Archival Resources on the Web

In the Trenches of Transcription: Untold World War I Stories Revealed

By Lily Birkhimer, Kristen Newby, and Jillian Ramage, Ohio History Connection

World War I has had profound and continuing effects on local, national, and world history. Ohio contributed to the war effort in every way imaginable, from supplying soldiers and training them at Camp Sherman in Chillicothe, to manufacturing equipment and machinery at factories across the state, to Ohio women volunteering and stepping into the workforce, to families growing produce in "victory" gardens and purchasing war savings stamps. Ohioans played an invaluable role in the Great War, and nearly all Americans shared their experiences and sacrifices.

Looking back at the conflict one century later, Ohio History Connection staff have helped commemorate the history of our state and beyond through a two-year project entitled Little Stories of the Great War: Ohioans in World War I. With funding from the National Endowment for the Humanities, project staff have developed a comprehensive statewide digital collection of World War I materials from the archives of the Ohio History Connection along with 15 other cultural heritage institutions around the

state. Freely available through Ohio Memory, the collaborative digital library of the Ohio History Connection and the State Library of Ohio at ohiomemory.org, this digital collection helps increase access to and use of World War I scholarly and primary sources and makes available those too-often untold stories of everyday Ohioans in the war. Items in the collection include

- photographic materials;
- posters and cartoons;
- letters, postcards, and other correspondence;
- diaries and scrapbooks;
- books and other publications;
- military uniforms and accoutrements; and
- various military and organizational records.

As part of this grant, staff coordinated additional activities to support and enhance use of the digital collection by a variety of audiences, including three thematically aligned

From the World War I in Ohio Transcriptions homepage, users can browse available items or conduct a keyword search.

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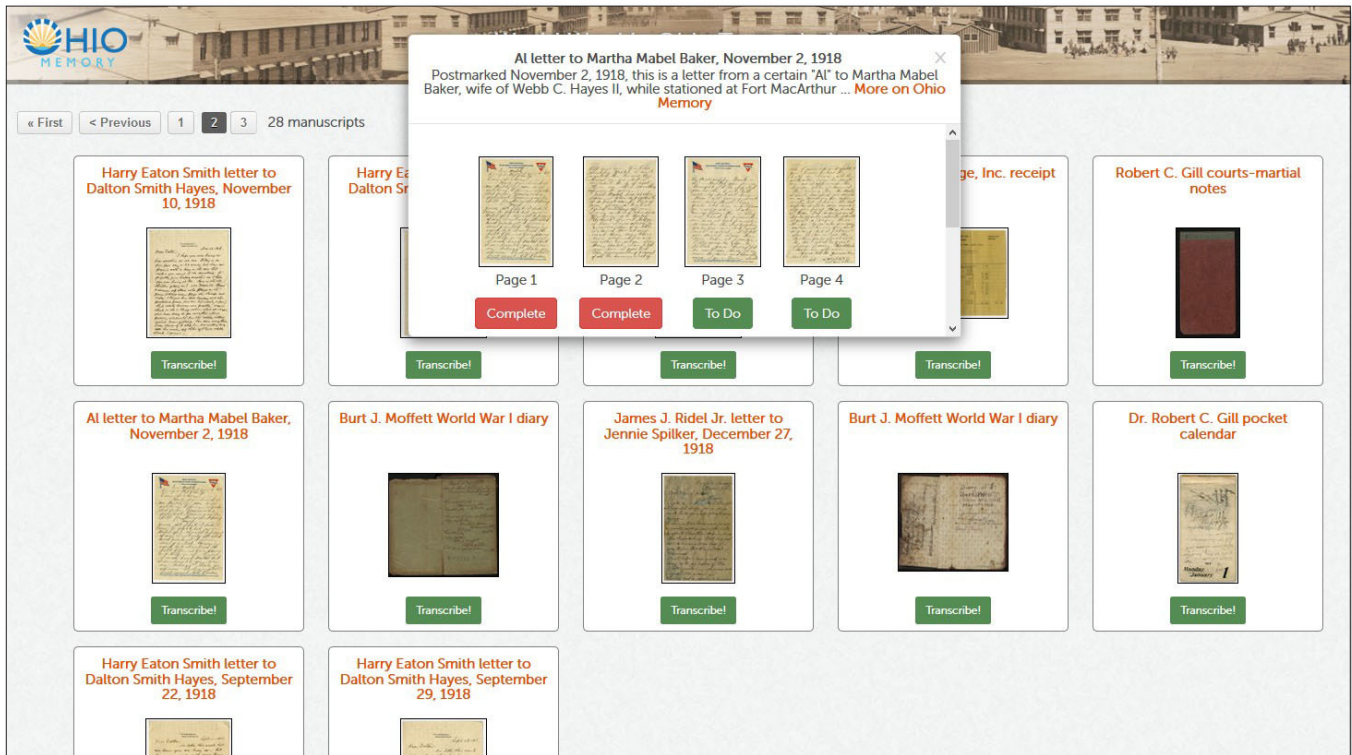*An Ohio Memory record shows the original document above its transcript.*

