PAPERS AND PRESENTATIONS

Digitizing the Records of Philadelphia's Historic Congregations

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ABSTRACT In 2018, the Council on Library and Information Resources (CLIR), funded by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, awarded a Digitizing Hidden Collections project grant to Christ Church Preservation Trust to digitize the records of eleven of Philadelphia's historic congregations. Founded by William Penn in 1681 upon the principle of religious liberty, Philadelphia drew worshippers of all denominations. By 1750, the Society of Friends, Christ Church, First Presbyterian, Gloria Dei, Mikveh Israel, and others were providing spiritual inspiration to their various congregations. Their records reflect an emerging society, providing a glimpse into political and social changes before much other official record keeping was in place. These largely hidden records allow access to historical data of great use to scholars, students, and family historians. It is a collaborative project with resources shared generously by the congregations and their partners in this initiative: the Athenaeum of Philadelphia, Atla, and the University of Pennsylvania.

Four years ago, the idea of scanning and placing online in one unified website the records of some of Philadelphia's oldest congregations pushed us into an exciting and rewarding venture. Along the way, we've acquired strong partners, willing congregations, and dozens of volunteers who have all come together to make this dream a reality.

In 2016, the Council on Library and Information Resources (CLIR), awarded a Digitizing Hidden Collections project grant for the scanning of New England's Congregational church records. That project led to our impetus to bring together the records of Philadelphia's diverse religious communities, offering an even broader array of theology and religious traditions. These "hidden records" would allow current and future generations of researchers to envision life in 18th- and early 19th-century Philadelphia through the minutes of the various trustee bodies; the baptismal, circumcision, marriage and burial records; the accounting records; sermons; and more. We hoped to find not only the histories of the individual congregations but the shared history of Philadelphians as they faced epidemics, revolutions, depressions and a civil war.

Digitizing the Records of Philadelphia's Historic Congregations is a project that has been in the works for the last two and a half years. It brings together the records of eleven of Philadelphia's historic congregations, ranging in date from 1708–1870. Participating congregations include the African Episcopal Church of St. Thomas, Christ Church, First Baptist Church, First Presbyterian Church, Gloria Dei, Mikveh Israel, Second Presbyterian Church, St. George's United Methodist Church, Saint Paul's Episcopal, St. Peter's Episcopal, and Third Presbyterian Church.

The records are being scanned, uploaded to one unified website (www.philadelphiacongregations.org), then shared with the public through that website and through Atla's digital library (dl.atla.com/collections/philadelphia-congregations-early-records-project). Records can also be viewed through the University of Pennsylvania's Special Collections Libraries' OPenn portal (openn.library.upenn.edu/html/congregations_contents.html). It is through OPenn that long-term digital preservation is ensured.

The project built upon an earlier pilot initiative undertaken at Christ Church in 2012, when the Athenaeum of Philadelphia scanned the first three volumes of the Christ Church vestry minutes. Walter Rice, our IT consultant, built software to allow for transcription to be done online and to have it viewed alongside the original record. These were uploaded to the Philadelphia Geohistory website; links from the Christ Church website took researchers directly to these records. Also included in this project was an access database of baptismal, marriage, and burial records from 1709 through 1900, allowing searches for individuals, dates, and life events. The contin-

ued demand from researchers for copies of those original records led to a search for funding that would make the scanning and placing online of those records possible. CLIR's Digitizing Hidden Collections project grants provided a viable option. Over the years, we had developed strong relationships with many of the archivists and volunteers working with the records of the older congregations in Philadelphia; it was easy to reach out and invite them to join us in this project.

The goal was to scan those records created by congregations established in the historic city of Philadelphia prior to 1800. Records of high interest were vestry minutes, sacramental registers, accounting records, charters, and more. Our dates spanned the years from the beginning of the congregation through 1865.
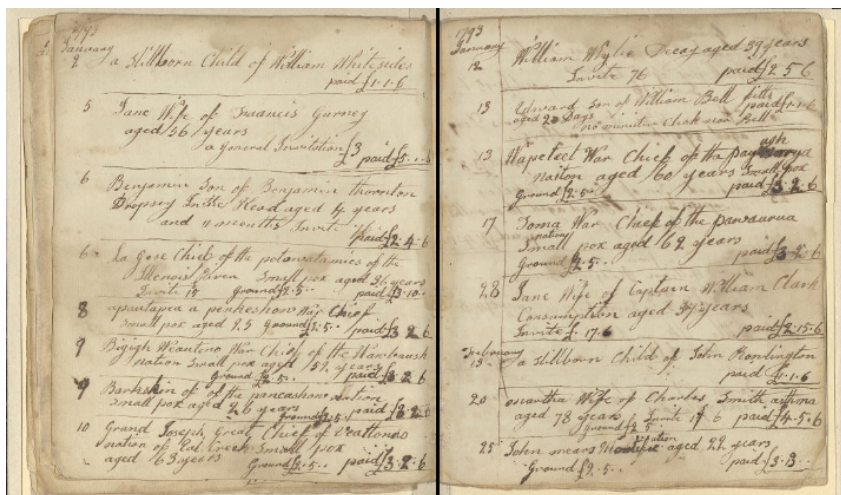

FIGURE 1: Sexton's Account Book, St. Peter's Burial Ground, 1789–93, pp. 43–4. Used by permission of Christ Church. www.philadelphiacongregations.org/records/items/show/280.

