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### The Espy Project: From Paper Archives to Digital Scholarship

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## Introduction

The M.E. Grenander Department of Special Collections and Archives has digitized the most complete existing collection of execution records collected by M. Watt Espy, and is making them available for digital scholarship.

The New York Times crowned M. Watt Espy (1933-2009) as "America's foremost death penalty historian," who devoted more than 40 years to documenting each legal execution dating back to the founding of the Jamestown Colony. In 2008, the M.E. Grenander Department of Special Collections and Archives acquired the hallmark collection and in 2016 was awarded a grant by the Council on Library and Information Resources to digitized 24,000 index cards and over 100,000 pages of reference material to document each case.

# **Project Plan**

The Espy Project is a searchable database of nearly 150,000 documents with metadata available on individuals executed; their race, gender assigned, crime convicted of, method of execution, county of conviction, along with Espy's written analysis. This project will draw a wide range of researchers from academic scholars to those seeking to abolish the death penalty.

With the digitization of this incomparable collection, interested persons throughout the world now can mine the execution files—a groundbreaking accomplishment certain to stimulate research, scholarship, and critical inquiry about historical and current death penalty policies and practices.

—Distinguished Teaching Professor James Acker, School of Criminal Justice, University at Albany

# **Espy Metadata Editor**

The project needed an innovative tool to solve the challenges of updating and creating metadata records for over 24,000 index cards and over 100,000 pages of reference material, plus merge old ICPSR data with the newly created records.

Our project manager, Greg Wiedeman created a Ruby on Rails application, which allows metadata technicians to flip though each page of reference material using links or arrow keys. The Espy Metadata Editor allowed metadata technicians to focus on the intellectual task of cataloging historical data and records instead of using cumbersome file systems or spreadsheets.

The list of persons executed from the Espy file were made searchable with auto-complete functionality. Auto-complete allows technicians to type names or dates in a field and quickly select matches. For records not listed in the Espy File, metadata technicians create new records.

# The Espy Project: From Paper Archives to Digital Scholarship

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# Metadata Challenges

- No suitable standard schema or Linked Data ontology
- Inconsistencies that arise with multiple metadata technicians
- Vague, incomplete or illegible records
- Duplicate records leading to potential redundancy by metadata technicians
- Unconfirmed executions
- Extrajudicial executions required new categories
- Modifying biased terminology and categorizations without affecting the integrity of Espy's mission

# Conclusions

This is the largest digitization project the department has ever undertaken. The metadata editor minimized the potential pitfalls involved in processing the voluminous digitized materials, and controlled the complexity of linking, creating, and updating metadata records.

While the sheer overall workload of the project was unexpected, even after conducting multiple time and motion estimates for creating metadata, the metadata editor brought new efficiencies. We aim to use the editor for future metadata work.

# Espy Metadata Editor

Documented

Record type

Name

Owner

**Espy Record** 

## **Control Panel**

We connected with ICPSR to "seed" our metadata and match it to the documentation in the Espy Papers.

### **Small Index Card**

Smaller index cards give brief details of an execution.

### Large Index Card

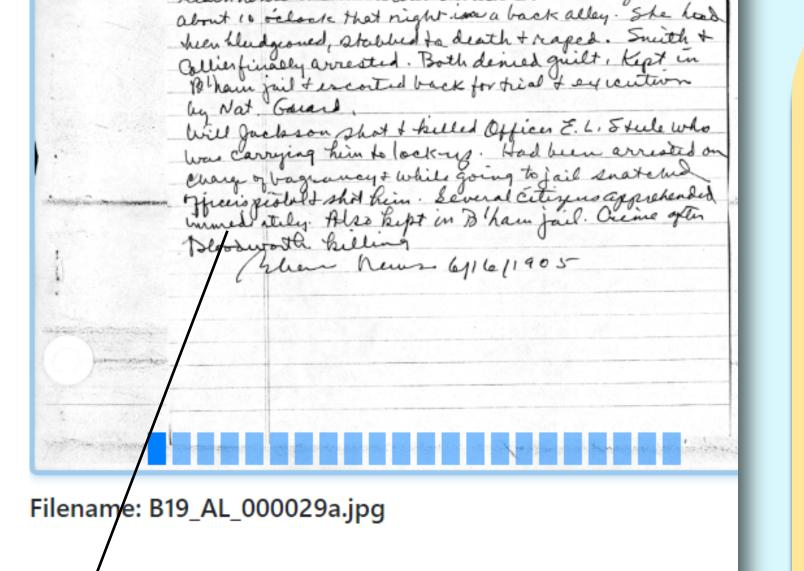
Larger index cards expand upon executions if available to Espy.

