

The Evolution of the Seward Family Digital Archive's Volunteer Collaboration

In addition to our separate internal guide for helping prepare students to train and work with our volunteers, we are including some details about how we have recruited, trained, and integrated volunteers into our workflow.

Volunteers from many areas of our community and with a variety of professional backgrounds and experiences have worked with us. In some cases, we have personal relationships with members of the university community who are interested in joining us, but other volunteers have learned about the project through presentations about the Seward family and the Seward Family Digital Archive.

During a graduate student's presentation about the Seward Family Digital Archive at The Highlands at Pittsford, a local retirement community that is affiliated with the University of Rochester, members of the audience were quick to notice and point out that he had made an error as he was reading from the digital image of the nineteenth-century manuscript projected on the screen. Their quips about his questionable ability to read cursive highlighted their level of interest and engagement with the project and inspired the idea of a collaboration between residents of the retirement community and the project.

After working with an initial group of residents at the Highlands, we did a presentation on the Seward family and a brief overview of the project during a lecture series at the Highlands. We explained the work volunteers do on our project in the last few minutes and distributed contact information for them to follow up with us if they were interested in volunteering. We did a similar presentation at the

local Oasis chapter in Rochester. After both presentations, we had several individuals who were interested in volunteering with the project. We also have a group of retired librarians and university employees who have heard about the project through personal connections and university publications and started volunteering in our first cohort.

Through the support of the Emerson Foundation and the National Historical Publications and Records Commission, the project began training volunteers at the retirement community, and it became the first external site in a new phase of community engagement. With the Robert David Lion Gardiner Foundation supporting the creation of a new volunteer site in 2019, project staff will collaborate with volunteers at three remote sites, at the university, and electronically rather than in a physical space. The majority of our volunteers are retired, and despite their diverse life experiences, they all come to the work of transcription with an excitement and enthusiasm about the manuscripts and the stories they are transcribing that is inspiring to anyone who works with them.

We meet with volunteers at these remote sites or on campus to go over questions about their transcriptions and annotations and collect completed transcriptions and distribute new images to be transcribed. When we first started meeting with volunteers at remote sites, we scheduled a meeting for all the available volunteers to join us at one time every other week. However, we found that rather than trying to have two students answering questions for six volunteers during a two hour window it was a better experience for everyone to schedule individual appointments during that same block of time instead. Each volunteer has a 30 minute window to meet with a student and transfer files, work on deciphering difficult words, and ask new questions.

Some volunteers like having a shorter appointment time with less of a time commitment, but many will come early and stay past their window and work with the other volunteers some. The student staff already employed a peer-training model that has been extended to the volunteers. The more experienced volunteers help more recently trained volunteers with deciphering stubborn words, identifying elusive people, and mastering a range of technological challenges. The volunteers provide a great deal of support to each other, and the students help with maintaining continuity and helping with more unusual questions.

In addition to the volunteers who meet with us at the remote sites, some volunteers come to work in the lab with the students on a weekly basis. Most volunteers work off site once they receive some initial training. Some of these volunteers communicate and exchange files with us electronically while others come into the lab every few weeks to touch base and exchange files. We always invite volunteers to join us on our Seward class trips, Seward Stories, and project social events, and especially with not seeing everyone in one place consistently, we value having our volunteers and staff together at these events.

The volunteers now outnumber the students who work on the project, and as more volunteers joined the ranks of the project, we have adjusted our internal workflow. The first change was navigating the peer editing process for volunteer letters. Embracing the volunteers' strengths and interest in transcription, project staff handle more of the annotations for volunteer transcriptions. We also have a wide range of productivity among our volunteers, making it a challenge to create effective and balanced peer-editing partnerships. Instead, our student staff edits all the volunteer letters.

For letters assigned to our staff to transcribe, they go through one round of peer editing. A student transcribes and annotates the letter, another student edits the

version one transcription and annotations, and the first student makes revisions and creates a version two. When the volunteer manager distributes volunteer transcriptions to be edited, the student they are assigned to takes on stewardship of them. The first student completes any incomplete sections and edits the volunteer's transcriptions and annotations. Then the student's editing partner edits it, returning it to the first student to make it into a version two. We have greatly increased our accuracy in transcription and annotation and consistency with our internal style standards by having two students edit the volunteer letters rather than just assigning a single student to edit a volunteer transcription.

Another challenge we encountered was keeping letters we assigned and collected from volunteers synchronous with the transcriptions students were completing. Our paid staff have collection deadlines throughout the year when all their letters for that term are due and collected for a final round of review against the manuscripts. However, we found that it was harder to predict when the volunteer transcriptions would be completed and returned to us, and then with two rounds of editing, they required a few weeks time to be able to turn them around in advance of a collection deadline.

We understand that our volunteers have other obligations and rather than establish deadlines of collection for them, we started assigning volunteers letters a term ahead of where we were working with the project staff. This allowed us to assign letters with many months until we would be hoping to receive them from volunteers. Of course, most volunteers return their completed transcriptions quickly, but if a volunteer was unable to commit as much time to transcribing as usual, we had a cushion built in within our workflow already.