

White Paper Report

Report ID: 98508

Application Number: HD5077609

Project Director: Timothy Powell (tipowell@sas.upenn.edu)

Institution: Itasca Community College

Reporting Period: 9/1/2009-8/31/2010

Report Due: 3/31/2011

Date Submitted: 4/5/2011

The Digital Humanities
Viewed from Indian Country

White Paper #2

“Gibagadinamaagoom: An Ojibwe Digital Archive,”
NEH Digital Humanities, Level One, Start-Up Grant

Primary Investigator:
Larry P. Aitken,
Tribal Historian, Leech Lake Band of Ojibwe Nation,
Director of American Indian Studies, Itasca Community College

Co-Primary Investigator:
Barbara McDonald,
Dean of Academic Affairs, Itasca Community College

Project Director and Author:
Timothy B. Powell,
University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology
Director of Native American Projects, American Philosophical Society

Introduction:

“Indian Country” is the part of North America occupied by sovereign American Indian nations (U.S.) and First Nations (Canada). Historically, treaties created reservations and reserves, mostly in remote areas undesirable to non-Indian settlers. These areas have long suffered neglected and are in danger of being left behind by the digital revolution. FCC Chairman stated in 2010, “in Indian Country today, our best estimates put the adoption rate [of broadband] in the range of 10 percent.”¹ This severely limited access has also impacted the digital humanities, albeit in ways not often discussed. One of the crises facing the digital humanities, at this early juncture in the field’s history, is a disturbing lack of cultural diversity. We believe that the digital divide cuts both ways—cutting indigenous communities off from a vast amount of knowledge and depriving the digital humanities of the wealth of traditional knowledge in Indian Country.

This white paper, which describes a project entitled “*Gibagadinamaagoom: An Ojibwe Digital Archive*” that was awarded a Digital Humanities Level I Start-Up (January-December 2010), focuses on exploring the problem of the “digital divide” as manifested in the Ojibwe’s ancestral homelands in northern Minnesota. In the Ojibwe language, *Gibagadinamaagoom* means ‘to bring to life, to sanction, to give permission.’ The project is devoted to studying how digital technology can bring Native American materials housed in museums and archives to life by restoring their connection to the Ojibwe oral tradition. The project sanctions the authority of Ojibwe wisdom-keepers by consulting with them at every phase of the development of the digital archive and creating protocols to assure that culturally sensitive materials are not displayed on the website (www.gibagadinamaagoom.info). We did not, obviously, choose the name *Gibagadinamaagoom* because it would be easy to Google. Rather, the name alerts the viewer immediately that they are entering a digital realm of traditional Ojibwe culture, where one navigates through the site according to the seven sacred directions of Ojibwe cosmology.

The success of the project, 3 NEH grants and counting, can be attributed to a powerful and committed partnership. “*Gibagadinamaagoom: An Ojibwe Digital Archive*” is a collaboration between four tribal and community colleges: Leech Lake Tribal College, White Earth Tribal and Community College, Fond du Lac Tribal and Community College, and Itasca Community College. The participating museums and archives include the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, the American Philosophical Society, and the Minnesota Historical Society.

In keeping with a deeply held conviction that the project can benefit both digital humanities scholarship and Ojibwe communities, we established two advisory boards. The board of Ojibwe permission givers is headed by Larry Aitken, who holds the titles of Director of American Indian Studies at Itasca Community College and Tribal Historian of the Leech Lake Band of the Ojibwe nation. Jerome McGann, John Stewart Bryan University Professor at the University of Virginia and editor of *Dante Gabriel Rossetti: A*

Hypermedia Archive, heads the digital humanities board. We are thankful for the extraordinary leadership provided by professors Aitken and McGann, which allowed the project participants to engage in a year long discussion that included a conference of all the partners held at the Minnesota Historical Society in March, 2010, the *Online Humanities Scholarship: The Shape of Things to Come* conference convened at UVA a few weeks later, and the “Building Bridges between Archives and Indian Communities” conference at the American Philosophical Society in March, 2010.

