

Geographies of Inequities: Towards an Open-Source Digital History of Slave Sales in Virginia

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Abstract:

The Geography of Inequities project aims to document the history of slave auctions and sales in the Commonwealth of Virginia through crowd-sourced data collection and research, the construction of an online platform to host detailed geographic and historical documentation of each sale, and producing compelling educational material by harnessing ESRI Story Maps and *Omeka* web-exhibits. The novel integration of a digital-humanities based platform with participatory GIS presents a promising opportunity to expand the horizons of open-source data collection and the potential for powerful geography-based storytelling in public history.

The temporal scope of the project ranges from the earliest years of the Virginia colony in 1619 through the present day. Although slavery was formally outlawed in the United States with the passage of the 13th amendment, de-facto slavery persisted through the Jim Crow era, and “mock slave auctions” persisted as a common fundraising scheme through the 21st century. Documenting slave sales over such an expansive timeframe naturally lends itself towards a participatory data-collection model – a single team of archivists is insufficient for such a task. Encouraging the participation of a wide range of specialists, as well as driven non-professional users, will help accomplish the project’s lofty ambitions.

This timely project comes at the midst of America’s racial reckoning. The need to educate the public, spread awareness, and highlight the prevalence of racial inequities throughout the history of the state of Virginia has never been clearer. This year, the ICC will be hosted in South Africa, a nation whose recent history, through the end of apartheid and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, closely mirrors the racial reckoning underway in the United States.

Thus far, the Geography of Inequities project has successfully drafted and test-run a preliminary iteration of the submission portal and generated geographic data from the inputs. The project is built using *Omeka* – an open-source web publishing platform developed by the Roy Rosenzweig Center for History and New Media, commonly utilized by humanities researchers, archivists, and digital historians. The platform is equally suited to collaborative, participatory research through the usage of web forms and hosted databases. Through the submission portal, users contribute documentation of examples of slave sales uncovered through their own research. Thus far, user submissions have included snippets from local newspapers, sale ledgers, and historical photographs of both auctions and auction sites.

The open-source collection method and the ability for non-technical users to submit documentation of their research to the submission portal requires the careful balancing of ease of access with the requirement of usable data. Additionally, the poses a central issue to the project, *Omeka*’s submission portal balances comprehensive documentation with ease of access, with georeferencing tools that allow users to either directly place a pin on a web map, or to submit a textual description of the location.

This balancing act represents a core challenge in the project design, as the comprehensiveness that is central to the value of a research database is often incompatible with the accessibility necessary for open-source collection. To resolve this tension, the project team sought to carefully define the objectives of this database as one oriented towards data-collection and the public display of information, prioritizing breadth over depth; citations and links to the original source documents are provided for each geo-tagged collection item for researchers who desire a deeper examination into each event. Users are compelled to submit at least a short number of sentences describing their contribution as a minimum for each submission to provide textual context that will be displayed on the pop-up description of mapped items. The focus on breadth over depth, combined with the web map interface, naturally lends itself towards an exploratory mode of user engagement, where the stories of slave sales are told through the user’s navigation through

these spatially linked locations, akin to a tourist being guided through a historical narrative while progressing through the curated halls of a museum.

Using Omeka as the platform for data collection presents three major advantages. Firstly, the platform is familiar to digital historians, easing accessibility and lowering barriers to participation. Secondly, data collected from the submission portal automatically creates a new archival item within the Omeka Collection. In an Omeka database, each item can be assigned tags, description text, images, geo-referenced locations, and other relevant data. These archive items can be accessed outside of the story map as standalone exhibit. Finally, due to the attachment of georeferenced locators, Omeka also allows for easy incorporation of archival items to both Omeka-based web maps and ESRI story maps. Previous work by the authors in areas of gazetteer development and quality control in crowdsourcing will be incorporated as required to improve and validate contributions.

Further, Omeka's usefulness for geography-focused digital humanities education tools has already been demonstrated by Cobb et al. (2019) in their Anatolian Traveller's project, especially as a means for collecting geospatially referenced collection items and visualizing spatial-historical relationships through mapping.

In line with the project's goals of furthering awareness of and educating the public on Virginia's long and complicated history with race, all data will be completely open source. A talented team of researchers have test-driven the submission portal. The project anticipates a mid-spring beta launch to students at George Mason University, followed by a later release to the public. All data collected by the project will be open source, in line with the projects ambition of widespread accessibility and proliferation of the educational material generated by the team.

References

Cobb, P. J., Rogers, J. R., Ford, B., Blasdel, G. P., & Renninger, S., 2019. Mapping Historical Texts in the Classroom: The Anatolian Travelers Project. In: *Cartographic Perspectives*, Vol. 93, pp. 14-33.