“In an alien land”
Finding Solace from Librarian-Led Digital Humanities Pedagogy in a Pandemic

Francesca Giannetti, 29 October 2021
For many a youthful shoulder now is gay with an epaulet,
    And the hand that was deft with a cricket-bat is defter with a sword,
And some of the lads will laugh to-day where the trench is red and wet,
    And some will win on the bloody field the accolade of the Lord.

They have taken their youth and mirth away from the study and playing-ground
    To a new school in an alien land beneath an alien sky;
Out in the smoke and roar of the fight their lessons and games are found,
    And they who were learning how to live are learning how to die.

Agenda

1. Records of the Rutgers College War Service Bureau, summarized
2. The personal correspondence series, from assignment to edition
   2.1. AKA What can you do with 4,000 letters?
3. Editorial and technical matters
4. Progress and future work
Records of the Rutgers College War Service Bureau

I. Personal Correspondence, 1917-1919
II. War History Files, 1917-1919
III. Subject Files, 1917-1919

RG 33/C0/01

Inventory to the Records of the Rutgers College War Service Bureau

By Mark Anderson, Suzanne Blecker, Mary Ladany, Elizabeth Leister, and Meghan Rinn

May 1992

Special Collections and University Archives, Rutgers University Libraries


Special Collections and University Archives, Rutgers University received an operating support grant from the New Jersey Historical Commission, a division of the Department of State.

Descriptive Summary

Creator: Rutgers College War Service Bureau
Title: Records of the Rutgers College War Service Bureau
Dates: 1917-1919
Quantity: 5.5 cubic feet (14 manuscript boxes, 3 card boxes)
Abstract: The Rutgers College War Service Bureau was founded with the intention of keeping the Rutgers students, alumni, and staff in touch with one another as they served in World War I. The records contain letters from members of the Rutgers community regarding their activities during the war on the home front and abroad. It also contains bulletins from Earl Reed Silvers, the director of the War Service Bureau, about activities at Rutgers during the war.
Collection No.: RG 33/C0/01
Language: English
Repository: Rutgers University Libraries. Special Collections and University Archives
Note: The digitization of these records was assisted by a grant from the New Jersey Historical Commission, a division of the Department of State.
October 22nd, 1917.

LETTER 1.

TO RUTGERS MEN IN SERVICE:

Rutgers College, appreciating the generous response of her students and alumni to the country's call, and wishing to keep in touch with them during the crisis through which the world is passing, has established a War Service Bureau, the purpose of which is stated above. The Bureau hopes to be able to serve Rutgers men in the following ways:

(a) A news letter will be sent to you once every week or ten days. This letter will contain all the campus gossip, besides notes of general college interest.

(b) You will receive all regular issues of the Alumni Quarterly, including the supplement to the October number, containing a list of Rutgers men in the service.

(c) You will be written personal letters, if such letters are desired. A line to the Director will bring an immediate reply.

(d) All questions will be answered, whenever possible, concerning the college or college men.

The success of this plan depends, however, on your cooperation. Our men are constantly shifting about from camp to camp; it is hard for us to keep in touch with you, and unless you notify us at once of any change of address, we cannot keep you listed in the Bureau. That you may notify us whenever a change.

Earl Reed Silvers, Bureau Director and RC class of 1913
The Personal Correspondence Series
From Assignment to Edition
Personal Correspondence

The Assignment

• Two-week course module introduces students to the theory and practice of scholarly digital editing

• Analytic annotations initiate students into the work of the scholarly editor

• Letter metadata, containing sender and addressee names, locations of origin and destination, and dates, may be extracted for visualization
Wait. What is the Text Encoding Initiative (TEI)?
William P. E. Ainsworth to Earl Reed Silvers, June 7, 1918

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Somewhere in France, June 7, 1918

Dear Reed:

At last I am "over here" and everything is so peaceful in the locality where I am situated that it hardly seems I am in a country which has been at war for four years. Of course I am in a place very many miles from the firing line which accounts for the tranquility. You must understand, while I censor my own mail, that I cannot reveal many things and must deal largely in generalities in writing you. (First of all I want to express [sic] for "friend—wife" and "Mike" I hope both are as ever and suppose "Mike" is growing everyday. Tickle him for me.)

The trip over was wonderful. The sea was very calm and the weather beautiful all the way over except for about two days when it blew up rather rough and as the seas caught us sideways the boat rocked to beat the band. It sometimes rocked so that for hours if you were sitting on deck you would be looking alternately at the sky above and the water beneath you and unless you braced your steamer chair you would slide, chair and all across the deck. Many of the men were dreadfully seasick but it did not affect me in the least. In fact I thoroughly enjoyed it.

I have often heard what one wonderful sight is after days at sea but never realized it until I saw it at the end of our voyage.

Of our debarking and train trip I may say little except that the scenery was wonderful but in a different way from America. Our beautiful sections as a rule are the wild ones but the beautiful sections of France are after the cultivated ones.

The officers live in the chateau which is a great white stone house with a tile roof (one of the originals from which the millionnaires took their plans for their seaside homes). It has a nice big room with an adjoining second floor parlour. In back there is a terrace with a pool and rose garden containing a wonderful pagoda. A brook with a deep curving hole runs into the park a nearby meadow and offers the men an opportunity for bathing. The days are very warm and the nights cool.

What more could one ask for?
“…the digital representation of correspondence offers us the chance not just to remediate a central part of our cultural inheritance but also to begin to do justice to the larger social fields in which letters were written and thereby better represent the social dimension of epistolary thinking.”