The partners have been working together for more than ten years to create an Ojibwe digital archive that brings together digital audio recordings of indigenous languages, digital images of museum and archival holdings, and videos of Ojibwe elders. Our hope is that by recounting our frustrations and successes that this white paper will:

- expand the community of “digital humanities scholars” to include Ojibwe wisdom-keepers, language carriers, and tribal and community college faculty and students;
- offer reflections on how powerful, committed partnerships can provide workable solutions to the interrelated problems of access, sustainability, and greater cultural diversity in the digital humanities.
- raise important questions concerning the conflict between the virtues of open access vs. the need for restrictions to protect culturally sensitive materials;
- provide new models for collaboration in digital humanities projects.

At a historical moment when digital technology provides unprecedented access to archival collections worldwide, our primary concern is the risk that digital humanities scholars may overlook Native American communities. For far too long, information has flowed in only one direction—out of indigenous communities and into museums and archives, where these cultural materials have been largely unavailable to the communities where this knowledge originated. We hope that the *Gibadinamaagoom* project provides a model of best practices and practical suggestions about how a two-way flow of information can lead to mutually beneficial relationships.

Cultural Diversity in the Digital Humanities

Although the digital humanities is yet a young field, some scholars have pointed out a troubling tendency toward an older, mono-cultural conception of American studies. What might be called the first wave of scholarly archives focuses on writers such as Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin, Walt Whitman, Herman Melville, and Emily Dickenson. It is important to recognize that, unlike the canon wars of the late 20th century, the exclusion of Native American culture is not, in most cases, rooted in ethnocentrism but, more likely, based in fiscal reality. It is far easier and less expensive to digitize print editions of collected works by canonical authors than to digitize the oral tradition of Ojibwe bands in the rural Great Lakes region. Fortunately, the staff of the *Gibagadinamaagoom* project has never been deterred by fiscal reality.

The problem is not due, however, to a lack of digital materials related to Native American cultures. If one looks outside the academy to digital projects housed within museums and archives, abundant materials are readily available. The National Museum of the American Indian, for example, has digitized images of 825,000 objects representing over 12,000 years of history and more than 1,200 indigenous cultures throughout the Americas.² The American Philosophical Society, one of the partners of the *Gibagadinamaagoom* project, is in the process of digitizing more than 3000 hours of endangered Native American languages, which includes songs, stories, linguistic and ethnographic materials.³ Given the vast quantities of Native American materials available, one wonders if the problem is not about access but, instead, a certain narrowness in the way American studies is commonly imagined within the academy. How often, for example, do scholars think of American literary history beginning in 10,000 BCE?

Vast amounts of digitized Native American materials are not sufficient, therefore, to diversify the digital humanities. For the problem is not lack of access, but a lack of cultural context. Much like objects stored in dusty museum repositories, with little white cards attached providing information about the non-Native collector, digital reproductions of the artifacts can seem lifeless when reduced to Dublin Core metadata fields. As the Ojibwe wisdom-keepers on the project have taught us, a *dewe'igan* (drum) will only come to life to tell its story if an Ojibwe *chi-ayy ya agg* ('wisdom carriers') are present who speak the language of the drum.

We were able to record such a moment on videotape at the Penn Museum, when Larry Aitken and David McDonald came to the Penn Museum. The museum staff, to their great credit, did not fall off their chairs when Larry began to play one of the historic drums in their collection. The story is more interesting, though, when told from Prof. Aitken's perspective. He explained that *he* did not decide to play the drum, but that *dewe'igan* spoke to him, asking to be brought to life with a traditional song.⁴ "The [drum] knows a wisdom keeper and how to talk to them," Larry later recalled. "The wisdom-keeper is startled, surprised by the force nudging them, trying to contact the wisdom-keeper." Moments like this reveal what we may mean by mutually beneficial

relationships. This video is now being shown in Ojibwe high school and tribal colleges; it has also been presented to digital humanists at the University of Virginia and the Digital Americanists section of the American Literature Association conference, demonstrating what a valuable resource *aadizookewinini* ('storytellers') can be for expanding and enriching the field.

While it is understandable why the digital humanities has focused thus far on archives of written materials, our hope is that the Gibagadinamaagoom archive demonstrates that it is not only possible but critically important to expand the digital imaginary to include audio, video, and material culture viewed from the perspective of Ojibwe wisdom-carriers. One of the more striking discoveries we have made, first noted by the Ojibwe wisdom-keepers, is that digital multimedia may be much better suited to representing the nuances of the oral tradition than print media. Unlike the printed page, video allows the audience to hear and see, for example, a storyteller lifting an eyebrow or smiling. Humor constitutes an integral part of the Ojibwe oral tradition and yet such telling inflections too often go unnoticed in print transcriptions. The interactivity of digital displays also corresponds, imperfectly, to the interactive nature of storytelling, a feature we have worked hard to incorporate into the web design (see "[Ask the Elders](#)").

