

Digital Humanities Start-Up Grant Proposal

Personal Liberty in Antebellum America: The Fugitive Slave Crisis and the Coming of the Civil War

1. Enhancing the Humanities through Innovation

The web provides incredible new possibilities for the humanities. With the rise of new forms of historical scholarship—including but not limited to public, applied, and digital history—there is a real chance to bring many groups of scholars together and extend the influence of history over broader audiences outside of the academy. In the process, historians could help to garner more interest among both general and academic publics as they do new and interesting things with their work. Hopefully, these innovative methods and studies will lead to increased interest in history among students and educators. History and social studies offer the opportunity for students and educators to interact with content that not only achieves various curriculum objectives, but that also teaches students important history and important civic values.

The web allows scholars to demonstrate the importance of humanities in American life and American education. While there are certainly excellent examples of digital projects that currently exist, many digital projects still tend to focus in on more traditional historical objectives—i.e., archival undertakings and the pursuit of traditional subfields of interest. *Personal Liberty in Antebellum America: The Fugitive Slave Crisis and the Coming of the Civil War* aims to truly harness the power of the web by creating a digital resource center that brings together the most useful digital resources on the fugitive slave crisis, personal liberty laws, and the coming of the American Civil War. This resource center will allow teachers and students to utilize these resources, interactive learning methods, and research strategies in the classroom and beyond. In addition to coverage of the fugitive slave crisis and the coming of the Civil War, we hope that the project will address larger issues including the development and meaning of American democracy, republicanism, liberty and freedom. In order to achieve these goals, we will create interactive new resources and establish a forum for teachers and students to rely on during their research and lessons.

A prototype of *Personal Liberty in Antebellum America* can be found at www.leahsuhrstedt.com/personalliberty. The sections as they currently exist include Context, Laws, Images, Maps, Forum, Activities, and Going Further. A Level II Digital Humanities Start-Up Grant for \$50,000 from the National Endowment for the Humanities would allow us to further develop all of these sections, creating a truly valuable and innovative piece of humanities scholarship for students and teachers to use inside and outside of the classroom. Through this funding, we could do internal and external research to ensure that the best choices are made in terms of technology and content for each section.

***Bringing a Fresh Perspective and Modern Relevance to Historical Study**

The web can has the power to bring otherwise understudied topics and issues to the forefront of historical debate for those both inside and outside of the academy to explore. The American Civil

War is one of the most popular topics of study in American history, but through *Personal Liberty in Antebellum America* we hope to bring a fresh approach to the study of this popular topic by using a little-known issue to open up debate on larger issues. Namely, the site will use personal liberty laws and the fugitive slave crisis to examine the issues of democracy, republicanism, personal liberty and freedom in the United States. The Civil War did much to affect how debates surrounding these issues developed for decades to come, and these issues remain central in American political debate today.

The study of any topic related to slavery and the Civil War is inevitably multifaceted, and can demonstrate both inspiring efforts by some and disappointing actions of others, none of which can be characterized in simply black and white. The fight over fugitive slaves was one of the most controversial topics in antebellum America, rivaled only perhaps by the territorial crisis. Northern states began to pass statutes known collectively as personal liberty laws, which dealt directly with the rights of fugitive slaves and refused to consider humans property. Two conflicting legal systems began to arise within the country, namely those of the northern states and that of the increasingly southern-allied federal government, and incidents occurred which were directly related to the chain of events that resulted in the Civil War.

Personal liberty laws were unique in how they pursued abolitionism, and their story is ultimately one of the more idealistic stories in the coming of the Civil War. While there was much more that many people could have done to combat slavery and discrimination in antebellum America, the story of personal liberty laws is the story of what people were doing. Technically it is true that these laws “used” government to achieve their goals, but in reality what they were doing was purposefully misusing the government. Fugitive stories brought the antislavery argument to life, for antislavery and abolitionist activists were no longer talking simply about theory and ideology, but instead about real people that northerners could see and sympathize with. An examination of the events, trials and ultimately the violence that resulted from the passage and attempted enforcement of these laws demonstrates how and why public opinion shifted throughout the North in the years leading up to the war; the continued divergence of the two sections of the country, especially as demonstrated in the legal realm, caused sectionalism to grow to such a point that the Civil War erupted. Students will certainly be able to relate to the human stories of fugitives, and the images and interactive abilities that come with the web will only increase the effectiveness of this topic in classrooms.

Personal Liberty in Antebellum America will allow students and teachers to explore the coming of the American Civil War through personal liberty laws—an underutilized lens that does much to reveal the causes of the Civil War. Especially in an age when terrorism and questions surrounding nationalism and governments are at the forefront of current events, a digital research resource such as *Personal Liberty in Antebellum America* can connect with modern themes while also providing deeper historical understanding. The site will provide students and teachers with new digital tools through which to explore this understudied and exciting topic. Through interactive maps, image galleries, a forum for discussion, classroom and research activities, lessons, and more, we believe that students and teachers alike will gain a deeper understanding of one of our nation’s most formative events and what those events mean to us as modern Americans.

