

“Veracruz is dying”: the US occupation of Veracruz in history and memory

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583 Foundations of Preservation & Archives

Archival Remix Proposal

PURPOSE

This interactive web exhibit allows patrons to explore through original documents the context, history, and aftermath of the US occupation of Veracruz in 1914, its impact on US-Mexican relations in the 20th century and its imprint on US self-perception as an imperial or quasi-imperial power in Latin America and the Caribbean. A combined map and timeline, situating those documents in both time and space and connecting them to one another through both geography and temporal sequence, allows a casual user to follow the story of the occupation in chronological order or to sample it non-linearly, while for teachers it can serve as a students’ entrypoint to the material or as a basis for more structured assignments.

SCOPE

Sources and collection methods

The core resources for this exhibit are the collections of the National Archives and Records Administration, for military and diplomatic records, and of the Library of Congress, for photographs and periodicals. In order to keep the project tractable, it is proposed to limit the project initially to these sources, although in principle, its infrastructure could support adding more content at a later date. A larger project might add documents from the papers of private individuals, such as the William Bayard Hale papers at Yale and the John Lind papers at the Minnesota Historical Society; an ideal exhibit would also include documents from the Archivo General de la Nación de México and other Mexican sources.

The exhibit takes its title from the refrain of Warren Zevon’s 1978 song “Veracruz”, a ballad dramatizing the occupation from a Mexican point of view, which Zevon wrote with Puerto Rican songwriter Jorge Calderón (Plasketes 43). It is an open question,

requiring further research, to what extent the occupation has otherwise left a mark on popular culture.

Technology and content

Technologically speaking, the site consists of a patron-facing presentation interface, a curator-facing administrative interface, a database of documents and annotations, and possibly a dedicated image server, depending on how practical it proves to be to make use of document images *in situ* at their home archives.

In terms of content, the exact volume depends on what we find while collecting materials, and at what level of detail we find it necessary to annotate them. Based on somewhat similar projects such as the Library of Congress' Mexican Revolution exhibit (LOC, *Inauguration to Invasion*), but assuming somewhat less lengthy annotations / textual description, we might expect something on the order of a few dozen documents and a few thousand words of text.

PROJECT PLAN

The project consists of the tasks below. Note that in principle, the collecting tasks and technology tasks could proceed in parallel.

Collecting tasks

1. **Plotting the narrative.** In order to assess what materials we need for the exhibit, we first need to fully understand the history that we propose to present, using secondary sources to sketch out the sequence of events and order them properly both temporally and in importance. This historical outline then both informs our search for relevant documents and serves as a logical armature on which they can be arranged. When the outline is complete we should, if at all possible, also have our narrative reviewed by historians of the period or other similar experts.
2. **Collecting materials.** Once we have a sense of what events we are interested in and how deeply we want to investigate each, we then can identify relevant documents in the source collections. Note that some of the material we are interested in may not yet have been digitized, or if digitized, may require copyright evaluation before it can be published (see e.g. *U.S.S Dolphin*).
3. **Annotating materials.** As (or once) the materials are collected, we need to provide annotations for each document that allow patrons to understand its meaning in context. These will largely be taken from the historical outline created above, but individual documents may invite more detail.

Note that once the technology platform outlined below is in place, we could in principle collect documents and enter annotations directly into the final system.

Technology tasks

1. **Selecting technologies.** The prototype linked below is a custom website developed for this proposal. Given the right resources, this can be an effective way to build an exhibit, but the resulting digital artifact is often fragile, difficult to maintain or preserve. Ideally, the final exhibit would be built on an existing platform such as Spotlight or Omeka; the platform should be selected with an eye toward minimizing customization and maximizing sustainability.
2. **Developing infrastructure.** Once a platform has been selected, it will at minimum require configuration and visual customization, and will most likely require some level of custom code as well, unless suitable plugins for the combined timeline / historical map display we envision can be identified for an existing platform. Note that here we are building the infrastructure for managing and displaying the documents, but not entering the documents into the system, except as necessary for validating design concepts and for testing.

Integration tasks

1. **Incorporating content.** When the infrastructure is sufficiently developed, we can begin entering documents and their annotations into the system. Again, it might be possible to combine this with the collection/annotation tasks above.
2. **Validating the narrative.** When most or all of our collected materials have been entered into the system, we should re-assess how the documents work in context, to ensure that we have placed emphasis appropriately and told the story we intended to tell, and that the story still makes sense. This would be a good time to again bring experts in to provide feedback.
3. **Launching the site.** Once we have sufficient content in the system and are sufficiently confident in our presentation, we can make the site available to the public.

