History in the Present—I
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Until the world of cyberspace arrived, intrepid researchers of past events had to traipse to far-off libraries and archives to do original research in the field of history. In the 21st century, thanks to the marvels of digitization, the Internet, and the World Wide Web, researchers can often conduct a considerable amount of primary research without ever leaving their offices, homes, or local libraries. During the last half-decade, WMU’s University Libraries has been extensively “growing” its collection of online indexes and full-text historical resources. We now offer our patrons a wealth of original documents on the Web, and multiple indexes to other materials that can be borrowed through our Resource Sharing service. Among some of the best sources of the actual texts are the following extraordinary examples of “history in the present.”

• North American Women’s Letters and Diaries (Alexander Street Press), when completed, will be the largest collection of women’s diaries and correspondence ever assembled. There are approximately 150,000 pages of published letters and diaries from individuals writing from colonial times to 1950, plus 4,000 pages of previously unpublished materials. Spanning more than 300 years, this comprehensive collection will bring the personal experiences of 1,500 women to researchers, students, and interested persons. Readers will learn what women wore, what kind of work they did, how often they attended church, what they ate, what they read, their relationships with family, friends and lovers, and how they spent their leisure time.

• Similarly, the American Civil War: Letters and Diaries, also from Alexander Street Press, consists of more than 400 sources of diaries, letters, and memoirs that provide easy access to thousands of views on almost every aspect of the conflict, including what was taking place on the home front. The writers are from all regions of the country and include politicians, landowners, wives, slaves, soldiers, slaves, seamen, and even spies. The database includes writings by both famous and unknown people, and offers perspectives from the North and South, as well as from foreign spectators. Using a specially constructed thesaurus of Civil War terms, researchers can quickly find references to battles, individuals, and events throughout the course of the war. With approximately 100,000 pages of published memoirs, letters and diaries from individuals, plus 4,000 pages of previously unpublished materials, this database is a treasure trove of information for people interested in the American Civil War.

• Another fascinating historical research tool is Harper’s Weekly, which began publishing its original print version on January 3, 1857, and whose full-text online version called HarpWeek runs through 1912. This invaluable journal is truly the only consistent, comprehensive, week-to-week chronological record of what happened around the world in the second half of the nineteenth century. Harper’s Weekly was a leading shaper of public opinion in the United States for over half a century. The illustrated contents played a key role in giving up-to-date reporting of the Civil War, the re-election of Abraham Lincoln, Ulysses S. Grant’s two presidential victories, the defeat of Boss Tweed and the Tammany Hall political machine, and the first election of Grover Cleveland. At its height, the magazine’s circulation was more than 100,000, and its readership probably exceeded half a million persons.

The pages of Harper’s Weekly have been scanned in their entirety, so researchers will see and read Harper’s in the same four-column format and small font as it originally appeared. Luckily, the font size can be increased for ease of reading. In addition to the news stories, Harper’s is significant and unique for all of the illustrations, literature, editorials, cartoons and advertisements it contains. Readers of the online version, as well as the print copy, can see illustrations of the battles of the Civil War, and cartoons by such artists as Winslow Homer and Thomas Nast. Social historians and casual browsers alike will be fascinated by the wealth of advertise-
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ments in the periodical—from corsets to cooking stoves to false teeth and spectacles. There are a number of ways to search Harper’s including browsing by date, searching the index, or searching the full-text of the entire database. In addition, one can limit searches just to illustrations and advertisements.

• A brand new addition to the University Libraries’ growing list of primary source databases is Early Encounters in North America: Peoples, Cultures and the Environment also published by the Alexander Street Press. This database will ultimately include more than 1,000 published and unpublished items from a variety of sources including online resources and microforms. It will feature more than 100,000 pages of letters, diaries, memoirs and accounts of traders, slaves, missionaries, explorers, soldiers, native peoples, and officials, both men and women, written from 1534 to 1850. The collection was compiled using a number of standard bibliographies including such works as A Biodiversity of Native American Writers, 1772-1924; Sources for the Ethnicography of Northeastern North America to 1611; The Plains and the Rockies; and Early Midwestern Travel Narratives, An Annotated Bibliography, 1634-1850. The material has been indexed so users can search by author, place, year, encounters, images, cultural events, places, personal events, environment, flora, fauna, and several other factors. Of special interest are the many accounts of Michigan’s early history, including narratives of the explorations and encounters of such Jesuit missionaries as Jacques Marquette, Pierre-François-Xavier Charlevoix and Isaac Jogues. There are also many references to Fort Michilimackinac, Fort Detroit, the Potawatomi Indians, and Lake Michigan.

The databases described above are easily accessible in any of the University Libraries, and other on-campus sites, but may not be accessed from home or off-campus unless one is affiliated with WMU as a student, staff, or faculty member. Instructions on how to set up your computer to do this are found on the Libraries’ main screen (www.wmich.edu/library/) in the lower right hand corner. The instructions are easy to follow and, once implemented, you will have password access to these unique licensed databases.

Free and open access to many wonderful, rich databases of special interest to historians is available to anyone who can access the Internet. Two or more of these collections will be described in the next issue of Gatherings, but for those who want to open a door to a world of fascinating history right now, the full-text database called the Making of America is the place to begin. The Making of America is a digital library of primary sources in American social history from the antebellum period through Reconstruction. This is a major collaborative endeavor in preservation and electronic access to historical texts initiated by the University of Michigan (http://moa.umdl.umich.edu/) and Cornell University (http://library5.library.cornell.edu/moa/).

The collection is particularly strong in the subject areas of education, psychology, American history, sociology, religion, and science and technology. The complete Making of America collection includes over 2.5 million page images, representing approximately 5,000 volumes of primary source materials, including books and periodicals. The selection process at Cornell University has focused on the major journal literature of the period, ranging from general interest publications to those with more targeted audiences, such as agriculture. The University of Michigan process focuses on monographs in the subject areas of education, psychology, American history, sociology, science, technology, and religion. Since the pages are digitized, readers can view the scanned images of the actual pages of the 19th century texts—a realistic touch that gives students a feel for doing research with primary source materials.

The five databases mentioned in this article are just a few of the many history offerings by the University Libraries. There is a plethora of full-text resources available on the World Wide Web, many sponsored by our nation’s best colleges and universities. To explore further in the field of history, be sure and visit the Libraries’ History Web Resources page (http://www.wmich.edu/library/sr/history-web-resources.html). Arranged in twelve broad topic areas this site provides a starting point for history resources on the Web. Another site of interest is the Primary Sources on the Web page (http://www.wmich.edu/library/handouts/primary-sources.html) found on the University Libraries’ Web site. In addition to listing a number of primary source sites on the Web, this page provides links to sites that discuss the process of doing historical research.

As digitization of original documents and artifacts becomes increasingly common, historians will find that there are no limits to their ability to see and read manuscripts from the Roman catacombs or the newspapers of Nazi Germany or the original census data of Kalamazoo, Michigan from 1910. Far more is available already than most of us know. A computer terminal and Internet access will provide an almost infinite assortment of full-text primary source materials. Just think ... on a cold, snowy evening, you can explore America’s past online with a cup of coffee or hot chocolate by your side in the comfort of your home. Happy researching!