“And There Was a Large Number of People”

The Occom Circle Project at the Dartmouth College Library

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“. . . ther I preachd began about 2 and there was a large Numb’ of People and I Spoke from the Words I have a mesage &c and there was an affectionate attention amongst the People....”

—Samson Occom, Journal, 3 June 1788

SAMSON OCCOM (1723–1792) was a Mohegan Indian and one of the earliest (if not the first) Native American students of Eleazar Wheelock, the founder of Dartmouth College. As an itinerant preacher, Occom ministered to Native and white communities throughout the northeast. After breaking with Wheelock for several reasons, Occom went on to found an independent Indian community in upstate New York. The Dartmouth College Library’s Occom Circle Project, led by English professor Ivy Schweitzer and funded by a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities, is producing
a scholarly digital edition of Occom’s papers, including journals, letters, sermons, herbals, and accounts. In addition to Occom’s papers, the project also includes documents that discuss Occom by others in his “circle,” including Eleazar Wheelock, Nathaniel Whitaker, Joseph Johnson, David Fowler, and George Whitefield. Upon completion, the collection will be fully searchable, with person, organization, place, and event indexes. These documents, all of which are held in the archives of the Dartmouth College Library, are a foundational collection of primary sources in Native American studies, colonial history, and American religious history.

Digitizing Occom’s papers has been an organization-wide endeavor for the Dartmouth College Library, involving staff from many departments, including Special Collections, Preservation, Cataloging and Metadata Services, and Reference. A half-time project manager directs the transcription and markup process, which involves library staff, faculty, undergraduate students, and the English subject librarian. This chapter will describe the development of our project management process, which has been accomplished almost entirely within the existing organizational culture of the library. The library does not at the time of this writing have a separate digital humanities department, program, or center, but it has a long tradition of producing digital projects. It is still in the early stages of developing staff dedicated to leading and supporting large-scale, ongoing digital humanities projects. The Occom Circle Project provides a case study in organizational change and an example of how subject specialists and department liaisons can work within their libraries’ existing cultures to develop new skills and connections to support and foster the digital humanities.

Samson Occom, 1723–1792

“I was Born a Heathen and Brought up in Heathenism”—so opens Samson Occom’s 1768 autobiography. Occom was, in fact, born a Mohegan Indian in eastern Connecticut in 1723. In his teenage years, he had two experiences that shaped the rest of his life: the first was a religious awakening that first

* The authors wish to thank Ivy Schweitzer and Jay Satterfield for their feedback in revising this chapter.
made him fear for his soul and then brought him to Christianity. The second was watching deliberations related to the infamous Mason case, a controversy over indigenous land rights that turned on the Connecticut colony’s exploitation of Indian illiteracy.† These two experiences—one spiritual and one political—led him to seek a Christian education with the New Light minister Eleazar Wheelock in 1743. Occom and Wheelock had a complicated relationship. On the one hand, Wheelock provided Occom with a classical education (including Latin, Greek, and Hebrew) not offered even to most white students at the time. On the other, Wheelock kept Occom beholden to him for support, both financial and moral.

Occom was ordained in 1759 after serving as a lay minister and teacher for many years at Montauk on Long Island. He always struggled financially and was well aware that he was supported much less extravagantly than English ministers doing similar work. In 1764, he and his family moved back to Mohegan. He soon ran afoul of local clergy because he was drawing Native parishioners away from their services. He also became embroiled in the Mason land case in an attempt to protect the Mohegans from financial ruin. It wasn’t long before accusations of misconduct were leveled against Occom. Wheelock, disgusted by these accusations, convened a synod that acquitted Occom of all charges save those related to the Mason controversy. Fearing Occom’s further involvement in local issues, Wheelock sent him to England in 1766 in the company of local minister Nathaniel Whitaker to raise money for Wheelock’s Moor’s Indian Charity School. In England, Occom and Whitaker, who was something of a hustler, traveled the country; Occom preached while Whitaker took up collections. Their tour raised an astounding £12,000—equivalent to approximately $2.4 million today.

