

Going Digital: Open-Source Access Tools at the SCRC

by Benjamin Bromley

The success of the online projects of the Earl Gregg Swem Library's Special Collections Research Center (SCRC) has been built utilizing open-source platforms. Our three primary online resources, the SCRC Collections Database (<http://scrc.swem.wm.edu>), the W&M Digital Archive (<http://digitalarchive.wm.edu>), and the Civil War Transcription Project (<http://scrcdigital.swem.wm.edu>), would not have been possible on a traditional subscription model. While open-source platforms are not the panacea for libraries and archival repositories, they can be used to great effect.

The Special Collections Research Center in the Earl Gregg Swem Library (<http://swem.wm.edu>) is home to over one thousand collections in four collecting areas: manuscripts collections, university archives, the Warren E. Burger Collection, and rare books and periodicals. The manuscripts collections focus on Virginia history from the seventeenth to twenty-first centuries, but also contain material of national significance. They include letters from presidents and slaves; diaries of plantation mistresses and Civil War soldiers; journals of spiritual seekers and farm managers; account books of colonial merchants and twentieth-century funeral homes; organizational records of churches, reform organizations, and literary societies; and other items providing evidence of events great and small and the

daily lives of Americans of all backgrounds. The university archives collect material documenting the history of the College of William & Mary from the 1600s to the present, including bursar's records and other official papers, twentieth-century freshman beanies, tapes of choir concerts, student publications, faculty and student research, and papers of alumni. The Warren

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E. Burger Collection consists of the lifetime personal and professional papers and memorabilia of the late Chief Justice Warren E. Burger. Warren Burger served as the twentieth chancellor of the College of William & Mary from 1986 to 1993, and the college is honored to serve as the permanent home of the papers of one of the most influential legal figures of the twentieth century. His papers remain closed until 2026. Like the manuscripts collection, the rare books and periodicals focus primarily on Virginia history, but include collections that cover many other areas and interests, spanning the fifteenth through the twenty-first centuries.

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In addition to the William & Mary students and faculty who use the SCRC, we welcome scholars and the general public to conduct research in our collections. The SCRC annually serves over seventy-five classes and two thousand researchers, with approximately half visiting the department in person. Our collections are cared for by four full-time equivalent (FTE) professional staff, three FTE paraprofessional staff, three total FTE support hourly staff and undergraduate student employees, four graduate student interns from the department of history and the American studies program during the academic year, and around twenty volunteers.

Prior to 2007, only a small amount of the material in the SCRC had detailed descriptions that were accessible outside of the Earl Gregg Swem Library. Our rare books and periodicals were, and still are, described in the library catalog and WorldCat. This has worked well and the library catalog is still the main access tool for these materials. While many

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of our then over seven hundred manuscripts collections had records in the library catalog, these were only collection-level records. Out of those seven hundred collections, only a hundred had finding aids available online through the Virginia Heritage Project (VHP), a consolidated database of finding aids to manuscript and archival collections from repositories across Virginia. The only access tools to the detailed description of the rest of our collections were the paper finding aids stored in binders in the SCRC lobby and a card catalog that indexed subject terms and personal names.

A bigger problem, however, was access to our university archives collections. The primary access tool for these was a color-coded card catalog, which had separate sections for personal names, subject terms, and publications. The meaning of the different colors was arcane at best. Other platforms for allowing online access to our university archives collections had been discussed, but deemed too expensive. Records had been created for seven notable collections in the library catalog; four collections had finding aids added to the Virginia Heritage Project; but access to the descriptions of the rest of the university archives was confined to on-site only. In short, descriptions for materials in the Special Collections Research Center could be found scattered over the library catalog, the Virginia Heritage Project, binders, and multiple separate card catalogs. This was an untenable situation that hurt our researchers and limited the amount of assistance that staff could provide.

In 2007, we considered two separate open-source products as solutions to this problem: Archivists' Toolkit and Archon. We eventually chose Archon partially because its staff interface was easier to use at the time, but also because it has

a built-in web front-end that allows changes to be immediately available to the general public. Interestingly enough, the two are now being combined into one product, ArchivesSpace (<http://www.archivespace.org/>), which is scheduled to be released at the end of 2012. The quickest way to get descriptions of our manuscripts collections online was to scan each of the paper finding aids, creating PDFs and attaching them to their respective collection-level records. While useful, these PDFs are not full-text searchable and do not

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take full advantage of the benefits of Archon. Due to the ease of use of the Archon staff interface, we are able to have our students transcribe the PDFs into Archon, which will allow patrons to fully search these descriptions.

