2002

The Virginia Heritage Project: An Update

Tonia Graves
Old Dominion University, tgraves@odu.edu

The Virginia Heritage Project: An Update

by Tonia Graves

The Virginia Heritage Project (VHP), a union database of Encoded Archival Description (EAD) tagged finding aids, began in 1998 as a collaborative project among Special Collections departments from eleven VIVA institutions. Backed by a $250,000 grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities and Edward Gaynor's staff at the University of Virginia (UVA), the project commenced with the Special Collections of Perry Library of Old Dominion University (ODU Special Collections) as one of the eleven first-year participants. Rather than detail the history of the VHP, the intent of this article is to share experiences of a first year VHP participant and perhaps provide advice to institutions that are planning to participate in a collaborative or individual digitization project. For more information about the VHP and its origins, please see Gail McMillan's article, "Virginia Database for African-American History and Culture" in the April–June 2001 issue of *Virginia Libraries*.[1]

ODU Special Collections houses the University Archives, Manuscript Collections, books and printed material relating to Virginia and Tidewater History. Our Manuscripts consist of over fifty collections that include correspondence, diaries, legislative and mayoral files, campaign files, family papers, scrapbooks, photographs, business

papers, and legal files. The content of each collection is described by a finding aid that is created by an archivist or librarian. Nearly 40 finding aids have been entered into the VHP database. Perry Library staff participating in the VHP project includes the Acquisitions and Preservation Services Librarian, the Electronic Resources Cataloger, the Special Collections Coordinator, and a student assistant. The Acquisitions and Preservation Services Librarian's position was vacated early in the VHP project, and the VHP responsibilities associated with that position were absorbed by the Electronic Resources Cataloger and the Special Collections Coordinator.

Our first step as a VHP participant was completing a survey designed by the Virginia Heritage Project Task Force (VHPTF) to obtain information about our collections. **Advice**—Evaluate your collections and be familiar with the conditions and formats of your finding aids. This information will be invaluable further into the project.

The next step was attending a two-day training session at UVA. This session was led by Daniel Pitti, Project Director from the Institute for Advanced Technology in the Humanities at UVA, and provided participants with project goals, time lines, tools, and hands-on EAD markup training. Two ODU Special Collections staff attended this training session. **Advice**—Send relevant staff to all training sessions and take copious notes.

After the UVA training session, ODU Special Collections staff began to draft a local procedure based on the Retrospective Conversion Guidelines, a 49-page document adapted for the VHP by Edward Gaynor and Jodi Koste. Our local procedure underwent multiple drafts and grew to be 11 pages long. Included in the local procedure is information about how to properly use the tools designed and selected by the VHP management staff at UVA. This article would not be complete without mention of project manager Bradley Daigle, who oversaw the design of the VHP's toolbox, which includes the encoding templates, the track-

---

***Tonia Graves** is Electronic Resources Cataloger at Old Dominion University Libraries. She can be reached at tgraves@odu.edu.*

ing database, the administrative website, and the word processing software. He also had the ability to answer most questions on the same day they were asked. **Advice**—An innovative and responsive project manager is critical to a successful digitization project.

Writing the local procedure gave the ODU Special Collections Staff an opportunity to clarify information learned during the UVA training and poised them to begin designing workflows and assigning tasks. Questions raised during the workflow design and task assignment stage of the project included: Who will select the finding aids and decide the order in which they are encoded? Will we start with our existing print finding aids, and if so, will we scan them into an electronic form, or will we rekey them? Who will scan or rekey and proof the electronic format? Who will remain focused on creating new finding aids to contribute to the VHP because we may finish encoding our existing finding aids? Who will proof the encoded finding aids? Who will address the parsing errors? If necessary, who will communicate with UVA about the parsing errors? Who will train the student assistants and ensure that they are paid? **Advice**—It is crucial to have an accurate and precise procedure before training others to encode.

We decided the Special Collections Coordinator would manage the selection and encoding order of the finding aids, be responsible for reformatting existing finding aids if necessary, coordinate the ongoing creation of new finding aids, train student assistants, ensure that the student assistants received their wages, encode, and troubleshoot parsing errors. The Electronic Resources Cataloger was responsible for editing the local procedure, encoding, proofing, and solving parsing errors. Both the Special Collections Coordinator and the Electronic Resources

Cataloger communicated with UVA about parsing errors as necessary. A student assistant was responsible for encoding a particular segment of the finding aids called the container list, using VHP-approved word processing software. **Advice**—Appoint a project secretary who will record all local decisions. It is important to document local decisions for historical purposes, as well as personnel changes.

With our training, local procedure, and workflows in place, we

---

The VHP provides researchers around the world with the ability to conduct online searches of standardized finding aids.

---

began to encode. Despite their being in place, the learning curve was steep and initially our rate of parsing errors was high. A substantial challenge encountered early in the VHP was the numerous template design changes. The templates are part of the VHP toolbox designed by UVA for use by all participating institutions when encoding particular segments of the finding aid. The numerous template changes early in the project were the results of UVA listening to suggestions from all first-year participants and then implementing those suggestions into the template design. **Advice**—Maintain a file of error messages and the actions taken to resolve them.

Additional challenges included student assistant turnover and the recognition that some of our existing finding aids were inconsistently and incompletely written. Overcoming student assistant turnover is likely to be a challenge in any project. We addressed this by train-

ing our student assistant to work with encoding just one segment of the finding that required using a stable word processing software rather than having the students encode entire finding aids. As our knowledge of finding aids increased, we were better able to revise existing ones and create others of consistently high quality. We crafted an Access Restriction, User Restriction, and Preferred Citation statements, and established preferred headings and fonts. **Advice**—Identify each team member's strength, and apply knowledge gleaned from the project in other areas of your Special Collections' services whenever possible.

The VHP and other similar projects improve services provided by Special collections and archival repositories by increasing access to unique, historical resources. Prior to the VHP and other web-based union databases, researchers would rely on correspondence with an institution's archival staff and travel to various institutions to determine the contents of a particular collection. The VHP provides researchers around the world with the ability to conduct online searches of standardized finding aids.

The VHP experience was a learning opportunity for ODU Special Collections. Future plans include increasing our knowledge of emerging digital library standards and technologies, expanding the network of contacts we developed during the VHP, and further integrating digital resources into our collections and services.

VHP Website—http://www.lib.virginia.edu/vhp/

Endnotes
[1] McMillan, Gail. "Virginia Database for African-American History and Culture." *Virginia Libraries* 47 (2001): 5-7. ▣