On his return to the colonies in 1768, Occom found himself without means of support. Wheelock had neglected Occom’s family and, for various reasons, turned his attention from his former pupil in order to pursue the founding of a college on the New Hampshire frontier. Occom and Wheelock fell out over the use of the funds raised in England, which Wheelock

used to establish the institution that became Dartmouth College. Occom never set foot on campus nor saw his former mentor in person again. This was a turning point in Occom's life and his first step toward spiritual and intellectual independence.

In 1772, a Mohegan Indian named Moses Paul was convicted of murdering a white man while under the influence of alcohol. He was sentenced to death and asked Occom to preach his execution sermon. Occom spoke to a large, mixed-race crowd on the subject of temperance, an issue of deep concern to the English establishment in its relationship to Indian communities. At the urging of others, Occom had the sermon printed, and it went through nineteen editions (including a Welsh translation), making Occom the sixth-most published American author of the 1770s. The sermon launched him on a new path of celebrity.³

Over the next fifteen years, Occom became increasingly disenchanted with white culture, while at the same time he deepened his connection to his Christian faith. In 1787, he wrote a sermon titled “Thou Shalt Love Thy Neighbor as Thyself” in which he declared that those who held slaves—which included almost all white men of station at the time—were not Christian. Even in an environment where several states had moved to outlaw slavery, this was a radical statement. Frustrated by his own circumstances and by those of his Christian brethren across a number of tribes, he and several other graduates of Moor’s School set up a Christian Indian settlement called Brothertown in Oneida territory in upstate New York. Occom moved back and forth between Oneida and Mohegan for many years and finally died in Brothertown in 1792.

While there are many things about Occom that made him unique among his peers—his education, his experience in England, his international acclaim and recognition, his straddling of two cultures—he stands out most prominently today in that he is the foremost colonial Native American to have left behind a published body of written work. It is this body of work, along with the opinions and perceptions of his Anglo-American colleagues, that makes Occom of particular and compelling interest to modern scholars of eighteenth-century history, literature, and culture.
The largest body of Occom’s papers is held by Rauner Special Collections Library at Dartmouth College.

**The Occom Circle Project**

Rauner Library is committed to integrating its collections into the intellectual life of Dartmouth College. In most academic years, around one hundred classes hold sessions in Rauner, using materials from the rare book, manuscript, and archival collections. Ivy Schweitzer, Professor of English and Women’s and Gender Studies, has regularly brought her Early American Literature class in to use Rauner’s collections. Her teaching collaboration with College Archivist Peter Carini led to an invitation to present and discuss Samson Occom’s papers as part of Dartmouth’s annual Pow-Wow, an event celebrating Native American culture held annually since the college refocused attention on supporting Native American education in the early 1970s. Their presentation during the May 2007 Pow-Wow was attended by members of the Mohegan tribe. During the session with Schweitzer and Carini, a member of the Mohegan Tribal Council asked why, if Occom was such an integral and important part of the founding of the college, was he not more visible at Dartmouth—at the time, the only space in Hanover named for Occom was a large pond on the periphery of campus. This question sparked a lively discussion and inspired the idea for the Occom Circle Project.

Over the next few months, Schweitzer and Carini had several discussions about the possibility of digitizing Occom’s writings. At the crux of the discussion was the recent publication of Joanna Brooks’s book *The Collected Writings of Samson Occom, Mohegan: Leadership and Literature in Eighteenth-Century Native America*, a critical edition of Occom’s written work that included a number of documents that were not part of Dartmouth’s holdings. Rather than simply repeat Brooks’s work in digital form, Schweitzer decided that a digital scholarly edition of Occom’s writings at Dartmouth, combined with documents from his contemporaries (particularly regarding their perception of Occom), would provide a new and interesting angle, while at the same time facilitating her curricular use of the documents.
Schweitzer, in consultation with Carini and David Seaman, Associate Librarian for Information Management, applied for a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities and was awarded $250,000 to create a scholarly digital edition of approximately 530 eighteenth-century documents, comprising letters, accounts, journals, sermons, and other documents by, about, and related to Samson Occom. The grant proposed to digitize the documents, transcribe them, and mark up the transcriptions using the Text Encoding Initiative (TEI) XML schema. The mark-up would allow scholars to search and sort the documents in ways that a simple plain-text transcription would not allow. It would also make it possible to present the documents in both a scholarly diplomatic version and a modernized version that would regularize variations in spelling and handwriting common to eighteenth-century documents, making the material more accessible to undergraduates as well as to K–12 students and general readers.

