

Grant Proposal
HIST 677 History in the Digital Age
Tami Wolf

Old City, New Pictures
NEH Grant Proposal

1. Enhancing the Humanities through Innovation

People are often interested when historical topics relate to them and the experiences of themselves, their family, or their surroundings. History becomes familiar in these cases, and easier to connect with on a personal level. Looking at photos and/or drawings of places you know “how they used to be” or “the way I remember it from years ago” brings back memories of the past, valuable not only as family stories but also for historical research. Please note that drawings or sketches of cities and towns will also be utilized for times before cameras were invented. There is no reason to leave out entire centuries of history when an alternative is available.

Old City, New Pictures is a web archive and community site designed for the average computer user interested in how their city or town used to look, and what those places meant to people. Through the website, people will be able to explore their communities, neighborhoods, and cities relying on a network of similarly-inclined users. To further these goals, this proposal is to request a Level II Digital Humanities Start-Up Grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities to bring the initial prototype website to a place where it could be implemented successfully into at least one community.

Current Configurations

The Old City, New Pictures project utilizes Omeka software and plug-ins to display photos and allow users to interact with the site. Each pair of photos, one historical and one modern, are viewable as an item in a collection. Visitors to the site are able to browse all the items at once, items by collection, and based on the location of a picture using an interactive map. Once at an image, visitors can click on tags to view photos of the same neighborhood or of the same type. Additionally, the site also has a form and detailed instructions for submitting images and stories. There is a contact form for users who would like to send an e-mail to the project and a page detailing the goals of the site and encouraging user participation.

Right now only one collection exists, the one for images of Washington, D.C. It contains five items (ten individual images) and was created as the final project in a digital history class. (See the “History and Duration” section for more information regarding this.)

Old City, New Pictures in the Future

The eventual scope of Old City, New Pictures will hopefully extend beyond the District of Columbia into other cities and towns. Volunteers will take the initiative to begin new collections, and Old City, New Pictures will assist by maintaining those collections, as they do for the Washington, D.C. collection. If the site expands enough, additional moderators, volunteers, will be brought into the project to help out a local level. If the users of a collection would like, each city could have, in addition to a main collections page, a home page for meet-ups, challenges, and contests (as described below).

No matter the size, it will remain an independent venture, but would be interested working towards partnerships with national institutions such as the Library of Congress, and local organizations, such as historical societies, museums, libraries, or others that would have the images used on the site. We believe those organizations could, in turn, benefit from the work Old City, New Pictures does. Especially at the local level, our collections could help towns and cities explore themselves and the changes they have undergone over time.

Old pictures, especially from a family collection or of a place a person grew up, are often accompanied by memories. Users are encouraged to share their personal stories of the places depicted in the pictures, whether the images are ones they submitted or not. Rather than just a repository of images depicting change over time, the website becomes a way to illustrate the personal past, as well as an archive of the sometimes more impersonal images.

Old City, New Pictures will use events and contests at the local level to encourage involvement. Some ideas are:

- *Look-alike Contest*: Contest will be announced on the main page, with a link to a new area of the Old City, New Pictures website. Visitors will see an historical photo chosen at random, and will have ten days to post their own version of it. After the time has elapsed, visitors will be able to vote on the most accurate new representation.
- *Photo Challenge*: Challenge will be announced on the main page, with a link to a new area of the Old City, New Pictures website. Users will be shown an old photo of a semi-recognizable local landmark, with a date but no location listed. They will have two weeks to figure out what the landmark is, take a picture, and submit it. There will be at least one challenge a month. All submissions will be posted on the website.
- *Photo Meet-up*: In an alternate version of the Photo Challenge, a photo meet-up will be announced on the main page, with a link to an unlabeled historical photo, a date taken, and a date and time to meet. At the appointed time, local community members will meet at the place of the photo to take their own, and a group photo, all of which will be allowed to be submitted to the website.

At this time, there are no plans to reward the “winners” of the challenges or contests. They are fun activities designed to encourage people to participate in Old City, New Pictures.

Value

The value of Old City, New Pictures will be primarily for the interested general public. They will be able to see how their home changed over time, and how people lived in it. To an extent, then, this same information could be valuable to scholars looking to flesh out their own projects on

these specific places, time periods, or memory. For students, especially those in digital humanities, public history, or similar fields, creating a collection on the website and engaging a local community to at least begin putting materials up would be an excellent project.

At this time, no original or new software or Omeka plug-in are being considered for Old City, New Pictures. At this point, Omeka has been able to meet the needs of the site. If, in the future, it is unable to, outside assistance will be called upon to create whatever software is needed.

2. Environmental Scan

There are hundreds of places for individuals to look at old pictures. Archives and libraries, digital and traditional, contain millions of pictures. Hundreds of thousands of websites display photos. Even easier to get to, and perhaps more meaningful, are the pictures people keep in their homes, detailing their lives and their surroundings.

The Flickr group Looking Into the Past (<http://www.flickr.com/groups/lookingintothepast/>) is one site comparable to Old City, New Pictures. While a nice stream of pictures and easily accessible to anyone, it is limited to visual images only and discussions take place in forums, separate from the pictures and often not about the images themselves. The group is also a general dumping ground for old/new pictures and not oriented towards individual communities. Flickr lacks an overreaching organizational structure, giving members of the group free reign to upload what they wish without oversight.