From an Ojibwe perspective, the wind ruffling the lake in the background as an elder speaks or the shifting interplay of light and shadow on his/her face are all part of the story. Through such movements, the elders explain, the spiritual world becomes manifest, whispering the story to the wisdom-keeper. "The work we are doing with this digital archive," Larry Aitken explained, "is so important one wonders whether they're worthy to translate wind, fire, rain, earth sounds, bird songs, waves." Digital humanists, it seems safe to say, are not yet qualified to translate what it means to hear a loon calling as Larry speaks in the video. These spiritual dimensions, what Prof. Aitken calls "invisible forces," are all revealed through the use of digital video on the Gibagadinamaagoom website. A concerted effort is also being made by the partners to provide fields in the metadata for information about "spirit helpers," "ancestral sources of stories," and "spiritual dimensions of location."

From the perspective of the *Gibagadinamaagoom* partners, 'cultural diversity' is not limited simply to race. The success of the project results from a willingness to engage with equal passion spiritual and mundane influences, the views of high school students and elders, multiple bands of the Ojibwe Nation, rural and urban communities, tribal colleges and research universities, museums and archives, organizations with almost no digital infrastructure and institutions with highly sophisticated IT departments. All of these partners are integral to our long-term goal of building a two-way bridge across the digital divide.

Access in Indian Country

As of this writing, however, the *Gibagadinamaagoom* project has not yet achieved its goal spanning the digital divide. This is due, in large part, to the limited access to broadband in Indian Country. Nevertheless, the partnership continues to work hard to build an on-line digital archive in the hopes that broadband will one day soon be available in the Ojibwe communities with whom we work. Itasca Community College, the host institution of the present NEH Digital Humanities grant, continues to work closely with the Blandin Foundation to make broadband access more readily available throughout rural, northern Minnesota.

Unlike many other digital humanities projects, we presume, the target audience for the *Gibagadinamaagoom* archive is Ojibwe high school students participating in an extramural language preservation program known as the Quiz Bowl. The Quiz Bowl is an educational program, administered locally by Itasca Community College, which brings regional high schools into close contact with Ojibwe wisdom-keepers. Teams of high school students compete for a state championship by answering questions related to Ojibwe history, language, and culture. Quantitative analysis reveals that students who participate in the Quiz Bowl are more likely to stay in high school and to go on to college. The problem is providing new materials for Quiz Bowl competitions over the course of many years. The *Gibagadinamaagoom* project has been developing educational videos that bring together digital surrogates of materials housed at the American Philosophical Society and the Penn Museum with stories told by Ojibwe wisdom-keepers about the objects. These digital exhibits are archived on the *Gibagadinamaagoom* website. At the time this white paper was written, however, the high school students still cannot access these materials online and so all materials are disseminated by hand on DVDs.⁵

One of the most interesting aspects of viewing the digital humanities from the perspective of Indian Country is the way it complicates the ideal of open access. As the anthropologist Faye Ginsburg presciently noted in 1991: “indigenous and minority people have faced a kind of Faustian dilemma. On the one hand, they are finding new modes for expressing indigenous identity through media and gaining access to film and video to serve their own needs and ends. On the other hand, the spread of communications technology such as home video and satellite downlinks threatens to be a final assault on culture, language, imagery, relationships between generations, and respect for traditional knowledge.”⁶ It is a lament often heard in Indian Country, that digital technology is pulling the younger generation away from traditional forms of knowledge, such as the oral tradition, and distracting young people from the opportunity to engage with elders. The *Gibagadinamaagoom* project seeks to address these concerns by making a concerted effort to create situations in which young Ojibwe people, who have grown up with new technologies, work directly with elders to record traditional knowledge in digital form. The Native American advisory board to determine if they are suitable for publication on the web then reviews these materials.

