. What do you think the digitization process for this collection was like? What challenges might have been encountered? What choices were made?

- Pre-Class Reflection:

  - Listen to this podcast episode, in which Dot Porter (Curator of Digital Research Services at UPenn's Schoenberg Institute for Manuscript Studies) is being interviewed by Stewart Varner (Managing Director of the Price Lab at UPenn).

  - Manžuch, Zinaida. "Ethical Issues in Digitization of Cultural Heritage." *Journal of Contemporary Archival Studies*, vol. 4, no. 2, 2017, pp. 1–17.

  - Kropf, Evyn. "Will That Surrogate Do? Reflections on Material Manuscript Literacy in the Digital Environment from Islamic Manuscripts at the University of Michigan Library." *Manuscript Studies: A Journal of the Schoenberg Institute for Manuscript Studies*, 2016, pp. 52–70.

Andrew Huo

7:31 PM 5. Hypothesize about how viewing the postcards digitally might differ from viewing them in person. Postcard: Blair Hall, Princeton University 1897 Published by Van Marter; Printed in Germany The front side of the postcard consists of a hyper-detailed painting of Blair Hall covered in ivy. The digitized version appears dark, or the saturation seems off. One thing that is hard to tell is how light reflects off the card and what its true colors are. Through my computer, I see a combination of green, blue, and red; thus, it is not an accurate representation. Next, I cannot tell the texture, weight, thickness, and type of paper from the two

digital editions. The edges are also cropped slightly. The only aspect heightened through digitalization is the resolution and the ability to zoom into further details.

Raphaela Gold

1:57 PM Reflect on your experience navigating the digital collection. How does the digital interface impact your exploration and understanding? When I entered the digital collection, I was immediately struck by the choice to separate the postcards by place rather than any other factor/piece of metadata that might have been used, such as year or subject. Although one can choose to search by year, publisher, or subject, the site presents location as the primary mode of searching the collection, directing the viewer toward "highlights". I thought it was really interesting to see which place had the most and least post cards stored (with Blair Hall in the lead at 33 items and the Post Office picking up the rear with only 6. When I was searching for a postcard to focus on, I started by thinking about which places were meaningful for me, which made me wonder if that's how most people would interact with the interface. For example, I started with Princeton Inn because I live in Forbes College, which was converted into a residential college from the Princeton Inn in 1984, 24 years after the post card collection ended. I noticed that in older images, the inn looked much different than Forbes, while in newer images, the building appeared much the same, leading me to infer that the college must have been renovated some time in the 1900s. Next I poked around the grad college images because my friends and I love to hang out at the grad college and found some postcards depicting Proctor Hall, which looked much the same then as it does today. Lastly I checked out Lake Carnegie, which I love running around and have written about a bit for the 'Prince', and scrolling through the interface I found seven postcards which call Lake Carnegie "Loch Carnegie". These were a really interesting collection, some of which seem to be sent by the same person. One read "Don't think I can get away this time. Everything fine." This made me think about the limited space of a post card to convey oneself to another person, almost like a Twitter post with limited characters. When I look at the collection in person, I want to focus on what, if anything, was written on these postcards? How much were they able to get across through the medium of the postcard?

Anya Kalogerakos

8:21 PM Assess the quality of the digital images. Are there details potentially lost or misrepresented in the digital version? (Postcard: https://dpul.princeton.edu/historical-postcards/catalog/5d86p8802) One thing I have noticed with many postcards is that the color is the most difficult aspect to preserve. This postcard was interesting to me because it looks like someone hand-colored a photograph and the image itself didn't necessarily look hand-drawn. I know nothing about the process of hand-colored postcards, but perhaps this is normal practice. I am curious if the color contrasts are as harsh in person as digitally or if the details of the brushstrokes which can be seen clearly with the ability to digitally zoom are as noticeable in person. As it relates to details being potentially lost/misrepresented on this postcard, I found this particular postcard interesting because it is titled in the database as an image of Colonial Club, when it is really an image of Cottage Club (which even the title on the postcard itself states). This is an example of how human error can creep into data sets despite our best efforts, and could potentially alter our perception of the data and the conclusions we draw from it.

