

Because It Is Gone Now: Teaching the September 11 Digital Archive

I love you. . . the building was hit by something. I don't know if I'm gonna get out, but I love you very much. I . . . I hope I'll see you later. 'Bye.
—Voicemail from Ken Van Auken from the World Trade Center, contributed by his widow

As a citizen, it is sometimes a jolt to realize that September 11 is now a decade in the past. As a teacher of modern United States history who ended her twentieth-century survey last fall with the attack on the twin towers, it was even more of a jolt to realize that a first-year college student who had matriculated in September 2010 might recall only the faint outlines of an event that definitively altered the course of our century. A student who entered high school in that same month would likely have been familiar with images of the smoke billowing out of the World Trade Center towers and the steaming stacks of rubble known for months as “the Pile.” But that same student would have only vague memories of adult anxieties, cars in Connecticut, New York and New Jersey train stations awaiting commuters who never came home, or the frantic efforts to reach family and friends who might have had business downtown that day. A student entering middle school this coming fall will have been merely born into the world that al-Qaeda and George W. Bush created. Regardless what level of history course you are teaching, your students will have no accurate memories of this very recent past and yet they might yearn to understand the events through which their parents and siblings lived.

As I scrolled through the September 11 Digital Archive, trying to collect my thoughts about how I might teach such very different audiences with these rich materials, I couldn't help but think about one of my own nephews who will enter college in the fall (1). Several years after the attacks

on the twin towers, he came across a picture of himself taken at Windows on the World, the sky-top restaurant where so many people from different nations died on 9/11, and where his great-grandmother enjoyed treating her younger relatives to lunch (Figure 1). Recalling

memories of the view and his participation in this family ritual, he then turned abruptly to his toddler brother, so young that he had yet to speak his own first word. “You,” he said, “Will never go there. Because it is gone now!”

Material objects, paper records, and people have disappeared, lost in the fire and chaos of attacks on New York, the Pentagon, and the two jumbo jets full of passengers who believed they were going to California that day. But fortunately they are not gone.

In the design of the 9/11 Archive, it is easy to see the creative hand of the City University of New York's American Social History Project (ASHP), founded in 1981 to curate the social and cultural history of the United States and promote the newest technologies and active learning methods (2). The workers, citizens, and survivors whose stories made history that clear September day have left their voices in the intriguing, emotional, and richly descriptive artifacts collected on, and linked to, this website. It is a particularly promising source for teaching history. The site blends the sense of discovery and ease of access that causes students to use the web as a resource in the first place with standard genres of evidence that could train those same students to use conventional archives as well: written documents, images, video,



Figure 1. A fixture of the New York skyline and tourist stop since the 1960s, the World Trade Center towers are seen here in March 2001, six months before the attacks of September 11. The history of the neighborhood around the towers is just one of the topics explored in the September 11 Digital Archive, which contains a wealth of documents, audio recordings, photos, and video footage related to the events of that day. (Courtesy of Wikimedia Commons)

oral histories, and audio “found” objects such as voice mail and spontaneous tape recordings.

Funded by a grant from the Alfred P. Sloane Foundation, the September 11 Digital Archive is a collaboration between the ASHP, now housed at the Center for Media and Learning at CUNY Graduate Center, and the Center for History and New Media at George Mason University. In 2003 it was accepted as part of the permanent collection of the Library of Congress as its first major digital acquisition, and was closed to new materials the following year (Figure 2). The site designers are currently launching a redesign, now in Beta test, that promises to make the labyrinth of different projects to which the Archive is linked, as well as its own materials, more attractive and easier to navigate. While the archiving of 9/11 on the Web and in different projects around the country is by no means complete, this project is a gift for history teachers at all levels. Through it, archivists have collected their own material, as well as links to other digital collections that preserve the history of the September 11 attacks in images, video, sound, and print.