Most of our university archives collections did not have finding aids that we could turn into PDFs and quickly upload to Archon. The best source of information for each collection was actually the handwritten accession records that were filed by originating office, material format, and accession number. Over the summer of 2007, we were able to hire two graduate students to enter these accession records into Archon, giving us collection- and series-level descriptions of over 90 percent of our university archives collections. Those collec-

tions that have PDF inventories are now also being transcribed into Archon, along with the manuscripts collections.

The process of adding new manuscripts and university archives collections and additions to existing collections is now completely done within Archon. We have abolished paper accession records and have recently moved to keeping only electronic records for most of the material that we purchase. While we have added additional platforms from which we serve digital content, Archon continues to be the pivot. Material that is digitized from our collections and placed into the W&M Digital Archive or the Civil War Transcription Project is linked to the Archon record for each respective collection. (For more information about the SCRC's implementation of Archon, see Ute Schechter's MARAC presentation, "The ARCHON Ultimatum at the Special Collections Research Center, Swem Library," at <http://www.slideshare.net/Swem-SCRC/the-archon-ultimatum-at-the-special-collections-research-center-swem-library>.)

Since the success of Archon, we have launched two more projects utilizing open-source platforms. The W&M Digital Archive is the online repository of College of William & Mary research and campus life and is an implementation of the DSpace institutional repository application. It includes student publications, faculty and student research, the records of student organizations, digitized material from the Special Collections Research Center, and much more. The W&M Digital Archive is also the place where we house large-scale digitization projects, some of which have been done off-site as part of the LYRAsIS Mass Digitization Collaborative (MDC) (<http://www.lyrasis.org/MassDig>) [see also page 31—Ed.]. Our first such project was to digitize the *Flat Hat*, the

College of William & Mary's student newspaper, from the microfilm created in the 1990s and earlier. As a part of the LYRASIS MDC, we have also digitized the *Colonial Echo*, the college's yearbook, and the college's undergraduate course catalogs, ranging from 1829 to the present. We are also digitizing other pieces of the college's history in-house, such as faculty minutes and bursar's records from the eighteenth to nineteenth centuries. These materials are photographed or scanned by a staff member, combined into a PDF, and then uploaded into the Digital Archive.

The Civil War Transcription Project is our newest online offering, which uses the Omeka web-publishing platform. We are digitizing all documents from our collections that relate to civilian and military life during the Civil War (three to five thousand documents total), and so far have recruited over two hundred volunteers to transcribe these documents. Currently, they view the document in Omeka, transcribe it in a Word

document or text file, and send it to SCRC staff for uploading to the web. However, we hope to soon add another open-source application, Scripto, which will allow the entire transcription process to be done online, eliminating the need for transcribers to use Word documents or text files.

Having multiple locations where digital projects exist is a problem, and one that we address in multiple ways. Archon has a digital library module that allows us to link content from the W&M Digital Archive, the Civil War Transcription Project, and other locations directly to the collection record. That link can be accessed at the collection level as well as from the item's detailed description in the container list. While we have multiple locations where content is located, Archon is where it is brought together. When the material does not have an Archon record, such as our rare books and periodicals, the link goes directly into the library catalog. Links to the digitized version of a document can be found

in the same place where the description of the physical object resides. We are also using Summon, a discovery service from Serial Solutions, which indexes and searches the W&M Digital Archive, the Civil War Transcription Project, the SCRC Collections Database, and the library catalog. Summon can be searched from the Swem Library homepage, allowing quick access to SCRC material without needing to search multiple platforms separately.

While open-source products are free to download and install, they require support from both archivists and information technology staff. At Swem Library, we are lucky to have a dedicated information technology department that can install and customize these platforms for us. Without them, utilizing these applications would not be possible for us. But through a partnership between information technology and the SCRC, we are able to provide digital access tools that open our collections to the wider research community. **VI**