In contrast, archival sites, such as the extensive Library of Congress (<http://loc.gov>), are excellent for looking through pages of pictures or showcasing exhibits. However, they are too structured, rarely allowing for much user interaction or input. They can also be difficult to search and navigate because of restrictions.

Old City, New Pictures is unique because it will allow users to interact with the site and each other. User submissions are the only way for it to grow. While giving users plenty of space to make the site their own, all content is filtered through the moderator, who makes sure it is appropriate and legal to put up. When accepting submissions like this, ensuring the privacy of users is paramount, and this filtration system ensures that no information is accidentally shared.

To our knowledge, there is no site that encourages local participation to learn about a town or city's past through visual images such as this.

3. History and Duration of the Project

The idea for a past/present photo project grew out of Tamara Wolf's love of old pictures of familiar places. It started as a workable project as the final project for her History in the Digital

Age course at American University in May and June of 2009, taught by Jeremy Boggs of the Center for History and New Media at George Mason University and PhD candidate there.

As of June 2009, the preliminary site “Old city, New Pictures” created by Tamara Wolf was available off her personal site (<http://tamarawolf.com/omeka>). No other work has been done for the website yet, nor has it officially gone public. This grant is to request the first funding for the project; until this point, it has been completely unfunded. Some ideas, in terms of browsing options and organization, were inspired by past CHNM projects using Omeka, such as the September 11 Digital Archive (<http://chnm.gmu.edu/category/collecting-and-exhibiting/>). These projects are archives of a mixture of media, much like Old City, New Pictures will be. The current content of Old City, New Pictures was discussed above, in the first section.

Initial reactions to the concept of Old City, New Pictures by those outside the digital humanities profession, primarily friends of the creator and the target audience, were positive, as was the reception of the site prototype. People found the comparisons of old and new fascinating, and those outside the DC area expressed an interest in doing something similar for their hometowns, one such being Galveston, Texas. This interest is encouraging, as it illustrates how quickly and widely the project could spread.

4. Work Plan

The technology needed for Old City, New Pictures is out of necessity very simple, since the goal is to simplify user experiences to encourage participation. As it currently stands, the website uses the software Omeka and the plug-ins available for it, namely Simple Pages and Geolocation/Google Maps for design, and Contribution, Guest Login, Rate Review, and Simple Contact Form for user interaction.

Omeka (<http://omeka.org>) is a free, open-source collections-based software created by the Center for History and New Media (<http://chnm.gmu.edu>) at George Mason University in Virginia. It was designed to display collections professionally and easily. Omeka is ideal for this project because its integration of Dublin core standards ensures proper credit is given for the historical and current images, and keeps them together. The number of plug-ins or possible additions to the site, available increases regularly, and the support of the staff at CHNM and the Omeka team ensure that help is always readily available to keep the site running.

Outline of Project Schedule:

October 2009

- Contact individuals across the country to get starters for collections of additional cities
- Get Geolocation plug-in to work properly, or find alternative for mapping out locations of pictures

November 2009

- Begin to contact institutions, such as the Library of Congress and local libraries, museums, and archives about making their collections a part of the project

December 2009

- Have initial cities or towns confirmed
- Set up collections for them

January 2010

- Moderators have access to site and upload more items as examples.
- Negotiations with partner organizations finalized

February 2010

- Last chance for partner organizations to give feedback on the site
- Final modifications to website and work out any plug-ins not functioning correctly (with outside help if necessary)

March 2010

- Public release of site
- Solicit initial feedback of site from users and other organizations

April 2010

- Continue to solicit feedback and work with users
- Recruit additional support and development staff

May 2010

- Start internal evaluation of first public release, especially relying on outside feedback

June 2010

- Complete internal evaluation by middle of the month
- Begin implementing necessary changes

5. Staff

Tamara Wolf is a Masters student in the Department of History at American University in Washington, D.C. Her interest is primarily in early American history and Public history. She is directing the Old City, New Pictures project. This is her first digital humanities project.

Assistance from the Center for History and New Media, particularly from **Jeremy Boggs**, has been essential to this project, and it is expected that further assistance will be requested, not the least because of the Omeka software.

Additional staff will be added as the project progresses. Any new staff paid to work on the Old City, New Pictures site will be paid a reasonable salary or fee from the grant money received from the Digital Humanities Start-Up Grant from this proposal.

6. Final Product and Dissemination

Old City, New Pictures will have its own domain name and be hosted separately from any institution. It is an individual's project and not affiliated with any center, university, or institution, though help is received from the Center for History and New Media at George Mason University. It will be maintained primarily by volunteers, and hoped that each collection will eventually be managed by an individual in that or a nearby community to increase the level of engagement outside the website itself.

Though the target audience for Old City, New Pictures is the general public, public historians and digital scholars are expected to make significant contributions. Outreach will mostly be word-of-mouth, through blogs, Twitter, and other social media outlets. Given the speed of the internet, word will spread quickly.

7. Biographies

Tamara Wolf is a Masters student in the Department of History at American University in Washington, D.C. Her interest is primarily in early American history and Public history. She is directing the Old City, New Pictures project. This is her first digital humanities project.

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