***Creating a Forum for Teachers and Students**

Personal Liberty in Antebellum America will include many interactive options for students and teachers alike, including but not limited to a forum in which to discuss historical and current events. Because the site has been created in a blog format, users will also be able to comment on any and all content—from historical documents to comments posted by other users. In the future, a list serve could even be created that users could sign up to be a part of in order to engage in ongoing debate about education, research, and larger historical issues that also have a modern relevance. Through something such as a list serve (and definitely through an ongoing, interactive forum) teachers and students can connect history and modern events, creating a deeper understanding of both while also satisfying educational standards.

***Thinking Creatively About Education and Educational Standards**

By thinking creatively about how educational standards (including but not limited to history and social studies standards), lessons covering topics such as personal liberty laws and fugitive slavery can prove especially useful to educators by satisfying multiple standards at the same time. By satisfying a number of different curriculum standards, the study of personal liberty laws will be increasingly attractive to teachers concerned with meeting such standards. Additionally, due to the intense and emotional content of the stories surrounding personal liberty laws and fugitive slaves, students and teachers alike will likely be more engaged by this topic than many others traditionally found in classroom lessons. Finally, by allowing the website to be totally interactive and embracing open source ideas, *Personal Liberty in Antebellum America* is likely to benefit from the wisdom of teachers who have spent many years in the classroom and understand what is effective and what is not. The project will also likely benefit from feedback from students as they interact with the content.

The changes that the web brings to history and the humanities are far-reaching, and if the field of history does not observe and respond to these changes, there will certainly be consequences. We believe that *Personal Liberty in Antebellum America* will take full advantage of the opportunities these changes bring, especially the idea of open source projects in the humanities. Open source attitudes emphasize collaborative and communal attitudes towards research, learning, and the production of quality content and interest among educators and students, just as does *Personal Liberty in Antebellum America*.

2. Environmental Scan

A variety of digital projects exist that serve as foundations upon which *Personal Liberty in Antebellum America* can build, but our project also differs in key ways from each of these predecessors:

The Valley of the Shadow: Two Communities in the American Civil War is perhaps the first serious digital project concerning the Civil War. While in many ways it was groundbreaking because it was such an early project, it is also dated in many ways. The project is first and foremost an archive, and while this is an important function that the web can fulfill faster and more effectively than many paper archives, *Personal Liberty in Antebellum America* aims to be more interactive than *The Valley of the Shadow*.

Documenting the American South offers an incredible number of archival resources regarding the American South, and their collection on North American Slave Narratives is especially relevant to this project. Again, while archiving is a useful benefit of the web, it is not the only possibility. *Documenting the American South* offers some limited scholarly commentary on the collection, but in the end it is primarily an archive.

The *Teaching with Historic Places* program of the National Park Service serves as a good model for creative teaching that satisfies multiple curriculum requirements. The variety of lesson plans is impressive, as is the diversity of content and interesting options that teachers can use to get students interested. While teachers are invited to submit lesson plans, the process is very standardized, and there is little option for interaction on the site itself.

The *House Divided Project* by Dickinson College's History Department offers an interesting mixture of archives and educational resources. The project's scope is immense, and it aims to give the visitor the experience of living in nineteenth-century America. While its various almanacs, exhibits, and teacher guides do offer more interactivity than the other examples listed above, the project is so large that at times it can become overwhelming. Its most dominant feature is also still that of an archive.

President Lincoln's Cottage recently revealed an online exhibit entitled, "Debating Emancipation" that puts students in the role of one of Lincoln's cabinet members. This exhibit has always been available on-site, but the Cottage recently made it available online (<http://www.lincolncottage.org/lcstage/player.swf>). This is a great model for what can be done with online exhibits, and it is a goal of the project to develop a similar type produce regarding personal liberty laws and fugitive slaves. Especially with a topic as emotional as fugitive slavery, allowing students to interact and connect with documents and stories can do wonders in helping them truly understand the issues at hand.

Personal Liberty in Antebellum America can lean on the archival collections of sites such as these predecessors while developing its own interactive and forward-looking forum for students and teachers across the country to use as they explore their own uniquely American heritage. Because our project is focused on a very specific topic, it allows for more interaction; at the same time, however, this smaller issue opens up to many larger, far-reaching topics including but not limited to democracy, republicanism, the American Constitution, personal liberty, and freedom.