Digital PULDigital PUL Colonial Club, Princeton University, Princeton, N. J. (6 kB)
https://dpul.princeton.edu/historical-postcards/catalog/5d86p8802

Talia Goldman

9:48 AM What do you think the digitization process for this collection was like? What challenges might have been encountered? What choices were made? Postcard: Reading Room, Library, Princeton University, Princeton, N. J. My chosen postcard, "Reading Room, Library, Princeton University, Princeton, N. J.," depicts the bottom level of Chancellor Green Library and is dated 1909. Somewhat saturated with an overall cool tone, a message on the front reads "Best birthday greetings from my desk," while the divided back reads "File library – Chancellor Green" with an address and stamp. I am interested in the question of how this image was digitized—on campus, I work on digitizing photographic negatives for the Visual Resources Collection in the Art and Archaeology Department, and found myself curious about how these postcards were digitized in comparison to the process I use for negatives. I use a high-powered DXL camera on a copy stand with a lightbox, so perhaps excluding the lightbox, the scanning equipment used for digitizing postcards could be similar. The editing process (under the assumption the images are edited) might involve fixing levels (amount of black/white/midtones in the image) or, since the postcard I chose is in color, adjusting saturation. Decisions regarding saturation, brightness, or contrast of the digitized image in order to remain truthful to the original postcards may differ slightly depending on who digitized the postcard. To that end, making consistent choices may be a challenge, along with considerations regarding cropping the images. It seems that the metadata included in each postcard is standardized, but I do wonder why the metadata information does not record who sent the letters or where it was sent from. As an additional note, although this postcard has a message, sender, date, and address, I also found it interesting to look at postcards with much less detail, like this one of Blair Hall, which was never sent but has a message. It makes me wonder if the owner of the postcard kept it as a keepsake, or gave it to someone in person. In any case, trying to learn as much as we can about the circumstances under which images or documents were made and subsequently recorded is one reason I enjoy digitizing material, and I'm excited to learn more about these postcards in class.

Digital PULDigital PUL Reading Room, Library, Princeton University, Princeton, N. J. (11 kB) https://dpul.princeton.edu/historical-postcards/catalog/5x21tr029

Digital PULDigital PUL Blair Hall, Princeton University, Princeton, N. J. (6 kB) https://dpul.princeton.edu/historical-postcards/catalog/bc386t80f

Alison Fortenberry

3:28 PM Assess the quality of the digital images. Are there details potentially lost or misrepresented in the digital version? Postcard: (https://dpul.princeton.edu/historical-postcards/catalog/vq27zz012). The image appears to be a watercolor or mixed media painting of the hall, but viewing the postcard digitally makes it more difficult to analyze the art itself than it would be in-person. For example, feeling the texture of the image on the postcard may make it easier to tell if it was painted directly onto this postcard, or if it was a mass-produced version of an original painting. If the image was painted directly onto the postcard, it may be easier to tell which medium the artist used in creating this. When zoomed into the image, the postcard looks to have little squares all over, but it's difficult to tell whether the postcard is textured, or if the image is just pixelated. While the images of the postcards are clear and well digitized, there are certain sensory aspects to sources like these that cannot be captured in the digitization process.

Digital PULDigital PUL Princeton University, Blair Hall (10 kB) https://dpul.princeton.edu/historical-postcards/catalog/vq27zz012

Melissa Woo

3:30 PM Look at the metadata provided alongside the digital surrogate. How does this information affect your understanding of the postcard? Postcard: Blair Tower, Princeton University, Princeton, N. J. Metadata: Publisher: Pub. by Photo Art Co., Trenton, N. J. Subject: Eye-level views Exterior views Princeton University Buildings Blair Hall (Princeton, N.J.) Abstract: Exterior view of Blair Tower in color with caption on back: "Blair Hall, with its great tower and arch, was named in honor of John Insley Blair, Trustee and donor of the building. One of Princeton's 26 campus dormitories, Blair Hall was one of the first examples of English Collegiate Gothic architecture in this country." Divided back postcard. Local identifier: AC045_c0005 Identifier: ark:/88435/gt54kx636 Edm rights: No Known Copyright Rights statement: http://rightsstatements.org/vocab/NKC/1.0/ The digital surrogate of the postcard "Blair Tower, Princeton University, Princeton, N.J." is accompanied by detailed metadata that significantly enriches our understanding of its context and significance. Beyond just being a visual representation of a university building, the postcard signifies architectural and university history. The mention of Blair Hall as one of the earliest examples of English Collegiate Gothic architecture in the United States suggests a deliberate architectural choice by Princeton University to evoke a sense of tradition and prestige. Furthermore, the naming of the building after John Insley Blair, a trustee and donor, emphasizes the philanthropic contributions that often underpin such architectural endeavors in educational institutions. This insight into the architectural and historical context provides a lens through which to interpret the postcard not merely as a depiction of a building, but as a representation of the values, aspirations, and legacies of Princeton University and its benefactors. Additionally, the metadata's indication of no known copyright restrictions suggests a democratization of access to historical artifacts, allowing for broader dissemination and interpretation of cultural heritage. Thus, the metadata invites viewers to engage with the postcard not just as a static image However, it's also worth noting that there are elements of the postcard that don't seem as represented in the metadata. In particular, there are several people depicted in the image, wearing various Princeton sweaters/orange ties, etc. These details could help provide more context about what time of day the photo was taken, what students lives' were like at the time, etc.