Preservation tasks

1. **Preserving the site.** Based on the technologies chosen, we should determine the best way or ways to archive and preserve the site for the future, whether through traditional web archiving, software emulation, or other means. Ideally, this would provide an avenue, at least in principle, for patrons to continue to discover and make use of the collected documents and annotations and our presentation of them even when for reasons of cost or effort we are no longer able to maintain the live site.

DESIGN & PROTOTYPE

As shown in Figure 1, patrons are able to select an event, and associated document, either via the timeline on the left, or via icons placed directly on the map. The timeline uses a quasi-logarithmic scale, allowing us to present documents widely separated in time while still keeping the timeline legible.

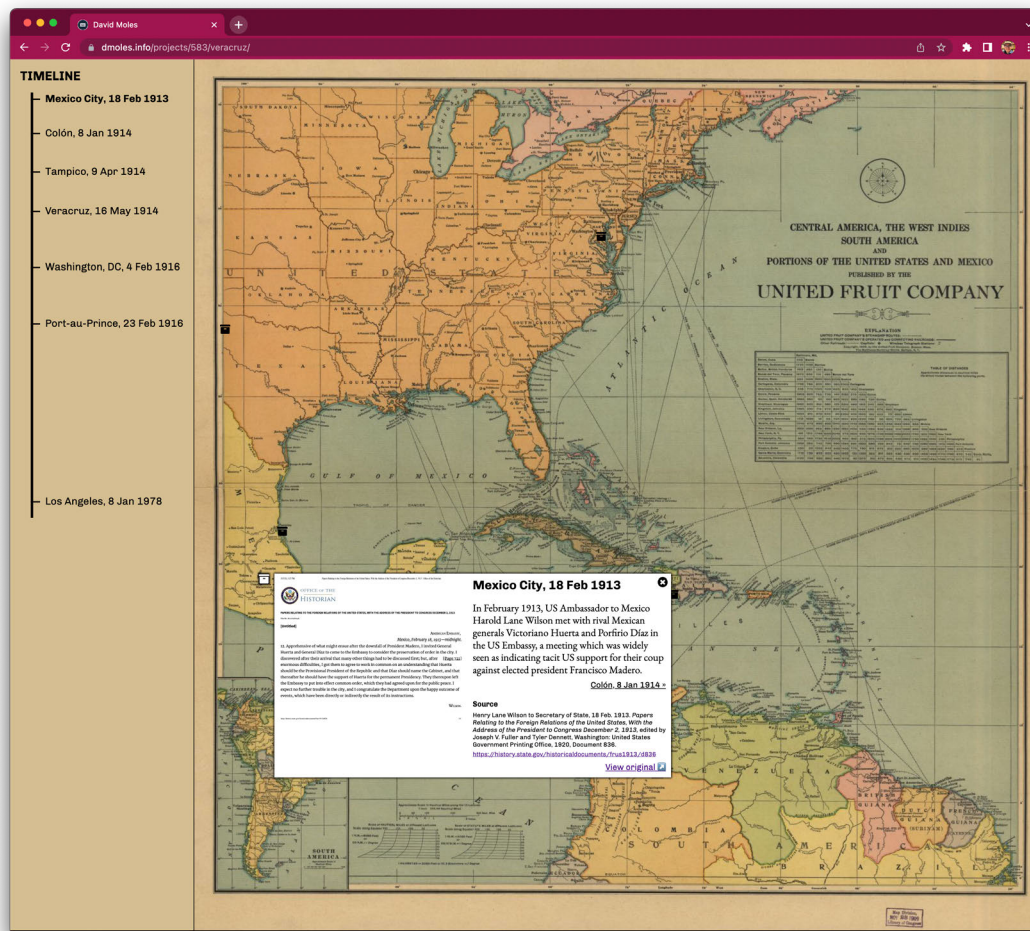


Figure 1. Screenshot of prototype.

A popup window then shows a preview of the document, along with a text annotation placing it in context, a full citation, and a link to the original. Patrons can also view multiple events/documents simultaneously, as shown in Figure 2, and each popup includes links allowing patrons to navigate through them in logical or chronological sequence.

