Starting an Online Historical Image Collection

Adam Smith, May 2025

Goals

- Easily upload and manage images and metadata.
- Allow the public to search, browse, and download images for educational and research purposes.

Factors

- Minimize direct costs.
- Minimize support and maintenance.

Options and Recommendation

There are essentially two options available:

1. A do-it-yourself approach, which can be done inexpensively by setting up a commodity web hosting account through a company like Bluehost (bluehost.com) and installing open source image management software like **Piwigo** (piwigo.org).
2. Using an existing commercial image hosting service like **Flickr** (flickr.com).

I recommend option 2, and specifically Flickr, for the following reasons:

- A Flickr subscription is actually less (typically) than a commodity web hosting subscription. In fact, I will propose a pilot project using the free tier of Flickr.
- Flickr eliminates the need to set up the commodity hosting, to install and configure Piwigo, and to provide ongoing technical support of this infrastructure. Flickr takes care of all that.
- Flickr provides unlimited bandwidth and in the Pro tier, unlimited storage, whereas commodity hosts typically have limits, albeit, typically quite high.

I specifically recommend Flickr, as it has been widely recognized as a high quality leader in this field for over two decades. I have used it personally over many years, and it has also had widespread adoption by museums and historical societies who have leveraged Flickr's intuitive interface and community engagement features to showcase their collections, ensuring discoverability and preservation. For example, the Library of Congress has partnered with various cultural groups to use Flickr to share historical collections through initiatives like Flickr Commons, fostering public access to heritage archives.

In Spring 2024, I helped start a pilot project in the Town of Caroline NY History Room that uses Flickr to showcase many of its digital images. (https://www.flickr.com/photos/200517596@N02/) The volunteers were able to quickly upload and add metadata to one thousand images.

Implementation and Costs

Flickr has two tiers: a free and "Pro" tier:

- The free tier is limited to 1000 uploaded images.
- The Pro tier has no upload limits and ads are not displayed in the interface.

Both tiers limit upload file sizes to under 200MB for images and under 1GB for videos.

The Pro tier's subscription costs depend on the length of the commitment:

- **Month-to-Month**: $10.44 per month, plus tax $10.44/month
- **Annual**: $72.99 per year, plus tax   ~$6.08/month
- **2-Year**: $132.99 per 2 years, plus tax   ~$5.54/month

I recommend the approach of the Caroline History Room: begin with the free tier as a pilot project, to learn the system and how to manage it effectively, and to promote it in the community, etc., to see if it is serving your needs. Then, at any time, you can buy a Pro plan and continue using Flickr the same as before without limits.

At that point, you may also want to consider purchasing a dedicated domain that points to this Flickr account, such as "woodhullhistory.org" or similar that can be purchased through a registrar such as namecheap.com, typically for under $10 per year, although the costs vary depending on the specific name chosen and the subscription length. When that time comes, I can consult with you more specifically on how to do this.

Service Continuity:

- Keep track of the timing of subscription renewals for Flickr and domains, as lapses can lead to the domain name being temporarily suspended, or revert Flickr back to the free tier limitations, etc. until the bills are paid again. I recommend synchronizing their renewal schedules: for example, at approximately the same time you upgrade to a Flickr Pro account for a two year term, you can purchase a two year subscription to an associated domain name, minimizing costs and making the management of the renewals more convenient.

Succession Planning:

- Up-to-date account credentials for Flickr, as well as any other associated accounts, such as for a domain registrar, should be printed and kept on record with the town clerk so that it is available to anyone with administrative responsibilities.

Data Preservation:

- Never rely on an external service like this as your system of record. Content uploaded to Flickr are only copies of originals that should still be preserved locally.
- Likewise, data added to images within Flickr itself should be backed up locally. I can consult on how to automate this using a free tool like Flickrmirrorer (https://github.com/markdoliner/flickrmirrorer).

(TODO: add a specific action plan? As a checklist of implementation steps?)

Organization and Metadata

The primary way of grouping images in Flickr is through **albums**.

For individual images, you can give a title and description. Focusing on **descriptions**, this is where you will add as much known information specific to the image, such as:

- Any known date information,
- Specific location information
- Names of people, streets, business, churches, etc.,
- Transcribed text if applicable and available, and
- Donor information, if known.

You can make images more browsable across albums by applying **tags** to images. I recommend keeping the list of tags relatively small to remain manageable. Tags can also be applied in bulk, making their maintenance easier. The key is to be consistent in how the tags are spelled and applied. Some ideas to consider might include:

Tag	Description
Portraits-Individuals	Photos of individual people, often notable citizens or residents.
Portraits-Families	Group photos of families or households.
Portraits-Groups	Photos of social, work, or community groups.
Buildings-Residential	Homes, apartments, and other living spaces.
Buildings-Commercial	Stores, offices, and business-related structures.
Buildings-Public	Government buildings, libraries, town halls, etc.
Transportation	Vehicles, trains, carriages, and transportation infrastructure.
Streets-Roads	Images of town streets, roads, and infrastructure over time.
Landscapes	Natural and urban scenery, including parks and town views.
Agriculture	Farms, livestock, crops, and agricultural events.
Community-Organizations	Clubs, societies, and local groups (e.g., Rotary, Scouts).
Local-Government	Photos related to town governance, elections, or officials.
Education	Schools, teachers, students, and educational events.
Religious	Churches, synagogues, and other places of worship.
Businesses	Local shops, factories, and industrial sites.
Celebrations	Community celebrations, parades, fairs, and festivals.
Historical-Events	Significant local events like fires, floods, or visits from dignitaries.
19th-Century	Photos from 1800–1899.
Early-20th-Century	Photos from 1900–1945.
Mid-20th-Century	Photos from 1945–1970.
Late-20th-Century	Photos from 1970–2000.

(TODO: more specific best practices to make it easier to bulk upload and bulk configuring rights, tags?)

Ownership, Copyright, Public Domain, Licencing

- Flickr allows the public to download copies of full size originals uploaded to the service.*
- Many of the images uploaded will likely already be in the **public domain**, that is, so old that copyright protection has ended. For exact conditions of what determines something to be in the public domain, refer to the summary in the next section.
- **Ownership** of a physical photograph or digital image by the Town of Woodhull does not automatically grant copyright. **Copyright** protects the creative expression in the photograph and belongs to the original creator (the photographer) or their assignee, not the owner of the physical item or digital file, unless explicitly transferred. Ownership of an original photograph or negative gives practical control over high-resolution scans. For example, a historical society can restrict access to scans (e.g., requiring permission or payment), creating a de facto control over commercial use, even without copyright. They could then charge for high-quality digital copies for commercial projects.
- Only the copyright holder or someone with express permission from the copyright holder can apply a licence. Many cultural institutions such as the Library of Congress use Creative Commons licenses and creativecommons.org straightforwardly describes the options available.
- In cases where the Town of Woodhull does have copyright, I recommend that by default, you consider the **Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0) license**: "This license enables reusers to copy and distribute the material in any medium or format in unadapted form only, for noncommercial purposes only, and only so long as attribution is given to the creator." This allows you to retain control over commercial use and modifications, to protect the integrity of historical photographs while permitting non-commercial sharing by family members, researchers and educators.
- Understand that "once you apply a CC license to your material, anyone who receives it may rely on that license for as long as the material is protected by copyright, even if you later stop distributing it."

* To disable the ability for Flickr users to see and download full size originals, go to Settings > Privacy & Permissions, and:

1. Set default view size to **Large (2048px)** or **Medium (1024px)** to balance quality and protection. This limits the maximum resolution displayed to Flickr users.
2. Set "Who can download?" to **Only you** for all photos to disable downloads.

It appears that there may be an update to Flickr in May 2025 that will disable full downloads on all images in the free tier by default.

Overview of Ownership, Copyright, and Public Domain

Ownership of a physical photograph or digital image does not automatically grant copyright. Copyright protects the creative expression in the photograph and belongs to the original creator (the photographer) or their assignee, not the owner of the item, unless explicitly transferred.

Requirements for a Work to Enter the Public Domain in the U.S.:

1. Published Works:
   - Copyright expires 95 years after the year of publication, at the end of that calendar year (Copyright Term Extension Act of 1998).
   - For works published between 1923 and 1963, copyright required a notice and renewal after 28 years; non-renewed works are public domain (Copyright Act of 1909).
2. Unpublished Works:
   - Copyright expires 70 years after the creator's death, at the end of that calendar year (Copyright Act of 1976).
   - If the creator's death date is unknown, copyright expires 120 years after creation, at the end of that calendar year, or by December 31, 2002, if created before 1978 and not published before 2003.
3. Anonymous or Corporate Works:
   - Published: Copyright expires 95 years after the year of publication, at the end of that calendar year.
   - Unpublished: Copyright expires 120 years after the year of creation, at the end of that calendar year (Copyright Act of 1976).

Clarifications:

- **Publication**: Distribution to the public with the creator's consent (e.g., in newspapers, books, postcards).
- **Expiration**: Copyright ends on December 31 of the final year of the term, with the work entering the public domain on January 1 of the following year.

Implications:

- **Public Domain**: If an image is in the public domain, anyone can use it for commercial purposes (e.g., selling prints, licensing for books) without restriction. A historical society has no exclusive copyright to control such use.
- **Physical Ownership Advantage**: Ownership of an original photograph or negative gives practical control over high-resolution scans. For example, a historical society can restrict access to scans (e.g., requiring permission or payment), creating a de facto control over commercial use, even without copyright. They could then charge for high-quality digital copies for commercial projects.
- **Digitization and New Copyright**: Scanning a photograph creates a digital file, but U.S. courts (e.g., *Bridgeman Art Library v. Corel Corp.*, 1999) have ruled that **faithful reproductions of public domain works do not generate new copyright.** A historical society cannot claim copyright over the scan itself unless it adds significant creative elements (e.g., artistic edits), which is unlikely for archival purposes.