sets of educational resources that enable teachers to more easily utilize the digital collection in the classroom; two curator talks focusing on World War I and its connections to Ohio; and the development of a platform where members of the public can crowdsource transcriptions.

The primary goal of the crowdsourced transcription platform, available online at transcribe.ohiohistory.org, was to increase public engagement with the World War I in Ohio digital collection and connect users to Ohio's World War I stories during this period of commemoration and beyond. Sourcing transcriptions from the public encourages deeper interaction between users and content as transcribers learn from record creators' own words. And, as users transcribe handwritten documents in the collection, the full-text transcripts they create increase the accessibility and discoverability of these historically important records online.

Transcription offers an opportunity for transcribers to develop "expertise" on a particular author's handwriting,

slang words and other vocabulary, and relationships between letter authors and recipients. Often, a soldier might include different details when writing to a sibling or friend than he shares with his mother, for example. Sometimes, war documents can yield interesting and unexpected occurrences, like portions of a letter clipped by censors to protect important military information or the account of a discovery of a German spy at an American training camp.

This type of transcription tool has long been a goal of Ohio History Connection staff, and this project presented a perfect opportunity to explore efforts in this area that could then be replicated for other digital collections on Ohio Memory and by other institutions with their own digital content. A digital record and its completed transcript can be seen on Ohio Memory. Once a document is transcribed, users can freely search its text for places, names, and terms of interest, and students have easy access to the transcribed text of hard-to-read historical documents in the same window as the digital version.

On the results page, users can select documents with pages that have not been transcribed, designated by a green "To Do" box. Pages with a red "Complete" box have been transcribed, saved, and marked as complete by a user and cannot be edited.

The platform's user interface was designed to be as simple as possible, offering an easy tool to jump right into the collection without being required to create an account or read through extensive documentation. Instructional text and links to background information about the digital object are provided to users as needed, rather than "just in case," and users are also provided with a point of contact to reach out to project staff with any questions or comments.

The World War I in Ohio Transcription website interacts directly with Ohio Memory's CONTENTdm platform to process the approval and indexing of completed transcriptions. CONTENTdm software supports International Image Interoperability Framework (IIIF) services, which was of great benefit to the design of the transcription's user interface.

The administrative interface allows project staff to review all user-completed transcripts before adding them to an object's Ohio Memory record. After a transcription has been reviewed and any corrections made, the next step is "approve," which inserts the text of the transcript into the full-text field of the object's page-level CONTENTdm record. "Mark as Done," the final step, changes the text