## 6-16-1905 COLLIER, John and SMITH, Harvey Both hanged, Decatur, Alabana, June 16, 1905. See large card. BIRMINGHAM NEWS, Birmingham, Alabama, June 16, 1905 ee ALA - BK % Mag EX Morgan County 9 OCR Fixed: ☑ Edit Index Ca 6-16-1905 COHZBJR, John and "SMITH, HM] (Both hanged, Pecatur, Alabana, June 16, 1905» See large card. BIRMINGHAM NEWS, Bimincham, Alabama, June 16, 1905 3 se ALA - BK & Mag EX COILIER, John and SMITH, Harvey 6-16-1905 Collier and Smith, Morgan Co., Ala., black men, were in the Decatur clothing store owned by a Mr. Bloodwoth late on the afternoon of Jan. 12, 1905, when Bloodworth's daughter, Miss Belle Bloodworth, brought him his supper. They heard Miss Bloodworth telephone her mother and state that she would be home shortly. When she left the store, they followed her, leaving behind Smith's fourteen-year-old son who was accompanying them. Mrs. Bloodworth did not arrive at home and that night a search party was formed which found her body in zon a back alley. She had been raped and then bludgeoned stabbed to death. Collier and Smith were arrested and charge the crime several days later when Smith's son told authorities that they had followed her from the store and that INTE his father returned home late that night. Later he heard his father Collier arguing and each accused the other of the crime. of the intensity of local feeling, they were carried to the Jefferturned to Decatur for their trial and later for their execution, they were accompanied and guarded by National Guardsmen. Both were hanged in Decatur on June 16, 1905, and both protested their inno-

Espy Metadata Espy Records \* ICPSR \* Index Cards Big Cards \* PDFs \*

**Edit Espy Record** 

### Ref Name lcpsr | Date execution 1905-06-16 Date crime 1905-01 Gender Assigned Race Crime Convicted of ✓ Icpsr Rape-Murder Enslaved Compensation case Execution method Hanging Jurisdiction Abbr State Alabama **County Lookup** County Lookup Search County name Morgan County code Get Code Note The big index card and the reference materials do not agree on the date of the exact date of the crime but both agree it happened in January 1905 so that is the date recorded. Most reference material record crime as murder only.



COLLIER, John, JACKSON, Wall, and SMITH, Harwey, blacks, hanged Decatur, Al. 6-16-1905

John Collier, Harvey Tmith + Will Jackson-all black, Ranged Wester, Ala: 6/16/1905. all Here hanged together. The bonst

Collies of gackson both died of strangulation. Smith & Collies Claimed to be imocent. Jackson said be killed

on Smith's neck sligged + but he feel to ground exclaiming.

Callies of Smith convicted of billing Miss Belle Bloodworth on

afternoon of 1/21/1905. Had taken sugger to father at his

Clothing store. Telegraned mother of fold her she was on her way home. Collies & Smith in stor of hund convenention &

followed her - Smith's 14 ye old-son testified against him belling how he & Callein had fallowed her from store - He

Said he went home + Yather cause in late. A few days later the said he heard father + Collier arguing of that each

accused other of crime. When Miss Bloodworth did not

reach home a search was instituted of she was found

✓ Icpsr

### **Metadata Fields**

These are all the variables that will make the final Espy metadata record. A user will be able to not only search and find a record, but see the source of the data, with links to the digitized document.

### **Source Material**

Information sourced throughout initial project. The documentation links to the index cards that summarizes the information of each execution.