To date, the Occom Circle Project, funded in part by the National Endowment for the Humanities and supplemented by the Dartmouth College Library, has resulted in 586 scanned documents either by or about Occom, plus a number of other documents pertaining to other Native American students taught by Eleazar Wheelock at Moor’s Indian Charity School in Connecticut. These scanned documents amount to 3,098 images (or pages), each of which has been cataloged, transcribed, and marked up using TEI. The final product presents the transcriptions side-by-side with the scanned documents to allow scholars and students to judge and interpret the documents and transcriptions for themselves.

The Project and the Process

The Occom Circle Project is one of the Dartmouth College Library’s most complex projects to date. The initial project team was led by primary investigators Schweitzer and Carini, with five additional members from library departments including Library Leadership, Cataloging and Metadata Services, the Digital Library Technologies Group, and Preservation Services. Hazel-Dawn Dumpert was hired from outside the library as project manager, and members of Dartmouth College’s Web Design and
Development team served as consultants. So far, the project has involved at least forty individuals from the library, Computing Services, and the grant team. It has also employed a number of Dartmouth undergraduates and graduate students and postdoctoral fellows from Dartmouth and other institutions.

Not initially included among the team members were department liaisons from the disciplines most relevant to the project: English, history, and Native American studies. This was neither a deliberate exclusion nor an oversight, but rather a function of the way new digital projects had been initiated within the current organizational structure of the library. Project leaders within the library—in this case, Carini, the subject specialist for college history—made proposals to a cross-departmental, cross-functional committee, which then decided how to move forward in accommodating new projects. Department liaisons often initiated new projects in the library’s digital program, on their own or in collaboration with faculty, but their roles once projects were underway had not been defined. The process of developing and carrying out the Occom Circle Project served to reveal both the strengths and the challenges of the current organizational structure and to suggest additional ways of involving department liaisons in digital projects in order to improve both library services and the projects themselves.

While the project was defined to a certain extent by the grant, a number of specifics needed clarification. To ensure that all parties were clear about the expectations and outcomes from the project, the project team drew up a success statement. The success statement included a narrative that laid out in broad strokes the technical expectations for the final product as well as the expected behaviors of the Occom Circle website, such as “The encoding will allow linking to contextualizing information about people, events, places, and organizations mentioned in the letters as well as facilitating research related to textual elements within the documents.” This was followed by an itemized list of actions that spelled out in more detail the expectations for each step in the process. This document has been important both for keeping the project on track and for managing expectations, as well as being a reminder of commitments made by various library
plified initial markup at the beginning of the process, but the final markup and the development of TEI headers that in turn facilitated the creation of Encoded Archival Description and MARC records for each document was performed by members of the text encoding team from Cataloging and Metadata Services. The final results are documents for which specific elements have been consistently noted by the team to facilitate searching and to improve access to and comprehension of the documents. For example, TEI allows us to regularize variant spellings in the collection so that if someone searches for Occom, he or she will find all the documents where Occom is mentioned, even if the spelling is “Occum.” The markup also provides clarification of unique abbreviations or strike-throughs, such as “Chh,” that the team determined stood for church.

Managing the Occom Circle Project

The grant for the Occom Circle Project provided for a half-time project manager, Hazel-Dawn Dumpert, who was hired from outside the Dartmouth College Library. The ultimate aim of the project manager (PM) should be the establishment of a smooth and steady workflow and the facilitation of an easy interchange of labor between departments and team members. In the case of the Occom Circle Project, which was a ground-up effort, the PM began with the very basic task of meeting individually with each team member to get a feel for his or her duties, goals, and ideas and thus to envision a preliminary network of how each member’s distinct tasks fit into the project as a whole.

