

Reflections on an Archon-to-AtoM Migration

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One of my major work-from-home archival projects during the COVID-19 lockdown of May–June 2020 was to conduct a migration of archival data from Archon to AccesstoMemory for a small consortium of Mennonite archives.

I started using Archon in February 2007, installed on a server here at Bethel College, North Newton, Kansas. I had been looking for something that would focus on public access for researchers rather than on internal archival management. (The other package available at that time, Archivists' Toolkit, focuses on internal management.) I had even been sketching out some database tables and other ideas to try to write something myself when I found out about Archon.

In late 2010 or early 2011, the Mennonite Church USA Archives, then located at Goshen College (Indiana), joined us in using our instance of Archon. Sometime in 2012, the Pacific Northwest Mennonite Historical Society, an all-volunteer organization, joined the “Mennonite Archival Commons.” In March 2015, we moved the Archon instance from Bethel College servers to Libraryhost, where it had been at mac.libraryhost.com until late 2020. In 2016, the number of participants increased by one as the Mennonite Church USA Archives moved a portion of its collection to the denominational offices in Elkhart, Indiana, and the portion that remained at Goshen became the Goshen College Archives. Thus, four archives participated in the Mennonite Archival Commons.

As Archon was left behind during the creation of ArchivesSpace, we had quite a few discussions about migrating from Archon. We saw ArchivesSpace as rather neglecting the public interface and focusing again on internal archival management. I was influenced by negative evaluations of ArchivesSpace, such as that by The Ohio State University in 2016¹ and private communications from a couple of state archives and universities.

Because we are all lone archivist institutions (some archivists are less than one FTE, and Pacific Northwest is all-volunteer), we needed the public researcher interface much more than the internal management. Once I found out about AtoM, I installed it on an

Amazon EC2 server to gain a bit of experience with it. At the same time, a consortium of Canadian Mennonite archives decided to use AtoM for making photographs available (Mennonite Archival Image Database). After a number of informal discussions, the US Mennonite consortium finally decided in 2019 to join with the Canadian consortium on its instance of AtoM to form the new Mennonite Archival Information Database (<https://archives.mhsc.ca>).

In addition to being a certified archivist since 1992, I have also worked in software development (and continue to do some software projects as a sideline to my archival work). Once we decided to migrate to AtoM, I began the process of migrating our data.

So that brings us to the technical aspects. No clean migration path exists from Archon to either ArchivesSpace or to AtoM. Because AtoM has a command-line bulk import process for EAD files, I concluded that the best approach would be to export and import EAD files. This was not as easy as it sounds, although I didn't encounter any insurmountable problems. But there's nothing like a data migration to reveal anomalies in your database, as I've found with other data migration projects I've done.

Archon has no bulk export to EAD that I was able to find. So, I wrote a Python program to download EAD files one at a time using the URL that is created if a human user clicks the EAD link. Because the URL contains the numeric collection ID, I could just loop through the IDs one by one and download the individual files. A couple of quirks occurred in this process that I won't go into here.

The next phase was to account for the various ways that Archon's EAD files don't match up with what AtoM is expecting, as EAD is a somewhat loose standard and can be interpreted in differing ways. There were two general categories of problems. I couldn't do much about data that Archon doesn't include in its EAD output (for example, Sort title). But, for things that are formatted differently in EAD (for example, some date formats and some unit IDs), I wrote a second Python program to modify the EAD files derived from Archon to reformat into the EAD sequence that AtoM was looking for.

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We succeeded in uploading about 1,800 collections into the already-existing AtoM instance used by the Canadian archival consortium. We discovered some quirks as we tried the process, such as one finding aid that was gargantuan because of numerous scope and content notes at the item level. (It took several hours to upload.) But we got all of the collections loaded with relatively little manual editing afterward.

If anyone out there is working on an Archon-to-AtoM migration, I'd be happy to answer any questions I can. I also provided a more detailed technical description and copies of my Python programs to Dan Gilleen at Artefactual, which manages the AtoM software.

Note

1. Morag Boyd, "Archival Management Systems at The Ohio State University" (PowerPoint presented at the Society of American Archivists Annual Conference, August 3, 2016), <https://www2.archivists.org/sites/all/files/SAA%202016%20Archival%20Management%20Systems%20at%20The%20Ohio%20State%20University.pdf>.


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