During the course of the present Digital Humanities grant, the two advisory boards worked on the interrelated issues of increasing access to a broader audience and protecting culturally sensitive materials. One of the long-term goals of the project has been to provide greater access for our Ojibwe partners not only to the website, but to the tools for web design. This concept was piloted by Tim Powell at the University of Pennsylvania with the design of a sister site entitled *Digital Partnerships with Indian Communities* (DPIC). Situated on the School of Arts and Sciences servers, DPIC was built in a Drupal environment, which allows undergraduates at Penn to work collaboratively on creating digital exhibits that include explanatory text, digital images of Ojibwe artifacts, and videos of Ojibwe elders. This controlled experiment in providing access to web design tools proved successful and plans are currently underway to migrate the *Gibagadinamaagoom* site to Drupal with the goal of providing similar access to Ojibwe faculty, students, and wisdom-keepers. In the coming year, David McDonald, who teaches Multimedia Studies at the college, will conduct a pilot program at Leech Lake Tribal College to allow students to build their own digital exhibits. The current NEH Humanities Initiatives with Tribal Colleges grant will provide funding for the Drupal redesign and will thus move the partners one step closer to the long-term goal of turning control of the site over to the Ojibwe people.

While working assiduously to make all aspects of the digital archive more readily available to our Ojibwe partners, the project has also been striving towards a more nuanced understanding of “access.” The Native American advisory board, for example, expressed concern that the materials produced by the project be made available to non-Natives as well as Ojibwe students. The *Gibagadinamaagoom* site was thus presented widely at a range of schools including Penn, Yale, University of Virginia, Georgetown, Boston College, George Mason and Friends Central School (grades 4 and 11). In some cases, however, the board advised not publishing materials to the website, but instead making them accessible in other ways. The American Philosophical Society, for example, has a drawing of a *Midewiwin* (‘Grand Medicine Society’) scroll that depicts the migration of the *Midewiwin* to Otter Tail Point on the Leech Lake Ojibwe reservation. The map was not digitized because *Midewiwin* materials are considered sacred. A hand drawn copy of the map was presented to Elaine Fleming, an Ojibwe faculty member at Leech Lake Tribal College, who has used it to teach students about sacred sites on the reservation. Prof. Fleming also used the map to petition the tribe not to develop Otter Tail Point. A copy was also provided to a *Midewiwin* leader at Leech Lake who is the keeper of sacred scrolls and who is using it in ceremonies not open to those outside the lodge. “Access,” therefore, is not defined solely in terms of world wide web, but in keeping with the traditional protocols of the tribe.

Building Digital Infrastructure and Sustainability

“Sustainability,’ Jerome McGann poignantly observed at the “Online Humanities Scholarship: The Shape of Things to Come” conference the University of Virginia, “is a dark but potent word in the field of digital humanities.” Even the most sophisticated projects at universities with digital humanities centers struggle with the question of how to sustain projects over the long term. For a small project like *Gibagadinamaagoom*, which has a fundamental commitment to one day turning the archive over to the Ojibwe people, the interrelated problems of access, sustainability, and digital infrastructure prove formidable.

Efforts to establish a digital presence in Indian Country were particularly difficult in the early years, when work on the *Gibagadinamaagoom* website was done in basements by dedicated volunteers, who made up for a lack of web building and programming skills with inspiration gained from Ojibwe elders’ stories about overcoming historical obstacles like the removal to reservations and winters of starvation. In 1997, the project received its first NEH Humanities Initiative grant through White Earth Tribal and Community College (Dr. Nyleta Beauregard) with logistical and technical support from Itasca Community College (Dr. Barbara McDonald) and the University of Pennsylvania (Dr. Tim Powell). Grant funding brought together a professional web designer (Greg Bear), a highly skilled videographer (David McDonald), and gifted Ojibwe wisdom-keepers who worked at tribal and community colleges (Larry Aitken, Dan Jones, and Andy Favorite). Artifacts from the Penn Museum and stories told by Ojibwe elders came together in digital exhibits such as “[The Treaty of 1855](#)” and “[How to Procure Apaakozigan \(‘Indian Tobacco’\)](#).” And yet, for all of this success, the *Gibagdinamaagoom* digital archive continues to be housed on rented server space with web development limited to the duration of the grant.