Digital PULDigital PUL Blair Tower, Princeton University, Princeton, N. J. (5 kB)
https://dpul.princeton.edu/historical-postcards/catalog/gt54kx636

Clay Glovier

4:02 PM Reflect on your experience navigating the digital collection. How does the digital interface impact your exploration and understanding? I found it interesting how the post cards were separated based on location rather than any other factor. Within each location, there could be a wide range of content, for example under the category "Princeton's Streets." The digital interface impacted my exploration by leading me to choose areas I wouldn't have chosen had they not been presented as options. Instead of looking at Princeton's Streets, I had expected to analyze more locations on campus and certain buildings such as Whig and Clio that interest me. However, as a native of Princeton I found it fascinating to look at the way the town has changed over the years. The picture I highlighted was a postcard of the street "Lovers Lane." Today, this street is in-between two very busy roads and I take it to get to the highway. I always wondered why such a busy street had a name suggesting it was for lovers and secluded. However, looking at the postcard revealed a beautiful, small, secluded lane, which was much more fitting for the name. After looking at this card, I feel I now understand the street and town better, and will think differently about the road when I next take it. Additionally, upon seeing what the street used to look like, I find it easier to fit the place to the name, as it is still fairly narrow and surrounded by some brush, even if it is between two highways. In sum, I enjoyed browsing these post cards and seeing how the campus has evolved over the years. https://dpul.princeton.edu/historical-postcards/catalog/h128nq29x (edited)

Digital PULDigital PUL Lovers Lane by Moonlight, Princeton, N.J. (5 kB)
https://dpul.princeton.edu/historical-postcards/catalog/h128nq29x

Pippa LaMacchia

9:29 AM Reflect on your experience navigating the digital collection. How does the digital interface impact your exploration and understanding? I am interested in the choices behind the design and organization of this digital archive. Each group of postcards is organized by location and the viewer/browser already knows what they are going to look at when they select a category. This recalls our conversations about the nature of "browsing" in a physical space (like a library) versus the digital sphere in which paths may be predetermined. Additionally, I would probably not look through every single postcard because of the way the archive is organized and that certainly changes the experience of more randomized browsing. On a slightly separate note, I wonder how organizing a digital archive overlaps with the field of museum study and display. The ways in which museums are designed shape what someone could take away or learn from the exhibit. The same is true for a digital archive like this one (comparable to a museum) and I am curious about how it shaped my experience on the website. The categorical display of these postcards is important because depending on what's selected to be shown first, emphasis of study can be changed without the viewer's control. Who organizes these exhibits? Are they randomized? Or controlled by the designer?

Colin Brown

9:52 AM Prompt question: What do you think the digitization process for this collection was like? What challenges might have been encountered? What choices were made? I chose to analyze "Graduate College and Cleveland Tower, Princeton University, Princeton, N.J", a postcard depicting the university's graduate college. Upon a close inspection of the front side, it's clear that this is a very detailed painting on the front. This made me wonder, then, what the digitizers needed to do to preserve this fine detail in the digital version without compromising the safety of the postcard. I figure that this digital copy was captured by either a photograph or a scan, kind of like what one might do when making copies at a printer. With photography, I'm sure they had to worry about light exposure. I've heard that many old paints and documents can be degraded with too much light exposure, which is why museums might notably not have windows in certain rooms or have a special casing around the art. This same concern about light applies to scanning as well, but scanning also presents an additional challenge: contact. For this process, the postcard would be placed face-down on the scanning platform. This technique can capture a very high resolution photo, but if the surface of the postcard is having to physically lay against the scanner, it could cause undesired damage. As a result, the digitizers likely had to choose one of these techniques and then figure out strategies to mitigate the downsides.