From there, the PM’s next big duty was to assist the project director in hiring student assistants. As anyone who has employed student workers knows, this can be a hit-or-miss endeavor. To help refine the search for reliable assistants, the Occom Circle PM gave promising candidates a short presentation to relate what their duties would entail, encouraging them to give the work serious thought before joining up. The development early on of an easily repeatable training program ensured consistency and a steady learning curve. Likewise, the PM learned to quickly identify, and gently but firmly dismiss, those students whose performance or work habits did
not show promise or improvement. While this was not the most enjoyable aspect of the project, it was crucial in terms of minimizing time wasted on training those who were not a good fit.

One of the PM’s trickier endeavors was deciding which tasks to delegate, and to whom. While having an overview of a project’s processes is not only helpful but necessary, a PM can risk becoming the sole keeper of that overview. For example, a particularly resourceful student worker was promoted from the transcription of letters to the researching of the names, places, and organizations contained in the documents. This student soon became invaluable to both the project and the PM, building a narrative of the players and events involved in the Occom documents. Although other research assistants were also recruited, they did not prove to be as effective, so the PM, satisfied with the work of this particular student, did not assiduously pursue new assistants. Thus, when the student graduated, the PM was left as the only team member with a thorough knowledge of the project overview and, more important, of how this wider perspective affected everything from the proofreading and markup of the documents; to the indexing of people, places, and organizations; to the implementation of website display options and beyond. If, for whatever reason, the PM were suddenly to no longer be involved in the project, the absence would have been difficult for other team members to overcome. In hindsight, it likely would have proved beneficial to the project and the PM to be more proactive about delegating some long-term duties to other permanent team members, thereby distributing project information more evenly and increasing the exposure of project documents to those who could help to ensure accuracy and consistency.

Connecting with Department Liaisons

What were the roles of department liaisons in the Occom Circle Project? The library’s existing organizational structure assigned one lead contact for digital projects—in the case of the Occom Circle, the College Archivist, who is the subject specialist for college history—to coordinate the project both inside and outside of the library. Laura Braunstein, department
liaison to English (one of the appointments of principal investigator Ivy Schweitzer), had heard about the project from library and faculty colleagues and from the PM (Dumpert), and was looking to learn more about the digital humanities—both as a field in general and in terms of learning skills and competencies that she (Braunstein) would need to support faculty, students, and researchers doing new work in this area.

Braunstein approached the PM in the summer of 2013 and asked to contribute in any way useful—not necessarily using her disciplinary expertise as a department liaison, but by learning the project from the ground up. She negotiated with her manager to contribute five hours per week to the project and began with the same training program used for the student assistants. She learned eighteenth-century paleography and transcribed letters, journals, and accounts using the simple markup developed for the project. She worked with student assistants, the PM, and principal investigator Schweitzer to proofread document transcriptions. Later, she learned the Text Encoding Initiative markup language in order to complete the headers and markup for individual documents. This part of the process had heretofore been accomplished solely by the PM and by staff on the text markup team in the library’s Cataloging and Metadata Services department. While Braunstein could have asked to join the text markup team, joining the project as if she were a student assistant offered additional opportunities to view the project as a whole from the perspective of the PM. Learning TEI through participating in the Occom Circle Project was a challenging process, but was enormously helpful in demonstrating the sheer scale of work and army of collaborators involved in producing a digital edition of this size. Understanding a project from the inside helps department liaisons advise other faculty and researchers who are interested in initiating new digital projects and provides valuable experience for librarians working within their libraries’ existing cultures to build digital humanities programs.
Lessons Learned

The Dartmouth College Library has a long history of involvement in producing digital editions,‡ but none have approached the scale of the Occom Circle Project. The road has not always been smooth, but we are lucky to have been able to draw upon the expertise and experience of our staff, who met technical and organizational challenges as they arose. When producing a large digital edition, defining the scope of the project and having a detailed understanding of the actions and expected outcomes are extremely important. Having the success statement as a reference point and guide kept the project on track as individual documents moved through the process. Having a set of milestones and a carefully thought-through workflow helped assure that the “large number of people” involved knew where their tasks fit into the whole.

