"Pushing the Boundaries of History and 'Digital World'"
Opening Remarks

NB: These remarks were given at a roundtable at the 2016 CUNY Early American Republic Seminar Conference.

The two prompts I received in preparation for this roundtable were to say something about the role of digital history in the overall profession and to talk about how I have leveraged the internet and digital tools in my own career. But let me begin by saying something about the "early American digital world" and its influence on the field. For longer than I've been alive, our field in a structural sense has been organized through the efforts of the main institutions in the field, i.e., the Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture and, later, the McNeil Center for Early American Studies and the Society for Historians of the Early American Republic. From fellowships to seminars to conferences, these institutions gave to the field the sense of community it had. And I would argue that the new early American "digital world" is not changing that but expanding on it (or around it). Social media and blogs are adding an additional layer of social infrastructure within the field itself, creating spaces that foster an even broader and more inclusive sense of community in the field, largely through the ability to include people who, for whatever reason, don't have access to or are outside the immediate orbit of those institutions and the field's traditional venues and channels of community-building.

Now, in considering the value of digital history to the profession, the overarching themes for myself are inclusion and access. How can we use the digital tools available to us to make the field at least feel (if not actually be) more inclusive? Can we use them to make isolated grad students or even faculty in far-flung places feel like they're part of a

community for more than 1 or 2 weekends per year? Can we use them to get history

professionals and secondary teachers more engaged with the field? And can we use them

as a means for the field to engage more with them? And, in terms of access, how do we

use these tools to increase access of all kinds? Can we use them to increase junior

academics access to the broader field? Can we use them to increase all historians' access

to the broader public? Can we use them to increase non-academics' access to the

knowledge and discussions currently being generated within the field? These questions

form the core of my own ideas about the value of digital history and they've shaped what

digital history projects I have chosen to start, participate in, and contribute to.

So let me say something briefly about the various projects I've been involved

with and how they've attempted to address those questions. The first is *The Junto*, which

is a group blog originally made up of mostly grad students, many of whom were still

engaged in coursework, also some who were ABD and a small few who had just

graduated and were doing postdocs or had gotten their first job. We started the blog as an

informal platform for early (or pre-) career people could discuss issues related to history,

historiography, and academia. In our wildest dreams, I think we hoped that it might help

develop a sense of community amongst grad students. In a way that still shocks me, it's

become much more than that. About 3 ½ years into the project, the blog just recently

received our 1,000,000 page views (300,000 in 2015). The blog has been mentioned in

the New York Times more than once (Scheussler). It's been cited in the AHR and RAH

and other places. It's regularly contacted by academic presses like Harvard and Oxford to

get their early American books reviewed on the blog and it's regularly acknowledged by

the main institutions in the field. (While the blog has 25 members in all, in 2015 it had 38

guest posts by 35 different people, many of whom were grad students. It's also had guest posts from more established and senior historians such as Ben Carp, Dallett Hemphill, Andy Schocket and Billy Smith, and Ed Baptist, Simon Newman] and interviews with Peter Onuf, Kathleen Brown, Richard Dunn, Saul Cornell, Dan Richter, and even Bernard Bailyn.) This general degree of acceptance in the field from grad students to senior faculty speaks, I think, to the gaps within the field that the blog has filled, namely the desire to be able to encounter and engage with each other *regularly* on historical, historiographical, and professional issue. And to provide a sense of being part of a field, of a community of scholars on a regular basis, not just for a few weekends each summer or on other special occasions.

For the first year or so, the blog ran a weekly digital/public history piece, often an interview, every Friday. And so in addition to our academic audience that brought (what I call) history professionals into the blog's community, e.g., archivists, museum curators, librarians, DH people, documentary editors, etc…. And it gave them a sense of participating in the broader field of early American history and it gave many readers a better sense of the relationship between academic work and scholarly work going on outside the confines of history departments.

I've also contributed to a number of other digital projects including *The JuntoCast*, which was very much in the same spirit though with the added goal of bringing recent scholarship to non-academic listeners and to do it in a way that modeled historical thinking and academic debate, which is why we chose a roundtable format with each hourlong episode devoted to a single topic related to early America. I have also contributed to Ben's project, American Yawp because it fit with these ethos. I was a

community college student here at CUNY who had to buy an expensive textbook for my US survey courses. The openness and the collaborative aspect of American Yawp and its goal of making scholarly knowledge more easily and readily available, especially to undergraduates made it especially appealing to me. I am also part of a much larger digital project that is in an extended planning phase that will bring individual stories of early America to a broader audience.

Like I said, my two main criteria for thinking about the value of digital history and individual projects is its impact on inclusion and access. And I think it's safe to say that the early American digital world represents in some sense and to some degree the democratizing of the field, however proportional. The discussion within the field has been democratized in terms of who has access to platforms from which they can reach the field. Of course, these developments are still in their infancy and there is a large percentage of academics who don't engage with the digital world at all. Moreover, some academics, to be sure, see these developments negatively as a detrimental to the field, but I think they're a minority, and that seems to suggest to me that the process is now well underway. Ultimately, the broader the variety of individuals and perspectives that are brought into contact and conversation with us as academic historians can only enrich and enliven the field and that is the result of and reward for pushing the boundaries of history and the digital world.