

The American Memory Project

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The American Memory Project is a digital collection of historical resources maintained by the Library of Congress and freely available to the public at large. Created initially as an educational resource, the project grew to a diverse historical and cultural collection, culled from a wide variety of American source materials. Originally, under the aegis of the National Digital Library Program, the American Memory Project undertook an ambitious collaboration with the private sector to make the treasures of its archives, and of the archives of other institutions as well, available to the general public in online formats and without cost. Numerous technological obstacles needed to be considered, particularly with respect to the selection of metadata to be used by the different organizations involved, the variety of types of materials to be digitized, and an overarching concern to make access to the content as widely available as possible to the intended users.

ORGANIZATION BACKGROUND

The American Memory Project began in 1990 as a four-year pilot effort by the Library of Congress to digitize a portion of its collection. The initial distribution of the American Memory Project content was by CD-ROM to select American schools and libraries. Due to difficulties inherent in the distribution format (expense, inefficiency), the project then took a new direction, with the aim to provide digitized primary sources on the World Wide Web. In 1994, with private donations of \$13

million, the Library of Congress created the National Digital Library Program and its flagship, the American Memory Project, with the ambitious goal of digitizing valuable content from both Library of Congress collections and the collections of other research archives in order to distribute them freely and through the Internet. In addition to the private donations, which swelled to \$45 million between 1994 and 2000, the National Digital Library received \$15 million in funding from Congress for its efforts (Library of Congress, n.d.d).

Through the cooperative efforts of public and private institutions, the American Memory Project now offers more than nine million digitized items in more than 100 distinct collections relating to American history and culture. Digitization projects are still ongoing, as the American Memory Project continues to build its collections. Included are printed materials, photographs, maps, sound and video recordings, and sheet music. The collections are annotated with explanatory materials, as well as being searchable and browsable. Reference assistance in using the American Memory Project collections is provided through the “Ask a Librarian function,” which features both email and chat reference services (Library of Congress, n.d.a).

The Library of Congress is the research arm of the United States Congress and part of the legislative branch of the U.S. government. Its mission is “to support the Congress in fulfilling its constitutional duties and to further the progress of knowledge and creativity for the benefit of the American people”(Library of Congress, n.d.c, para. 1). Since 1987, it has been headed by Dr. James Hadley Billington, the Librarian of Congress. Under his stewardship, the Library of Congress established the National Digital Library Program and the American Memory Project (Library of Congress, n.d.b). The Library of Congress Budget Justification for Fiscal Year 2013 was \$643.5 million, with \$47.177 million allocated to the Digital Initiatives Program of the Office of Strategic Initiatives, including the American Memory Project. This sum represented a 1.9% increase from Fiscal Year 2012 (Library of Congress, 2012a). The Library of Congress is divided into seven departments: the Congressional Research Service, Copyright Office, Office of the Librarian, Law Library, Library Services, Office of Support Operations, and Office of Strategic Initiatives (Library of Congress, 2012b). Until 2001, when it was discontinued, the National Digital Library Program operated as an administrative unit of the Office of the Librarian. However, after 2001, the staff from the National Digital Library Program continued to work in other units of the Library of Congress, many continuing with similar work.

Shortly before the American Memory Project’s launch, the Library of Congress undertook a 1989 nationwide survey of state libraries and research libraries. The survey was completed by 101 members of the Association of Research Libraries and by representatives from 51 state libraries. The results of the 1989 survey uncovered a high interest in access to online collections (Library of Congress, n.d.e). A subsequent

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