

Archival Resources on the Web

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Somewhere in the West: The Historical Geography of the Grand Rapids Dominican Sisters

By Jennifer Morrison, Dominican Sisters of Grand Rapids



“Somewhere in the West: The Historical Geography of the Grand Rapids Dominican Sisters” title slide

The archives of the Dominican Sisters of Grand Rapids (DSGR) is excited to share its story map entitled “Somewhere in the West: The Historical Geography of the Grand Rapids Dominican Sisters” (<https://www.grdominicans.org/somewhere-in-the-west-an-archives-story-map-project>), focusing on its Michigan pioneer predecessors.

Incorporating early photographs with information from historic annals and other primary sources, including the diary of a sister born in Quebec a year after the American Civil War ended, “Somewhere in the West” depicts how the sisters first came to Michigan. These true pioneers relinquished basic human comforts and set out in boats and buggies into the freshly settled woods of the lower peninsula to be of service to the children and families in these new parishes. The work was hard and the conditions so poor that the sisters literally risked their health and even their lives on these missions. In doing so, they embodied the dying vision of their mother superior, who saw a vast peninsula “somewhere in the West” dotted white with Dominican habits.

Story maps are produced through an online application that combines text and images, and can include maps and other elements, to tell stories in a creative and interactive format. Introduced by professionals working in geography and cartography, they but have been adapted by people telling all kinds of stories. Some story maps actually contain no traditional maps, though all of them map information in one way or another.

Story maps typically start with a title slide, similar to the cover of a book, and then are navigated by scrolling. As the viewer scrolls, different elements appear in the order the creator arranged them, directing the eye and calling attention to each in a meaningful sequence. The most common elements are text and images, which the creator can combine or separate, enlarge or minimize, place in a central position or to the side, extend or feature briefly, or otherwise manipulate. In this way, the story map creator makes headings, transitions, normal narrative, captions, and other story components. Story map elements can also have functionalities such as automatic zooming, audio, or video. The experience is interactive for the viewer, who can decide which elements to engage with and for how long.

Several websites provide templates and tools for creating story maps at a user-friendly level. We chose ArcGIS (<https://storymaps.arcgis.com>), where the user creates an account with a password. Accounts are free for noncommercial use. ArcGIS has countless great resources to help with the process, including articles, how-to videos, instructional story maps, a blog, and a forum. Another good way to learn about story maps is by browsing the many varied examples in the website’s gallery.

Our story map began as a collaborative project between our archivists and a geospatial analysis class led by Dr. Mary Clinthorne at Aquinas College. Aquinas College, which celebrated its 125th anniversary in 2011, was founded by the DSGR. Geospatial analysis is the collection, processing, and rendering of information that has a geographic component to it.

In a previous class, Clinthorne directed her students to create a story map about campus trees (<https://aquinas.maps.arcgis.com/apps/MapJournal/index.html?appid=8462888a76ab412398783c6df05eef00>). While working on the tree map, Clinthorne contacted the Aquinas College archives to ask about resources that might be useful for her project. The uniqueness of a geospatial analysis class gave the Aquinas College archivist a welcome opportunity to prove the value of her collection to a broad

(Continued on page 24)

ARCHIVAL RESOURCES ON THE WEB—Continued

Erin McBrien, Assistant Editor

(Continued from page 23)

audience. She went out of her way to work with these students and to find and pull items with information about campus trees. The students and the professor were excited about these archival resources, and, as a result, the tree map contains an especially strong historical, primary source component.

Not long after, the Aquinas College archivist went to work in the archives of the Dominican Sisters. One of her first responsibilities there was to organize the sisters' annals.



Sisters at their mission on Beaver Island, Michigan, in the late 1890s

Beginning in 1927, sisters from Grand Rapids on remote missions were required by their communities to keep a record of their activities in journal form. Today, these firsthand accounts are an important document of the sisters' lives and work. Remembering Clinthorne's request to keep an eye out for materials for future class projects, the archivist noted that the annals met three important qualifications:

- They represent a good quantity of primary sources from a variety of missions (or locations), so they allow students to choose an individual piece of an overall collaborative project.
- They are rich with graphic materials, including photographs, artwork, and other visually appealing items essential for creating story maps.
- The annals tell a geographical story, that of the sisters' migration over time, that particularly appeals to this class.