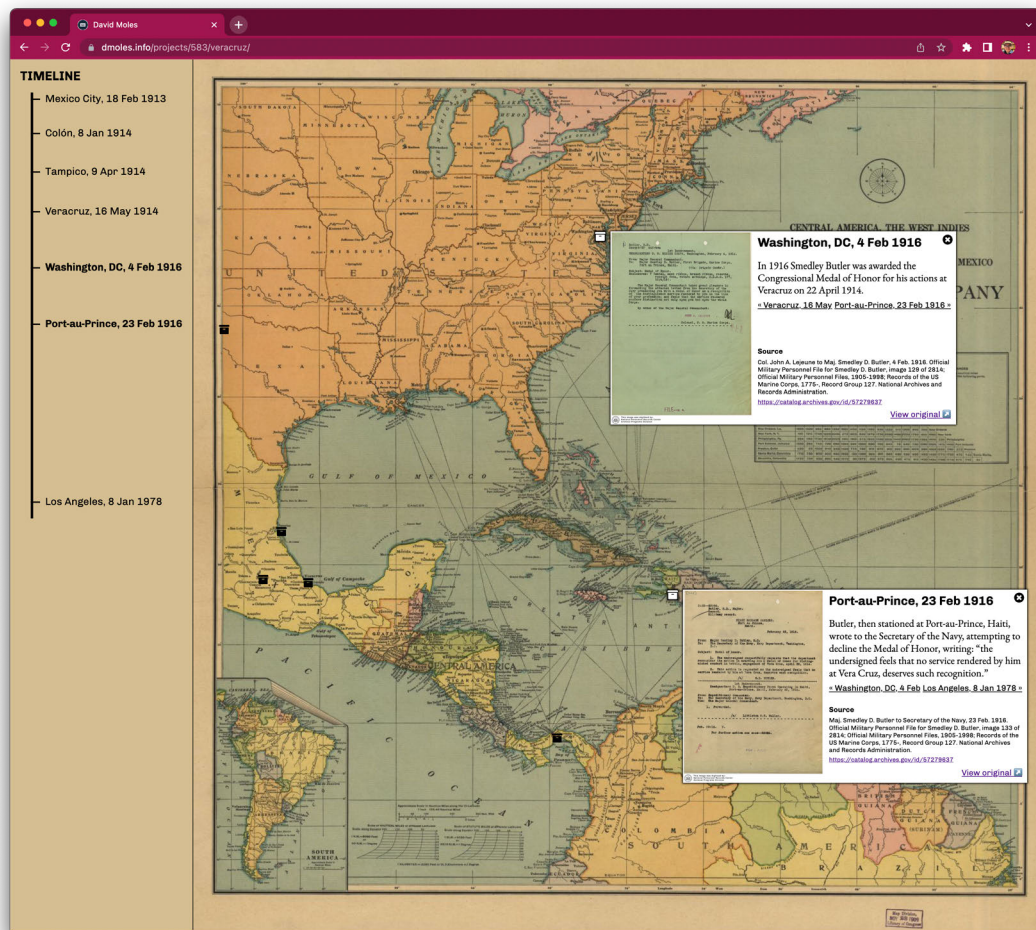


Figure 2. Screenshot showing multiple, related documents.

A prototype of the exhibit, incorporating a somewhat arbitrary selection of documents, is at <https://www.dmoles.info/projects/583/veracruz/>. As the diplomatic correspondence for the period has not yet been digitized, the prototype makes use of the State Department's published official version (Wilson).

Note that the underlying map (UFC) is not only of the period, being published in 1909, but, as a product of the United Fruit Company, has particular resonance as an artifact of US commercial imperialism—the United Fruit Company being an instigator and beneficiary of US gunboat diplomacy from the invasion of Nicaragua in 1909 to the CIA-backed coup in Guatemala in 1954 (Maurer 108, 307).

SIMILAR OR RELATED WORKS

The DocsTeach website offers several map-based activities (e.g. NAET), which ask students to match historical documents to geographic locations and analyze their contents. It also offers activities involving primary sources placed in chronological sequence (e.g. NYC Teachers), in which students are invited to make connections between the documents.

The Library of Congress has an extensive online exhibition on US-Mexican relations during the Mexican Revolution (LOC, *Mexican Revolution*), presenting a narrative of the period with associated documents. It includes a timeline of major historical events (LOC, *Timeline*), and an interactive map of the "Tragic Ten Days" period in Mexico City (LOC, *Tragic Ten Days*), but neither is integrated directly with the presented documents.

ABOUT THE APPLICANT

I am currently employed as head of application development for the UC Berkeley Library; I am also a student in the Master of Information program at Rutgers University, pursuing studies in library and information science and in archives and preservation. My previous academic work has been in history, linguistics, and East Asian studies; I have a BA in Japanese from UC Santa Cruz, and an MSc in economic and social history from Oxford University, where I studied the history of the British Empire, particularly the East India Company in the era of its transition from trading company to for-profit colonial government in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. My academic interests as a historian include colonialism and imperialism in general, and, in particular, the co-optation of state imperial power in the pursuit of private interests—something of which the history of US intervention in Latin America and the Caribbean is rife with examples.

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DOCUMENTS INCORPORATED IN THE PROTOTYPE

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