History of “Ground Zero”

While teaching was rarely a priority for archives prior to the digital age, as resources go on the web digital collections are being organized with

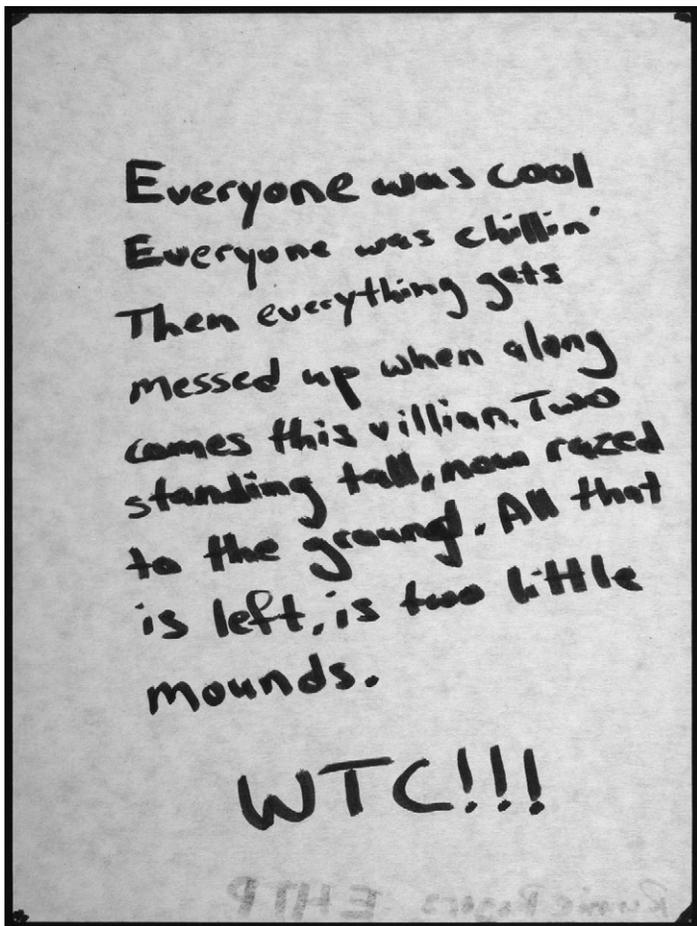


Figure 2. Student Ronnie Rogers composed this poem in the aftermath of the September 11 attacks for a Hip Hop Activism class at the East Harlem Tutorial Program in New York. Documents like this form one part of the September 11 Digital Archive, which donated its entire collection to the Library of Congress in 2003. (Courtesy of Library of Congress)

an eye to their use in the classroom, and many of the sites already have teaching guides. The archive is also a terrific opportunity to use student interest in 9/11 to teach other topics or approaches to historical investigation. The many oral histories in each section of the archive are ideal for courses, or sections of courses, that are designed to explore the many layers of history, and the overlapping interests, that are located in a particular place. The vacant land now currently under redevelopment in Lower Manhattan, and colloquially referred to as “Ground Zero,” had a long history of use prior to the catastrophe in 2001, bringing a diverse citizenry together to create and recreate community. These heterogeneous neighborhoods were cleared to make way for the World Trade Center, a common event in a city where one history supplants another at the edge of a bulldozer. A timeline provided by the Sonic Memorial Project (which is still accepting “stories, ambient sounds, voicemails and archival recordings” and has a searchable collection of audio files) takes students as far back as the creation of “Radio Row” in 1921, a cluster of electronics shops that drew generations of radio and Hi-fi stereo hobbyists until it was condemned and demolished in 1966 (3). Artists, building “stewardesses” who promoted the controversial new building, Mohawk Indian Iron workers who helped to build the towers, as well as stories of love and romance at the World Trade Center create a longer and more textured history of the neighborhood and the people who built it. Through exploring this rich evidence, history students can be encouraged to think about “community” as a continuously evolving, multi-racial, transnational, and cross-class project.

Oral Histories

Teachers who begin to plan classes around this archive can send interested students on to a wealth of other materials that document the destruction of the twin towers and the reverberating impact of that event. In the weeks and months following the disaster, several entities in New York moved swiftly to launch preservation projects, even prior to knowing that they would be funded. Those of us who ventured to the Special Collections room at the Columbia University library found hastily assembled cardboard boxes available for us to deposit any items—written, visual, or material—that would help to document the attacks and their effect on our lives. Columbia University’s Oral History Research Office has launched five major initiatives to document the impact of September 11 on Chinatown and other communities; public health and recovery workers; immigrants; and others affected by the event, all of which will be released with curriculum guides. The Internet Archive, a non-profit digital library founded in San Francisco in 1996, has also collected news broadcasts from September 11 that allow historians of the recent past, and their students, to view the event as others around the United States and around the globe did (4).