3. History and duration of the project

Work on *Personal Liberty in Antebellum America* began as a graduate project at American University, specifically in a class entitled History in the Digital Age during the summer of 2009. Leah Suhrstedt, who is interested in the Civil War and personal liberty laws as well as using new tools in historical research, conceptualized the project. Leah wrote her undergraduate thesis on personal liberty laws and the Civil War; specifically, the thesis was entitled "The Fugitive Slave Crisis and Personal Liberty Laws in Pennsylvania: The Breakdown of Comity in Antebellum America and the Coming of the Civil War." The thesis was completed in April 2007 at Dickinson College in Carlisle, PA and was awarded honors.

As a graduate student in public history whose tool of research is digital history, Leah felt that *Personal Liberty in Antebellum America* seemed a natural choice as a capstone to her summer course on History in the Digital Age. We hope that funding from the National Endowment for

the Humanities will help the project move forward and continue for years to come, both as a resource and a model for educators and students. Each section of the website would be further researched and expanded if funding were received, and the project team (which would hopefully grow beyond just Leah) would use all expertise and models available to them in this work. We also hope that American University will continue to support the development of this project, both during and after any awards may be received.

4. Work Plan

We hope to develop *Personal Liberty in Antebellum America* in conjunction with user research and feedback. The sections already established on the website as it currently exists (Context, Laws, Images, Maps, Forum, Activities, Going Further) will likely remain intact, though each will be expanded and sharpened to provide the best possible user experience. Again, while a detailed work plan will always exist and be adhered to, project staff will also be very in tune with user feedback and suggestions.

Project Technology

- **WordPress-** Currently, WordPress.org hosts the project. This platform allows for blogging and commenting capabilities (one of the most integral features of *Personal Liberty in Antebellum America*) as well as a stable, reliable, and easy-to-use system.
- **Mapping-** If funding were received, we would perform additional research into what the best mapping program would be to create interactive maps that allow students to explore and truly understand the spread of abolitionism and resistance in the North in the coming of the Civil War.
- **Images and Activities-** If funding was received, project staff (which at this time includes only Leah) would do additional research into the most appropriate technology related to images and the presentation of classroom activities. While lesson plans are great, the site hopes to go beyond purely textual lesson plans and create interactive activities for students to use as they explore personal liberty in antebellum America.
- **Exhibit Software-** We would like to develop highly interactive exhibits such as the one created by President Lincoln's Cottage (detailed in the Environmental Scan section above). If funding were received, research on the best possible software to use would be done (it might be Omeka, or it might be a program that allows exhibits to be developed that are designed specifically for younger students).

Project Schedule

The proposed schedule for this project will rely heavily on feedback from internal and external sources, but work will tentatively proceed as follows:

January-March 2010

- Overall evaluation of additional technologies to implement.
- Continue development of content (activities, forum, going further sections).

April-June 2010

- Decide on format for online exhibits and begin development on first exhibit (probably using a particular state and its personal liberty laws to explore the impact of such

legislation and the accompanying fugitive slave battles). A border state like Pennsylvania would probably be the most appropriate choice for a state.

- Continue development of content.

July and August 2010

- Develop activities that can be used in and outside of the classroom to help students truly understand the themes and issues involved with personal liberty laws and the fugitive slave crisis.
- Continue development of content.

September and October 2010

- Decide on image software and design strategic plan for how best to present and interpret images on the site.
- Continue development of content.

November and December 2010

- Closely examine the forum and find out from users whether there are improvements that can be made to blog format. Look into whether a list serve would be a desired or appropriate addition.
- Continue development of content.

5. Staff

Currently, Leah Suhrstedt serves as the only staff for *Personal Liberty in Antebellum America*. Leah is an MA student in Public History at American University, and will complete her degree in May of 2010. Her main area of interest (other than public history, of course) is the fugitive slave crisis and the coming of the Civil War. If funding for the project were received, additional staff could possibly be hired in order to help with the development of *Personal Liberty in Antebellum America*. In the meantime, however, Leah will be the director of the project and handle all development.

6. Final Product and Dissemination

The web allows for a variety of dissemination possibilities. First and foremost, we will try to make *Personal Liberty in Antebellum America* known by using existing forums and list serves regarding digital tools and history on the web. Additionally, we will hopefully receive assistance from American University in publicizing the project. The existing outreach capabilities of a University are extensive and should prove helpful in publicity efforts. Finally, as the project was initially conceived as a project for a class taught by a staff member at George Mason's Center for History and New Media (arguably the nation's premiere such center), hopefully CHNM will also help us to publicize the project.

Personal Liberty in Antebellum America aims to engage teachers and students, primarily at the middle and high school levels. However, due to what we hope will be far-reaching implications, the project may also attract contributions and advice from leading academic scholars and perhaps even attract the research interest of college- and graduate-level historians as they hone their own particular research interests.