The current NEH Digital Humanities Start-Up grant allowed for long-term planning to improve the digital infrastructure of the archive and to develop a model of sustainability. These planning sessions took place at three crucial events: a two-day conference at the Minnesota Historical Society in March of 2010, the “Online Humanities Scholarship: The Shape of Things to Come” conference, hosted by Jerome McGann and sponsored by the Mellon Foundation at the University of Virginia in March of 2010, and the “Building Bridges between Archives and Indian Communities” conference at the American Philosophical Society in May, 2010.

At the NEH sponsored conference, participants discussed the next step in developing metadata for digital objects in the archive and allowing Ojibwe partners to participate more fully in the design of the site. After a very productive discussion, the group decided to move from an HTML format to a Drupal environment, which would allow remote access so that students and teachers can create and implement new digital exhibits, thus building a basis for the digital humanities in Indian Country. We are deeply appreciative of the Digital Humanities division of NEH, since this planning led directly to another NEH Humanities Initiatives with Tribal Colleges grant that has already allowed us to implement many of the plans that came out of the meeting. We would like

to add a postscript, by way of thanking the Digital Humanities division. From our perspective, the emphasis by some granting institutions to constantly push the envelope to develop new tools or to build ever more sophisticated digital archives inadvertently worsens the problem of the digital divide. That is to say, building a more complicated digital infrastructure, requiring highly skilled programmers and a significant revenue stream, would only exasperate the problem of supporting and sustaining the archive in Indian Country. While our site may not be highly sophisticated, we have found that simplicity and reliability provide a more stable foundation for sustainability and we are deeply appreciative of the Digital Humanities division for its support of a more basic design.

It was a great honor for such a small project, devoted to a part of the country with very limited digital resources, to be invited by Jerome McGann to attend the “Online Humanities Scholarship: The Shape of Things to Come” conference, sponsored by the Mellon Foundation, at the University of Virginia in March of 2010. Participants, who included many of the most prominent editors of successful digital archives, were galvanized by a looming crisis that threatens the very existence of digital humanities—the profound difficulties of sustaining extremely complicated, scholarly, digital projects. As the editor of the *Rossetti Archive*, one of the most sophisticated and successful scholarly archives, Dr. McGann shocked the audience by announcing: “if the *Archive* is judged strictly as a scholarly edition, the jury is still out. One simple and deplorable reason explains why: no one knows how it or projects like it will be or could be sustained.... I am now thinking that, to preserve what I have come to see as the permanent core of its scholarly materials, I shall have print it out.”⁷ This ominous insight took on even darker shades when Rice University Press, which published the conference papers as part of its new digital imprint, suddenly closed down—sadly proving McGann’s prescience.

Just two months later, the partners of *Gibagadinamaagoom* came together again at the American Philosophical Society. There are few places where one feels more comforted about the fear of sustainability than the APS, which has a one hundred million dollar endowment and is built on the assumption that its collections will endure until earth’s final days. What occurred at the “Building Bridges between Archives and Indian Communities” conference was unprecedented in the Society’s 200+ year existence. Fourteen Native American wisdom-keepers, entrusted by their nations to protect and preserve their cultures, came to review materials originating from their communities in the APS’s collections. These tribal representatives met with attentive and sympathetic archivists from the Library of Congress, the National Museum of the American Indian, the National Anthropological Archives, University of Pennsylvania, and the Newberry Library to confirm a commitment to working in partnership to utilize digital technology to establish closer ties with indigenous communities. In the aftermath of the conference, the APS has agreed to digitize its Ojibwe collections and to allow the *Gibagadinamaagoom* partners to access the materials through a password protected portal, thus providing a robust alternative that will most likely endure beyond the life of the website.

Looking Ahead

Since completing the Digital Humanities Start-Up grant, the *Gibagadinamaagoom* project has received an NEH Humanities Initiatives with Tribal Colleges (2011-2013), through Leech Lake Tribal College, and is part of the new Digital Knowledge Sharing Initiative begun by the American Philosophical Society with funding from the Mellon Foundation (2011-2014). These grants have allowed the partnership to take significant steps forward in terms of building digital infrastructure, creating protocols for cultural sensitivities, and addressing the issue of long-term sustainability.

