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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 digitize 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 through 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

The screenshot displays the 'Edit Espy Record' interface. On the left, there are two index cards: a 'Small Index Card' with a brief summary and a 'Large Index Card' with a detailed narrative. The main area is a form for 'Espy Record' with fields for Record type, First Name, Last Name, Owner Name, Date execution, Date crime, Age, Gender Assigned, Race, Crime Convicted of, Enslaved, Execution method, Jurisdiction, State, County Lookup, County name, and County code. A 'Note' field at the bottom explains a date discrepancy between the index card and reference materials. On the right, a 'Source Material' image shows a handwritten document with a blue bar at the bottom indicating the filename: 'B19_AL_000029a.jpg'. A 'Control Panel' at the top left of the interface includes 'List', 'View', and 'Delete' buttons. A 'Metadata Fields' callout points to the form fields, and a 'Source Material' callout points to the document image.

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.

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.