
Access Beyond Borders

Expanding Open-Access Theological Research Through Digitization

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ABSTRACT: The Graduate Theological Union (GTU) received an Atla Digitization Grant which was used to pay for staff scanning operators supplied by the Internet Archive (IA). The initial appeal for funds focused on digitizing the John Capistran Borley Collection of Islamic Manuscripts; a collection of manuscripts that is frequently used in class visits and student scholarship. The collection was deemed in need of pre-digitization conservation work and removed from the initial appeal, but new public domain materials were identified to scan. The project also served as a testing ground for the second collaborative initiative between IA and the GTU which involved the installation of their scanning equipment for use onsite at the GTU.

Access Beyond Borders: Expanding Open-Access Theological Research Through Digitization was conceived as a project in response to demonstrated lost access to Archives and Special Collections during COVID closures. In addition, regular year-over-year use of a particular manuscript collection for class visits and independent student projects lead us at Graduate Theological Union (GTU) to believe there was a specific need to digitize heavily used rare collections.

Leading up to the effort described in this paper, the GTU Flora Lamson Hewlett Library suffered a significant loss in physical space and had to reduce its main library printed book count by approximately ~60,000 titles. A collaboration with the Internet Archive (IA) was initiated and volumes were irrevocably donated to IA for eventual scanning and hosting on archive.org. Terms of the donation included IA use of GTU bibliographic records and a record dump of surrogate URLs into the GTU catalog for inclusion in an 856 field. To date, over 90,000 surrogates are available on the GTU Library landing page (Internet Archive n.d.).

As courses returned to in-person instruction, a particular course in the Sacred Texts Program requested a special collections session with the John Capistran Borley Collection of Islamic Manuscripts. This collection is comprised of 106 manuscript texts with one printed work. Clay-Edward Dixon, Collection Development Librarian, and the author brought a significant selection of manuscripts into the classroom. The response was phenomenal, and one student expressed an intention to publish on the materials.

In her excitement, she wanted to work with the library to digitize the materials so she could more easily research them as she traveled frequently. She continued to pressure library staff, and we began pursuing grant opportunities.

Beyond irrevocable donations, in certain cases IA is willing to install a local scanning center which works onsite with materials that an institution will not donate. The terms of this agreement include matching funds from the institution to pay IA scanning operators at the worksite. All equipment is lent and installed at the institution by IA, and as with donated materials, they manage metadata, technical support, quality control, and hosting in perpetuity.

Having learned about this program, we began to solicit funds to employ local operators. Two granting agencies provided enough funds to install a center at the GTU. Operator training began in July of 2024.

Metadata control is processed in two ways. A cart-specific spreadsheet is populated. This spreadsheet is uploaded and the work order is established. No new volumes may be added to the workflow from the point of upload. New volumes will populate a new spreadsheet. Using the bibliographic record on the spreadsheet, IA will access the MARC record via z39.50 for inclusion on the surrogate's public view display.

Unfortunately, the bulk of the Borley condition is in too fragile condition to withstand scanning with the equipment and staff skill available at this time. Consequently, we looked for other types of materials which would benefit the global theological community if made freely available online.

Focused on public domain materials or orphan works, we began scanning early GTU member school theses and dissertations. As a single year's volume comprised many theses, each with their own bibliographic record, we decided to scan each thesis with a target including the titles which preceded and followed it in the hopes that users could easily collocate all theses in a single volume.

Another category of material which was chosen for the project was Shared Print Commitments. The GTU participates in the Statewide California Electronic Library Consortium (SCELC) Shared Print Program. This program promotes retention commitments from libraries with unique or rarely held circulating print items. Provisions include circulating these collections through Inter-Library Loan and offering titles to member institutions first should unexpected circumstances occur which necessitate the withdraw of materials.

In the GTU's retention commitments it was found that a large number of 19th and early 20th century imprints were being requested through this program. Many of these volumes were in condition too friable to safely circulate. We approached SCELC about a solution to the problem, and they agreed that providing access to a digital surrogate and sequestering the damaged volumes would be a sufficient substitute for physically circulating access. Along these lines, we also routed badly damaged works which could withstand scanning with careful handling, but not further circulation, into the workflow as well.

Conservation issues were revealed as titles were pulled. Very often a rebound book from the 19th century would be found to be stable enough to circulate but bound too tightly to digitize. In other cases, do-it-yourself solutions to handling problems were explored. In addition to commercially available cradles and snakes, custom plastic sheets were cut to gently flatten pages, wooden dowels were used as spine supports, and foam sheets were layered to support either cover as the pages were turned from left to right. It should be noted that no barrier layer was used with non-archival supports, as contact time was short enough to disallow any transfer or damage from off-gassing.

Beyond conservation challenges, some administrative obstacles occurred. We were asked to provide furniture for the scanning equipment and did so to specification, but the equipment is not modular

enough to accommodate ergonomic considerations for the operator. One employee experienced repetitive stress injury symptoms and moved on to other pursuits. Another operator left the area for other prospects. We employed two sets of operators in a period of less than six months. In addition to the training on IA equipment, details of safe handling take some time to become reflexive. At the point at which a team member was replaced we needed to fall back on more stable volumes as they learned equipment and handling practices, i.e., the workflow needed to be flexible to accommodate the various and building skill levels of the operators.

As we did not meet fundraising goals for the entire first year of operator time, invoicing became a small issue. Invoices were based on complexity of image, i.e., foldout or oversize, not hours of operation. At the point of moving from staging to production site, invoices were automatically generated. Unfortunately, this meant invoicing was erratic at first and took some time to become routine.

We continue to seek funding to conserve and digitize the entirety of the Borley Collection. In the meantime, we are working through our unique public domain materials in an effort to provide universal access through surrogates made available and downloadable on archive.org.

REFERENCES

Internet Archive. n.d. “Graduate Theological Union Library and Archives.” <https://archive.org/details/graduatetheologicalunion>.