in a hidden administrative metadata field from "yes" to "done," which removes the document from the transcription website. Once the collection is re-indexed, all changes are made active and the transcript appears live online.
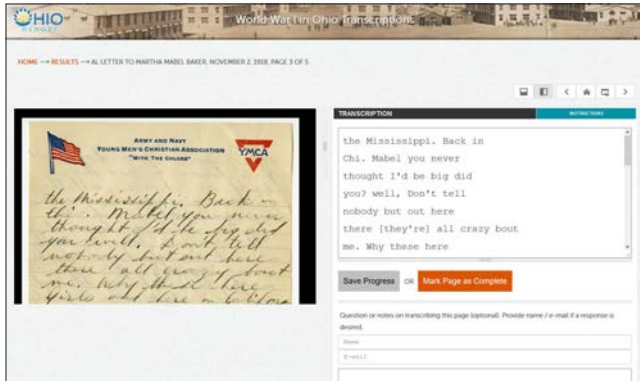
Some of the most engaging materials in the digital collection are soldiers' correspondence to their loved ones and their war diaries. These provide firsthand accounts of experiences at training camps at home and abroad, service on the front, and their travels across Europe. Transcription offers a unique opportunity for users to engage with primary sources and assume the role of a historian. By transcribing these documents, users can directly connect with the words of those Ohioans who experienced World War I and share these (until now) untold stories.

Because of transcribers' contributions, 391 of 467 handwritten documents—a total of 2,161 pages—digitized through Little Stories of the Great War are now full-text-searchable on Ohio Memory. The code for the transcription tool will be freely available on GitHub and can be adapted for use by cultural heritage institutions that use CONTENTdm for management of digital collections.
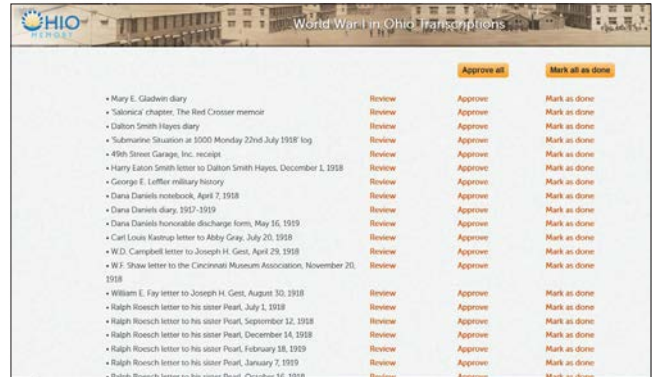
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The item-level view presents the digital image side-by-side with the transcription window. Here, users can save their progress and submit notes or questions for staff review.

The administrative interface allows staff to review and approve user-generated transcriptions before they are added to item records.

Project staff hope to apply this resource more widely to other Ohio Memory collections in the future to support wider full-text searchability of content.

Project staff promoted the World War I in Ohio Transcription project to grant partners, local history organizations, library and archives professionals, and K–12 educators, as well as to wider audiences via social media outlets. This promotion strategy proved effective, as returning users made up 17.8 percent of the site's traffic. Overall, response to the project from users, stakeholders, and other cultural heritage institutions interested in crowdsourcing tools was positive. Project staff found that user-contributed transcripts were largely accurate and did not generally require extensive revision prior to approval.

One primary challenge was promotion of the transcription tool to interested audiences to ensure that users most likely to engage in transcription were aware of the opportunity. Project staff and advisory board members discussed classroom applications for the site as one possible solution, while recognizing potential challenges that might prevent teachers from using the tool in class. Board members were also able to suggest several World War I and military history organizations with whom project staff could share the tool to promote engagement.

Additional ideas for enhancements came up over the course of the project that would help simplify the administrative process and improve the overall user experience. These include

- streamlining the steps required during the approval process;
- adding a feature to help others interpret the quirks of a particular author; and
- enabling a second stage of user-sourced review of completed transcripts, lowering the amount of administrative time required.

This project's success has encouraged project staff to apply this transcription model to other Ohio Memory collections, providing full-text searchability to hundreds of handwritten documents and increasing their accessibility, especially for those who are unable to see these original objects in person. Not only do transcriptions benefit archival repositories, but crowdsourced digital projects engage the public directly with archives, allowing them to contribute to a larger project and learn to be good stewards of history.