Archivists for the DSGR were eager because the project would strengthen their relationship with Aquinas College, boost their patronage at least for the duration of the project, and leave them with an impressive promotional piece. The professor felt that the annals provided enough material for subsequent classes and that students could

add components in the future.

Marywood archivists and Clinthorne began working early in 2020 to plan the project. The task of the archivists was to provide access to the primary sources for a class of nine students who would visit both as a group and individually. This involved creating longer-term in-house workspace for the class, having enough staff to assist, and pulling some relevant materials in advance. Clinthorne developed the relevant geospatial aspect of the project and outlined the requirements for the assignment.



Sr. Mary Navarre, director of archives for the Dominican Sisters of Grand Rapids (left) and Dr. Mary Clinthorne, associate professor of geography at Aquinas College in Grand Rapids (right), plan the story map project.

A member of the DSGR leadership team and one of the archivists visited the Aquinas class early in the semester. The sister delivered an overview of the history and culture of the DSGR, and the archivist discussed how archives and old records are organized and used. Students seemed inspired and interested in the lives and work of the sisters, as well as the prospect of becoming history detectives by exploring early documents.

The next step was a group visit by the students to the archives at Marywood so they could examine materials to use in their story map. Unfortunately, timing worked against the project as the spread of the COVID-19 virus quickly necessitated both the cancellation of in-person classes at Aquinas College and the closing of Marywood to outside visitors. Immediately after, even the archivists who were not sisters and off-campus sisters were barred from the Marywood archives.

The project principals found themselves suddenly and

ARCHIVAL RESOURCES ON THE WEB—Continued
Erin McBrien, Assistant Editor

unexpectedly separated and isolated, trying to learn new technologies and connect meaningfully with their work, whether that was their collection or their class. It seemed the project might have to be cancelled.

All parties were committed, however, and hesitated to give up at that point. A furious email campaign between the professor and the archivists followed. Two broad published histories of the community had been scanned and were made available to the students, but little else in the archives was digitized.

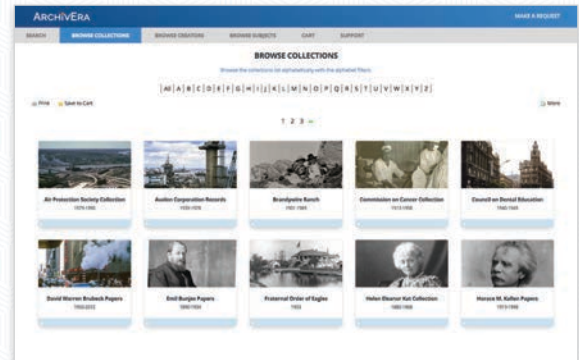
Crucially, one sister, who volunteered in the archives and lived on campus, still had access to the collection. She was quickly added to the email group. This on-campus sister, in her late eighties, was soon inundated with an unprecedented volume of urgent requests. The project planners as well as the nine students with separate and considerable needs for information and images all depended on her. Because she was not a trained archivist and had not been involved in the early planning, she sometimes had difficulty understanding the students' needs, but she became the lifeline for the project. She scanned and emailed primary sources to the students.

While students were inevitably affected by the changes in direction necessitated by the pandemic, all nine were able to complete their assignments. At the end of the semester in April, they presented their work to their professor, the archivists, and the sisters via Zoom.

Once the Marywood campus reopened to staff, archivists were able to regain access to the collection and determined there were resources the students did not have access to that needed to be incorporated into the story. They spent the next few months adding to the research and the narrative and were able to share the final product that fall.

The story map was promoted internally among the sisters, on the sisters' website, on social media, and via local history organizations. Each time, new viewers saw the presentation and the archives received new research requests. The sisters continue to find new audiences and new opportunities to use the story map.

We hope you too will enjoy scrolling through "Somewhere in the West" (<https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/33fec23421f940f1af3c3951f7e401ac>).



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