Correspondence description in teHeader element

Can be reused to create maps

Placeography in back element
Personal Correspondence

...to edition

• What don’t we need?

• Relational aspects of this collection are not the most interesting feature

• Geographic aspects - officers censored their locations, others had desk jobs and never left the U.S.
What do we need?

‘My own posing of the question “what do we need?” comes from an acknowledgement of the hybrid and global future we see being shaped for the scholarly record: parts digital, parts analog. In this new mediatic environment we continue to protect, study and renew the analog, as we attempt to harness the new media in smart, ethical and sustainable ways. For several reasons, this implies learning how to produce, disseminate and preserve digital scholarship ourselves, without the help we can’t get, even as we fight to build the infrastructures we need at the intersection of and beyond our libraries and schools. This means that my minimal computing does not stand in as a universal call, but rather as a space for new questions and practices, an injunction to constantly repeat the question, “what do we need?”'
Editorial and Technical Matters

“What do we need?”

- An interest in trauma is what initially drew me to the collection. Why not make it a more explicit focus by seeking ways to highlight attitudes towards physical and mental disability?

- “Somewhere in France…” Officers censored their locations. Knowing their military unit and the date of writing usually helps to estimate their location, but is time consuming to piece together. Are those maps really needed?

- Silvers, the bureau director, solicited family letters about soldiers to make copies for publication. Originals were returned. These copies needed to be treated with some suspicion.

- Handling forms and mailers and modeling graphical items, like picture postcards, raise questions about how much of the artifact to represent through the markup and the online presentation.
Progress and future work
Progress

Themes from correspondence

• Many expressed loneliness and isolation, although usually indirectly, through repeated requests for news of Rutgers men near them.

• A hierarchy of griefs emerged. A war death was heroic. A flu death by contrast was much harder to assimilate. Those afflicted with shell shock or PTSD received disparagement.

• Correspondents had no real sense of when it would end. Dread and uncertainty were common, at least until a turning point came in Aug-Sep 1918.
Lieutenant Joseph L. Costa, RC '22
My dear Mr. Silvers:--

I dislike to cause you unnecessary trouble, but I should appreciate it very much if you were to mail me a list of Rutgers men who are commissioned in any branch of the Engineers, Ordnance, Aircraft Production or Quartermaster Corps, with their addresses so far as known.
Private Morris Jackson, one of several flu deaths
“The war itself ... became a framing device, one that obscured the other mass tragedy that unfolded as the battles ended. The death and suffering brought by the 1918-1919 influenza pandemic—which infected 500 million people, killed between 50 and 100 million of them, and in which the United States lost more people than it did in all the wars of the twentieth- and twenty-first century combined—didn’t count in the way the First World War did. The war was what seemed real, and war deaths were what seemed important. Flu deaths were difficult to spin into stories of victory or needful sacrifices. The disease suggested bodily vulnerability and weakness, not a masculine power struggle or a larger political goal. Its source was invisible, amoral, uncontrolled, yet the agent was influenza, something that seemed like an ordinary and familiar antagonist. Amid the war’s dominance and visibility, the pandemic’s catastrophe became a shadow trauma, its deaths less grievable.”
My dear Mrs. Jackson:

I have just heard of Morris' death, and cannot forbear writing you a line, even at the risk of intruding upon your great grief. I don’t know when I have met a finer boy, and I had learned how to love him almost as a son. I shall never visit the farm again, where he was stationed latterly, without a feeling of mute pain. I used to go there occasionally to take supper with the boys, and the chief pleasure to me was sitting afterwards in the doorway or on the flagging and talking with him. It seems to me now as if I could never bear taking supper there again.

I had a postal card from him written on his arrival at Newport News in which he said he wished he had not left here, he had seen too much of the world since leaving. I know he referred to the nursing and horror of the demented, and I am afraid often degraded beings whom he had to care for on his way over. I can imagine the shock it must have been to his sensitive nature.
“In its most extreme form, [...] the First World War crisis of masculinity resulted in shell shock, a male appropriation of what psychiatry construed previously as the singularly female condition of hysteria.”
Progress

Student editor perspectives

• The project helped better contextualize the connections between technical skill and LIS/archival/historical work.

• Students valued the in-depth look at the letters from both librarian/archivist and patron/researcher perspectives.

• Silvers’s filing system made one student more aware of history happening in real time and the importance of “capturing thoughts, feelings, and actions of others that may otherwise be misinterpreted if captured too late”

• Purpose of hypothes.is annotation layer was unclear at first (incl. with the Ed theme for Jekyll), but it is proving invaluable to the editorial team for highlighting and annotating items to correct, to research further, or to mention in a biographical note.
Progress

Technical notes

- Pre-processing of TEI into a mix of markdown and HTML for online publication using XSLT stylesheets
- Reliance on existing software (Jekyll) and themes (ed) for minimal editions
- No dynamic content, minimal dependencies and infrastructure
- Using GitHub Pages to host the website and GitHub as development repository
- Open Science Framework will be used to archive project data in final form
Progress and future work
...coming soon...

• Short biographical descriptions of the alumni are needed to better contextualize the letter anthologies. These must be composed with care for gaps in information, as little is known about correspondents. Joyce Kilmer is the only well known alumnus.

• A project-wide personography and placeography to keep internal consistency and to avoid duplication of effort.

• Selective use of correspondence maps, only where the geographical information provides useful context for the letters.
The WSB edition in progress

https://rutgersdh.github.io/warservicebureau/
Thank you!