Nine different congregations ultimately agreed to take part; others wished to but were under contract with Ancestry or their records were held by a collecting institution that did not wish to join. We submitted our application in 2016 and were rejected, but heartened by the comments we received. We spent the ensuing year figuring out ways to strengthen our proposal. We learned of Atla's new digital library and decided to use it as our digital portal. This would widely expand our audience reach. We reached out to the University of Pennsylvania's Special Collections Libraries and asked them

if they would provide the long-term preservation of our images and they willingly agreed to join our venture. Finally, we strengthened our proposal by adding two more congregations—the African Episcopal Church of St. Thomas and the First Baptist Church—and we expanded our date range to 1871 to cover the period of the assassination of Octavius Catto, the well know African American teacher, baseball player, abolitionist, and vestryman of St. Thomas's. We had talked with digital archivists and gotten feedback, inviting them to join a technical advisory committee. We resubmitted our proposal and, in November of 2017, received word we had received a grant of $385,000. Work began in January of 2018 and it's been an exciting journey of discovery. Volunteers or staff from the congregations took their records to the Athenaeum to be scanned. Carly Sewell, our metadata archivist, provided checks, metadata, numbering, and generally kept track of images, and Walter Rice created an Omeka-based website for us to use as we built the project. Our website went live in April of 2019, and we notified interested groups such as the Genealogical Society of Pennsylvania that it was available.

The records chosen for scanning were wide-ranging: trustee and vestry minutes; baptismal, circumcision, marriage and burial records; accounting records; sermons; and more. They provide listings of names of those who helped to shape their congregations and the city of Philadelphia, as well as the "hidden" stories of their times. Through the sexton's account records (see figure 1), we see the names of the Native American chiefs who died of smallpox on their visit with President Washington in 1793 and the impact of the American Revolution on these various congregations told through their minutes. They are a treasure trove for genealogists but equally important for those interested in religious, social, and political history.

We worked hard to leverage key partnerships to create an ambitious yet successful project. The content partners provide amazing historical information that is unavailable anywhere else. Penn and Atla provide long-term stability and wide dissemination. But without the participation of a key middle-size institution, the Athenaeum of Philadelphia, the project would not have been possible. From the perspective of the small archives partners, the technology and infrastructure necessary for the project is beyond their capacity to create, let alone maintain. Archives staff are often part-time or volunteer, with limited capacity for projects. From the perspective of our large partners, the project is in many ways too small to get their attention, but their participation is key to ensuring the viability of the endeavor.

Utilizing existing relationships with small institutions like Christ Church and large institutions like the University of Pennsylvania, the Athenaeum connects small and large partners by providing a sophisticated digital infrastructure and digitization center that could cater to the specific needs of the congregations while, at the same time, providing the human networking connections, a community gathering place, and the standards-based technology to make partnership with the larger institutions possible and to their benefit.

The collaboration between so many institutions requires adhering to a set of best-practice standards. With public-facing frontends on the project website, the Atla Digital Library, and Penn's OPenn site, a standard metadata profile and crosswalks was essential. Working with Atla, we adopted a version of the PA Digital and DPLA Dublin Core-based standards. For transcriptions, we adopted a modified version of the Library of Congress' transcription style guide.
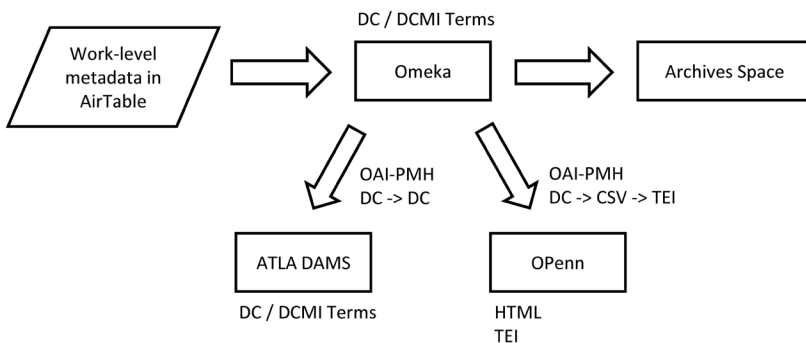
Metadata Workflow

FIGURE 2: Metadata workflow.