As I moved around from link to link, I could practically feel the dust and smoke New Yorkers breathed on that day in 2001 between my teeth and in my lungs. This leads me to one caveat: even a teacher can get lost in the September 11 Digital Archive, and without good direction and careful planning, students surely will (5). Instructors will want to view many of the materials ahead of time and prepare students for what is often unsettling and highly emotional documentation of the human consequences of massive violence. One portion of the project, entitled “Ground One” (done in collaboration with the Museum of Chinese in the Americas and presented in both Chinese and English) looks at the special consequences of the event on Chinatown. A community of immigrants was cordoned off from the foot traffic and tourism that supported its economy. Many residents were ineligible for social services or compensation because they lacked documentation.

Email Date: Saturday, Sept 15, 2001 4:30 AM

Email To: Sophie

Email From: James Croak

Email Cc:

Email Subject: The Dig

Sophie et al,

I went back to the remains of the World Trade Center and dug for bodies. . . . My first body was a fireman. His hat told me what had happened to him. Crushed, burned, shattered, it looked like a civil war relic brought up from the sea. My second body was a young girl, petite, in shape. I can't take this, I thought, and considered running. Thankfully we didn't have another for an hour or so.

Periodically the line would call "We need paint," meaning they found a body too deep to dig for at this time so the area is sprayed red to we can find it later. Several times we passed a body the size of a basketball. If the wreckage shifts, a Klaxon blows twice telling everyone to run, which we do. A minute later they all run back, me still shaking. The next body was in a fetal position she must have lived a while, I thought, and died of exposure with a billion tons of mess on top of her, scared beyond understanding. All told, we found 27 bodies and carried 9 out.

You think there are no heroes in America? I saw a lanky blonde that could have modeled Chanel tie a rope around her ankle, grab a stethoscope and dive head first down a debris hole that would have shredded a raccoon. The firemen in general were fearless, shrugging their shoulders at the obvious danger of it all..."

After 12 hours the accumulated stress and fear get the best of me and I walked home. But I'm back in tomorrow.

JC

Figure 3. New York-based artist James Croak had seen the twin towers fall from his Lower Manhattan neighborhood. Initially turned down in his offer to help with rescue work at Ground Zero, he later joined a group of ironworkers who were the only group of civilians allowed into the site. They arrived the afternoon of Friday September 14, and worked all night long. Croak's email is an example of the rich sources available in the September 11 Digital Archive. For the full text of his email, visit: <http://911digitalarchive.org/parser.php?object_id=35945> (Courtesy of September 11 Digital Archive)

And yet, as the interviews reveal, the difficulties the community had were in many ways only an intensification of longstanding political dynamics between Chinatown and New York City's government (6).

Multiple Sources for Teaching

Links to sites like Ground One make 9/11 an opportunity to enhance courses in Asian American, immigrant, and working class history with highly personal experiences that stretch beyond the event itself, allowing a teacher to use interest in this dramatic event to lead students to other topics. Another teaching strategy that might invite younger students in particular to engage some of the more moving and difficult testimony about September 11, could be to write narrative, or creative nonfiction. Students might draw from catalogued e-mails, personal accounts sent in to the archive, handwritten documents uploaded in PDF format, video or audio files to imagine how a real or fictional character might have experienced that day. For example, clicking on one sound file at the Sonic Memorial Project takes students to the Manhattan Bridge as New Yorkers streamed into Brooklyn on foot and emergency vehicles warbled in the distance. Clicking on another takes students to FBI bomb technician Gerry Fornino, who relates what it was like for a friend to save a human life at the cost of losing his partner, a bomb detection dog. In the process, Fornino describes the relationship between a human and an animal in a way that might lead students to a history that is not just composed of human experiences (7).