James Sowerby

5:15 PM Reflect on your experience navigating the digital collection. How does the digital interface impact your exploration and understanding? This is a really interesting question because the postcard that I chose is indexed as "Interior of Chapel, Princeton University, Princeton, N. J." and filed under the Chapel category, yet displays a picture of the former Charter Club building on Prospect Ave. I tried several times to navigate using the website to this postcard assuming that the mismatch between metadata and content was a mistake on my end somehow, but it led me each time to the same picture of the Charter Club. I guess this would a clerical error by someone working in Special Collections, but it still seemed emblematic of our discussion about metadata and digital surrogates. I wasn't sure if the metadata was supposed to refer to a different postcard on display, since its details were a bit indeterminate. The interior of the Chapel could

have so many different pictures, and I am not sure which one it would refer to. This is a really interesting dynamic—when you look at the metadata for a correct picture, it makes sense and maps perfectly together in your head. But would I have noticed if it was only a marginally different scene depicted? If it hadn't been the Charter Club, how could I have known the metadata was completely wrong? edit: here is the link: https://dpul.princeton.edu/historical-postcards/catalog/m900p4012 (edited)

Digital PULDigital PUL Interior of Chapel, Princeton University, Princeton, N. J. (9 kB) https://dpul.princeton.edu/historical-postcards/catalog/m900p4012

Emanuelle Sippy

8:34 PM Initially drawn to thinking about change over time, I was surprised at the lack of dates on the postcards and in the metadata below the images. Thinking about the postcards in their specific historical context seems incredibly important, and I was struck by the fact that that information was not available (at least on this interface) for such a large portion of the postcards. In the Nassau Hall sub-section, I thought it was interesting that although it has been a site of protest and student activism for many generations, this did not seem to be captured in any of the postcards. Notably, almost all of them capture Nassau Hall from the same angle, which includes the lawn and trees in front and often also the dome of Chancellor Green. One of the Nassau Hall postcards includes a poem written by Herbert Edward Mierow, class of 1914, "published by the Princeton University store," (which is funny to think of as an entity that publishes anything). Mierow speaks to the constancy that the near-identical depictions of Nassau Hall (and the building itself) over time evoke, writing: "Changeless she stands" (line 3). It seems significant that this is a quality of the University that people are drawn to—it's changelessness—something that alums speak to each year when they return for reunions or visits. The comfort and strength associated with this constancy, especially in the context of beautiful architecture, is fitting as something that University affiliates and visitors want to remember with a postcard. And yet, it also seems worth interrogating the ways in which the University has been and continues to resist necessary change. I wonder if there are ways in which the postcard collection captures the negotiation between the institution's incrementalism as well as milestones, such as becoming co-ed. The absence of that negotiation in the collection as far as I have explored so far seems telling in and of itself and suggests that these postcards were produced with a fairly specific, uncritical lens.

Digital PULDigital PUL Nassau Hall, Princeton University (9 kB) https://dpul.princeton.edu/historical-postcards/catalog/k643b9763

Layla Williams

10:40 PM "Hypothesize about how viewing the postcards digitally might differ from viewing them in person." The postcard I chose was "Washington St, showing Carnegie Lake" because it drew my attention with the abundance of vibrant greens and blues within the image. The only vehicle in the image seems to be dated pre-1900, so the maintained vibrancy of the colors is surprising due to its assumed age and handling over time. In the digital image, when I zoom into the image I begin to lose the definition of the actual objects and instead am met with faintly colored pixels. If I were to handle these in person, the shapes would maintain some kind of clarity. In addition, on the back of the postcard, the space for writing is completely empty except for a discolored space. The discoloration could be from faded or smeared writing, or it could simply be a blemish from misuse. However, because I cannot necessarily feel the card, I cannot pinpoint the stain. I am also curious about the durability of the card. Is it thick and intended to be something on display, or is it thin which might then create the impression that this card has been reproduced many times in

another context? In comparison to other cards in the collection that were published in Germany, the card I selected was published within Princeton. This means that tourism and creating an identity for the town was likely at the center of its creation. This might possibly mean that the card might be thinner because more may have been created. https://dpul.princeton.edu/historical-postcards/catalog/f1881w50j (edited)

