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Constructing the 1889 Baist Atlas of Richmond, VA: Building Blocks for Digital Projects

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Constructing the 1889 Baist Atlas of Richmond, VA: Building Blocks for Digital Projects

Lauren Work, Digital Collections Librarian

The Baist Atlas project was the first design of its kind created for VCU Libraries. The digital project was created by a collaborative effort to preserve, digitize, describe, and code an interactive website to showcase and supplement a unique resource for researchers. This ongoing project also experimented with ideas about use, access, evaluation and outreach for the collection.

Preparation

Preservation
Repair, including the pictured scraping technique to patch small holes in the map, and stabilization for handling and photography.

Digitization
Photography, editing, and digital “stitching” of component parts of the large image together for accurate digital presentation.

Cataloging
Supplemental cataloging for anticipated research use included:
- Street borders
- Street index

Collaborative development
The project was an iterative design collaboration between the VCU Web Team and Digital Collections.

History in context
To provide a reference for how the 19th century Atlas fits into the landscape of modern Richmond:
- All 20 panels were georectified over Google Maps
- Architectural “Points of Interest” were identified for each panel
- Street View was used to contrast historic images with present day architecture

New avenues for discovery
In addition to presenting the Atlas online, the interactive site also serves as a pathway to related VCU digital collections that feature the neighborhoods and structures in the Atlas.

Preservation
Time
Preservation work was extensive and necessary for the project. This collaboration took several months, which was longer than originally anticipated.

Digitization trouble shooting
Lighting, photography and digital editing for a large format item called for new approaches and workflows. These steps also required additional project time.

Challenges

Collaborative development
Scope creep.
Enthusiasm for the project ran high, and additional ideas were integrated continuously. This will be mitigated in future projects by establishing a project charter.

Cascading technical challenges
Scope creep led to shifting technical requirements, which delayed development.

Communication & Issue Tracking
Google Docs are not ideal for development. GitHub will be used for future projects for better issue tracking and workflow.

Supplemental resources
Downloads of digital collections are typically made available in our CONTENTdm management system. For the Baist Atlas, VCU Libraries provided additional resources for download and use including geospatial data and the Atlas street index.

Feedback & Assessment
- Quantitative: Google Analytics
  Event-specific metrics were created for actions like downloads and clicks on the interactive website link.
- Qualitative: Internal reviews from VCU Libraries & various faculty was solicited during a soft rollout of the site.

Outreach
Presentations & collaborations with interested groups:
- History and urban planning departments
- Friends of the Library
- Archaeology PhD student

Social media strategies included:
- Tumblr posts for “Map Mondays”
- Flickr Commons site metadata includes a link for the interactive website

Challenges

Feedback
This needs to be early and often. Our feedback provided great criticism, but it was too late in the project for major change.

Audience identification
The project was geared for scholarly research, but we struggled to identify our target audience. Students? Historians?

Sustainability
Preservation and migration plans for the site are extremely important. We are planning to use a project charter to assign ownership and future responsibilities.