Another assignment might ask students to track the events of the day as they might have been experienced by a person in a single location: a command center, an emergency room or temporary trauma center, a midtown office building, or a New Jersey suburb (Figure 3). One astonishing audio file takes the historian to Elisa Karp's Upper East Side apartment. Throughout the day, Karp absorbed the news of the day's disaster, speaking her thoughts into the tape recorder as she processed facts, rumors, and new worries. What is perhaps most fascinating about files like this is the ambient noise that would allow a student to read the layers of evidence it contains: a radio announcer giving instructions for New Yorkers trying to find family members, the telephone ringing, and sirens wailing outside her window. "There are so many totally dark buildings," an exhausted Karp says by 1 a.m. By listening to a description of a city in which all light had been extinguished to deter another attack, students are reminded how little people caught in the midst of historic events really know about what is occurring. "It's crazy," Karp murmurs. "I can look out my window and I can see entire buildings that are dark. . . . It's crazy" (8).

Finally, the September 11 Digital Archive is a particularly rich source for asking students to think about gender, race, class, religion, and nationality as lenses through which different people experienced the emergency and came to understand what it required of them. In one video, ironworker Kevin Crowley from Local 580, who had helped to build the radio antenna on top of the tower, recalls finding himself two days after the attack in the wreckage of what he had built. Inhaling deeply to keep his composure, this burly man stops and starts, trying to describe what he saw and how he felt. "On the thirteenth, uh, you know, it was, uh," he stops, and then starts again. "I cried a million tears. The only time I wasn't cryin', I was down there workin' cause it gave me somethin', I . . . was hopin' to find that one person."

Women, on the other hand, often had children at or near the site. April John Gallop, holding her son Elijah, describes coming to work as a soldier at the Pentagon with him, and having her entire office collapse around them. Struggling with conflicting duties as a soldier and a mother, she also believed she might not get out. "There were so many

images going on at one time," she recalls with composure. "My son was totally covered under debris. The only way that I knew he was still alive was that he was crying very loudly. And then all of a sudden he stopped. And that's what motivated me to try to get out from what I was under, so that I could get my son. I just wanted to leave with his body." Gallop dug herself out, freed her son, carried him out of the building to waiting rescue workers, and then returned to help others.

Conclusion

The attacks on the twin towers created the world virtually all history students now take for granted. From airport security rituals to a new awareness of Islamic communities in the United States and around the world, the September 11 Digital Archive is an attractive lure to learning the skills necessary to recreating worlds, understanding how they came to be, and entering into dialogue with the past. Through it, they can learn basic interpretive skills and other aspects of the historian's craft that can be easily transported to more conventional paper archives, as well as to other fields, other periods, and other subjects that might subsequently capture their interest. Furthermore, as new efforts to memorialize the day of the attacks develop, generating political controversy and opposition, teachers will be able to draw students back to complex, nuanced primary evidence that will allow them to reconstruct the event itself, generating their own perspectives on the newly manufactured memories that have replaced what is gone now. □

Endnotes

1. *The September 11 Digital Archive: Saving The Histories Of September 11*, <<http://911digitalarchive.org/>>. The older version, where I have viewed materials that are not yet accessible on the new website, is at <<http://old.911digitalarchive.org/>>.
2. For more on the ASHP, go to <<http://ashp.cuny.edu/about-us/>>.
3. See *The Sonic Memorial Project*, <<http://www.sonicmemorial.org/sonic/public/index.html>>. The project also provides a teaching guide that conforms to the goals of the national standards in social studies and some state level testing standards.
4. Go to <<http://www.columbia.edu/cu/lweb/indiv/oral/sept11.html>>. Columbia also launched a collection effort following the attacks, and has made the responses of many of its faculty and distinguished visitors from the United States and abroad available on-line: see "e-resources: Columbia responds to 9/11," *Columbia interactive*, <<http://ci.columbia.edu/ci/eresources/wtc.html>>.
5. *The September 11 Digital Archive*, <<http://911digitalarchive.org/index.php>>
6. *Ground One: Voices from Post-9/11 Chinatown*, <<http://911digitalarchive.org/chinatown/>>. Transcripts are available at <<http://911digitalarchive.org/chinatown/esearch.php>>.
7. "Archive," *The Sonic Memorial Project*, <<http://www.sonicmemorial.org/sonic/public/archive.jsp>>; "Fresh Kills," *The Sonic Memorial Project*, <<http://www.sonicmemorial.org/sonic/public/freshkills/index.html>>.
8. "A New York Everyman's Journal, September 11 2011," *The Sonic Memorial Project*, <<http://www.sonicmemorial.org/sonic/public/archive.jsp>>.

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