Digital PULDigital PUL Washington St, showing Carnegie Lake, Princeton, N.J. (9 kB) https://dpul.princeton.edu/historical-postcards/catalog/f1881w50j

Ethan Haque

11:06 PM My initial reaction to browsing the collection was that it's difficult to browse. On my screen, the images were really small and it was hard to make out anything but broad features on the postcards. The interface doesn't make it easy to view the post cards. The card I chose drew me to it because of how vibrant the colors were on it compared to the small images around it. Upon closer inspection it might not have been the postcard that was so vibrant and high contrast but the image taken of the postcard itself which changed the values of the colors in the image. Because it's difficult to view the cards in high quality all at once I think I'm less likely to randomly pick a card that looks bland, but that might hold some incredibly interesting information. Maybe that's my brain rot, hyper-consumerism culture affected self talking, but I don't think this is a particularly difficult claim to make. The photo is quite high resolution when you look at it through the photo viewer, and if I look really close I can see the pigment dots from the printing process. Even in person that might be hard to see, but perhaps not with a magnifying glass. https://dpul.princeton.edu/historical-postcards/catalog/s7526p02r default.jpg

Digital PULDigital PUL Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs, Princeton University, Princeton, N.J. (6 kB) https://dpul.princeton.edu/historical-postcards/catalog/s7526p02r

Helen Gao

11:14 PM Prompt: Look at the metadata provided alongside the digital surrogate. How does this information affect your understanding of the postcard? I analyzed a postcard of Princeton Inn, now Forbes College. I already knew that Forbes used to be a hotel before the University bought it, but if I hadn't been able to guess that from the context, I would've had no idea. The image of Forbes depicted here is quite different from what it looks like now (and not just because the postcard is in black and white), so the only way of knowing that these buildings are one and the same would have been by checking the metadata of this postcard, which tags the subject as both "Princeton Inn (Princeton, N.J.)" and "Forbes College (Princeton, N.J.)". (Though I was able to guess this, I wasn't actually certain until reading the metadata.) The date listed is 1926, so it's almost been a century since this picture was taken; seeing this year and then looking at the image on the postcard made me think about how much this building has changed over time - not only in name and ownership, but also in function and overall appearance (as well as how the change in function from hotel to residential college has affected the building's appearance). The metadata also specifies that this is an eye-level view, which reminded me of how photography has changed as well: previously, it would've been quite difficult to get a bird's-eye view, but now we have technology like drones that make photography from other angles much more feasible.

Digital PULDigital PUL Princeton Inn, Princeton, N.J. (7 kB) https://dpul.princeton.edu/historical-postcards/catalog/p8418x79t

Yaashree Himatsingka

2:32 AM Prompt: Hypothesize about how viewing the postcards digitally might differ from viewing them in person. Postcard: https://dpul.princeton.edu/historical-postcards/catalog/fb494k028. Response: The great thing about a digital collection is that I can access it from anywhere, search specific subjects or dates, and I can read abstracts and metadata associated with each postcard on the portal. But I lose the tactile aspect of handling physical postcards, feeling its weight and texture in my palm, seeing how the colors interact with light, and experiencing the "spontaneity" or serendipitous connections that only browsing can enable. The digital format is accessible and convenient but it can't replicate the sense of discovery and immersion of the in-person experience.

Digital PULDigital PUL Nassau Hall (5 kB) https://dpul.princeton.edu/historical-postcards/catalog/fb494k028

Pia Bhatia

1:24 PM Assess the quality of the digital images. Are there details potentially lost or misrepresented in the digital version? Response: I wanted to look at a postcard which showed a location on campus that had likely significantly changed from the time period it was taken. Nassau street seemed like a good, almost too-obvious choice - the postcard contains a horse-drawn carriage whereas now the street is a gentrified area with shops that hold products from all over the world. I wonder if its blurriness (especially the bottom half) would be lower in the physical copy, which would allow me to see more of what the people in this area looked like. https://dpul.princeton.edu/historical-postcards/catalog/h702qg97x

Digital PULDigital PUL Nassau Street, Princeton, N.J. (7 kB)