Limited technological resources of the congregational partners pushed us to develop the project using open standards and (as much as possible) open source software. Defining our goals in advance, we were able to patiently observe the development of various projects and carefully combine different software components to build the desired functionality. The project is using DCMI terms for its primary metadata creation, with crosswalks to TEI and EAD. Images are created as archive TIFF files and converted to JPEG2000 for display. Metadata is exchanged between systems using OAI-PMH, and image metadata and the images themselves are displayed using IIIF. The system components include Omeka, ArchivesSpace, Samvera (Atla

Digital Library), and Universal Viewer. Figures 2 through 4 provide diagrams of the workflows, standards, and protocols utilized for the exchange of metadata, images, and transcribed text.
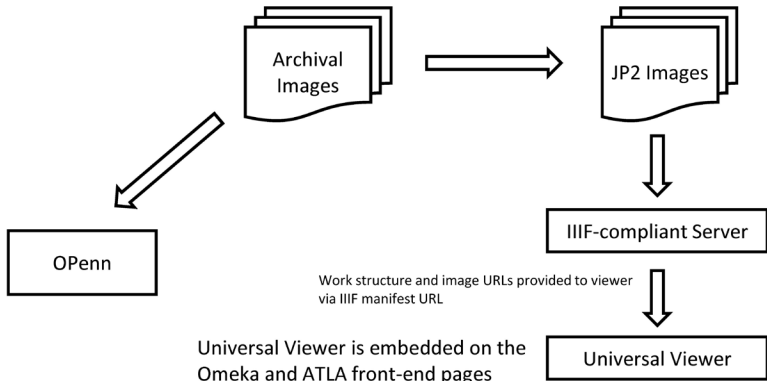
Images Workflow

FIGURE 3: Images workflow.

The project's success owes much to our ability to re-use and extend existing projects and technology infrastructure. We are using the Athenaeum's existing digital infrastructure, built over the last 20 years primarily for maps and large-format architectural drawings, now extended to support bound book volumes, OCR'd text, and
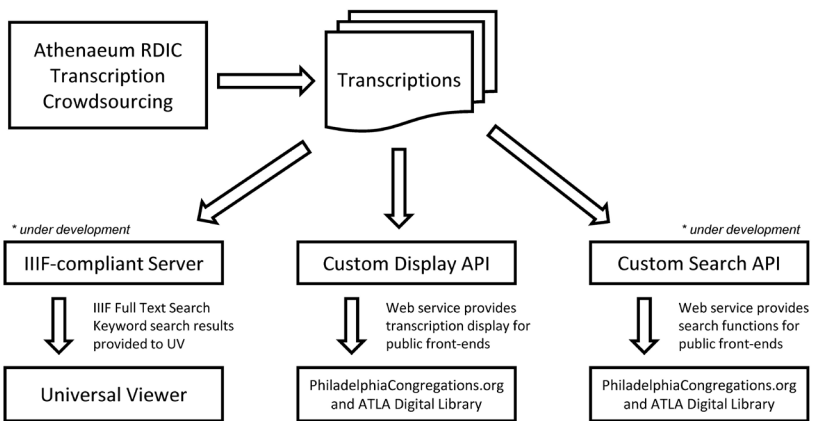
Transcription Workflow

FIGURE 4: Transcription workflow.

human transcriptions. The crowdsourced transcription functionality is built using an interface designed for an earlier Christ Church project to transcribe early minute books. The Atla and OPenn systems were designed for a different genre of resources and for much larger datasets, but we have been able to request careful, minor changes to fully support the project's resources for discovery and long-term preservation and access.

Outreach has been a key component of this project from the beginning. We've held public programs with scholars talking about their use of the records, presented the project to the broader historical community at the American Association of State and Local History in Philadelphia in 2019 and to smaller groups of congregational members and their constituents. We've used social media to spread the word about this project and to try to recruit transcribers. With the advent of the quarantine lockdowns, we began a concerted transcription effort. We had set up the website so that transcription work could be done online and had done some training with our congregational members and a few volunteers in the fall. This enabled us to refine our guidelines (based on Library of Congress standards) and clarify the registration process. Emails to prospective groups and Facebook posts brought in a dedicated crew of volunteers whom we try to keep united and engaged through biweekly coffee hours.

The project will need to be extended, partially because pandemic shutdowns have slowed scanning, but we had already anticipated extending it in the hopes we'd get more transcription work done. We are also bringing in more records as Ancestry contracts expire. As a result of this, we have added approximately 30,000 records of the Society of Friends. We are also hoping that additional grants may help us expand this project.

The project has already proven beneficial to researchers and the congregations. Archives are not the primary or even secondary mission of these institutions, which are reliant on volunteers for the most part (or someone whose job was something else altogether), so to have the project come this far is terrific. The advantages to the congregations cannot be overemphasized. By scanning these records and making them available online, our team can reduce the need for scholars or family historians to physically come in and view the records—something these congregations are not always set up to do. Our work provides them with a preservation copy of the information and reduces physical handling of materials. Finally, by putting

this information online and putting it together in a unified database, more researchers will see it. In these days of COVID-19, all of us are more conscious of how important digital access is and how important it is to provide access to those who cannot physically visit to see the records.

It is our partners who have truly made this possible: the Athenaeum for its high quality scanning and careful handling, the University of Pennsylvania for providing long term preservation, and Atla for providing access through its digital library to a far greater audience than we could hope to reach on our own. This was an incredible gift from CLIR and the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation to researchers of early Philadelphia history and we could not be more grateful to them and to our partners.