Even with these planning and reference tools in place, the project—like most endeavors of its kind—ran into several technical problems. Some of these problems were minor, while others had a significant impact on the project. An example of a relatively minor problem was the discovery that several separate letters were often written on a single document. Special Collections had cataloged each letter at the item level without regard to whether it was originally written on a separate piece of paper. Since the eighteenth-century authors did not give any thought to future digital projects when they were writing—and paper was expensive!—these letters often ended or began on the same page as an earlier letter by another author. This situation complicated the process of relating individual transcriptions to specific images within the database.

A similar issue that had a much larger impact on the project was also related to scanning. When the collection was originally scanned, some

larger documents—generally folio sheets—were scanned a single page at a time, while smaller documents—such as multi-page quarto-sized journals—were scanned open so that two pages appeared in one image. This presented some problems in making a one-to-one match between page images and transcriptions, with the end result that several large sets of double images had to be split apart digitally.

From the project management perspective, digital projects such as the Occom Circle Project can often be an education in lessons learned the hard way. Scrupulous record-keeping can help minimize back-to-the-drawing-board delays. Indeed, if we were to offer only one piece of advice to a project manager, it would be to keep track of everything. Information is easier to let go of than to gather together, and the Occom Circle PM soon learned that something that appeared to be inconsequential at the beginning of the project—for instance, building a list of each and every manuscript number related to each individual mentioned in the documents—would be of great importance further down the road. A detailed daily work journal, as well as a spreadsheet to keep track of all of the project’s various lists, proved to be of enormous benefit in corralling all the various aspects of the project.

Another aspect of the project that came to light only after a great deal of time had passed was the fact that the markup of certain documents would differ significantly from others. Although the transcription of letters—which comprised the majority of the project documents, and so were tackled first—was often difficult in terms of deciphering handwriting, their TEI encoding was a fairly straightforward and even pleasant task. When it came time for journals and accounts, however, team members were somewhat dismayed to find themselves faced with a whole new set of unforeseen problems, including but not limited to the difficulties of transcribing ledgers in ways that would ultimately display correctly on the published site and the sheer volume of person and place names contained in the journals (some of which ran longer than forty pages, contained nearly one hundred names, and entailed exacting specifications in their TEI markup). Only in hindsight did the PM realize that a healthy sampling of each type of document at the outset would have helped to sketch out timelines and prevent “coding fatigue” later in the project.
Our advice for department liaisons who want to support and foster new digital humanities projects at their libraries would be to pay close attention to what processes the organization already has in place for initiating, organizing, and operating existing projects, from the smallest to the largest. It would be unnecessarily complex, not to mention nearly impossible, to include every relevant library staff member on every project, and doing so should certainly not be a goal for even the most ambitious team. Yet given that much of department liaison work is outreach to and information sharing with faculty, students, and community members, there is always room to improve project communication. This can be an avenue for the departmental liaison to take positive action. Ask questions of anyone who will answer; spend time “informational interviewing” colleagues; don’t assume that digital humanities projects will function in the same way as other cross-departmental initiatives; and get comfortable with the possibility that channels of communication may occasionally have some static. If the project does not appear to have a place for the traditional contributions of a department liaison, consider it an opportunity to learn something new. Is there a process to which you can contribute? Is there a technical skill that you can learn? At the very least, commit to understanding what it would take for the library to support and foster new projects that your faculty might want to propose. Faculty members, students, and other scholars often hear about opportunities for collaboration from their colleagues; they might not comprehend the scale, technical resources, and staff time involved in producing many digital humanities projects.

Samson Occom worked tirelessly until his death to speak to and for his people. His journal entries over many years describe his itinerant preaching to Native and white communities throughout the northeast. A detail that he noted at nearly every stop on his travels was that “a large Number of People” had gathered to listen to him. A large number of people at Dartmouth College have worked to produce a scholarly digital edition of Occom’s writings to bring his voice to new readers and to honor Native American intellectual traditions. Part of the project’s funding comes from the National Endowment for the Humanities’ We the People initiative, which specifically supports public humanities scholarship to enhance civic life.\textsuperscript{7}
Through our edition of his works, Occom speaks to an even larger number of people in audiences he could have never anticipated. The Occom Circle Project testifies to the transformative potential of the digital humanities as a field of community-based knowledge and scholarship.

Notes

Bibliography
AND THERE WAS A LARGE NUMBER OF PEOPLE