The NEH HI grant has been used to lay the foundations for building a digital repository at Leech Lake Tribal College. Two external hard drives with three terabytes of memory have been set up at the LLTC library, which house more than 70 hours of videotape created by Ojibwe elders working with David McDonald as part of the *Gibagadinamaagoom* project. The grant will pay for Elaine Fleming, a noted elder and instructor at LLTC, to travel to the Library of Congress, National Museum of the American Indian and the National Anthropological Archives this summer, where she will supervise LLTC students collecting more digitized materials to add to the archive. The Library of Congress's Folklife Center, for example, recently digitized extremely valuable audiotapes made by the distinguished anthropologist Frances Densmore in the early part of the 20th century. These recordings are of Ojibwe elders from the Leech Lake, White Earth, and Fond du Lac reservations. Despite this rather rudimentary digital infrastructure consisting of external hard drives located at LLTC, we consider this to be an important step in that we have now established a physical presence in Ojibwe communities that does not depend upon access to broadband.

One of the most encouraging developments to come out of the recently concluded grant cycle is the use of the *Gibagadinamaagoom* project as a model for other partnerships between archives and Native communities. The Digital Knowledge Sharing Initiative, sponsored by a Mellon grant at the American Philosophical Society, was based in part upon the *Gibagadinamaagoom* archive. The APS will be partnering with four indigenous communities, including Leech Lake Tribal College, to create repositories of digital surrogates of photographs, audio files, and ethnographic materials related to the local community. As part of this project, the *Gibagadinamaagoom* partners are now working closely with remote Ojibwe communities in Manitoba and Ontario to try to replicate the success of our project. Other indigenous communities partnering on the APS's Digital Knowledge Sharing Initiative include the Eastern Band of the Cherokee Indians in North Carolina, the Wabanaki Confederacy in New England, and the Tuscarora Nation in upstate New York.

Finally, to place this analysis in an Ojibwe context, one of the moral imperatives for community-based work is to consider how your actions will affect the people seven generations in the future. This perspective proves helpful in that it encourages one to look beyond short-term obstacles like the lack of broadband in Indian Country and to concentrate on outcomes beyond one's own lifetime. Such traditional codes of conduct are fundamentally important to the partners, and thus we would like to conclude by

mentioning that every effort is being made to involve young Ojibwe people in all aspects of building the digital archive. Part of the NEH HI grant funding will allow five students from the *Makinaa* project at Leech Lake Tribal College to go to Washington D.C., under the supervision of Elaine Fleming, to do research and to collect digital reproductions of archival materials to add to a database of material housed at the college. The *Makinaa* students represent the first person in their family to attend college. When one of the students, a skilled bead worker, was asked what it meant to her to see images of beaded bags from the Penn Museum, she replied that it would allow her to teach her grandchildren an art form that has endured in the Ojibwe community for generations—a reflection of being taught to think seven generations into the future. Larry Aitken, the PI on the current NEH Digital Humanities Start-Up grant and the tribal historian at Leech Lake, is working closely on creating exhibits to provide cultural context for digital objects in the archive with his daughters Ann and Athena Aitken, who are studying anthropology at the University of Minnesota, Duluth and Minnesota State University, Moorehead. It is our greatest hope that these students, or perhaps their grandchildren, will one day inherit a sustainable digital archive based on the traditional teachings of their people.

Endnotes

¹ http://www.fcc.gov/Daily_Releases/Daily_Business/2010/db0721/DOC-300049A1.pdf

² <http://www.nmai.si.edu/subpage.cfm?subpage=collections&second=collections>, accessed 3/23/2011.

³ The American Philosophical Society received a Mellon grant (2008-2011) to digitize more than 1000 hours of its endangered Native American languages collection. A follow up grant has been awarded to the Society to digitize another 2000 hours of Native American audio material over the course of the next three years, 2011-2014.

⁴ “[Ask the Elders](#)” on *Gibagadinamaagoom* digital archive.

⁵ Problems with providing access for high school students participating in the Quiz Bowl include restrictive filters put in place by school administrators and the limited reach of broadband in rural northern Minnesota. To this point, the partnership has resolved this problem by issuing all of the materials in the form of CDs, which are distributed by the high school coaches. This “solution,” however, fails to take full advantage of the *Gibagadinamaagoom* digital archive’s interactive features and remains a work in progress.

⁶

⁷ Jerome McGann, “The Elephant in the Room”