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“The Personal Side of Editing the Sutliff Family Papers.”

Poster presentation, Association for Documentary Editing Annual Meeting, July 12, 2013.

Q: You encountered the Sutliff Family Papers while taking a class on historical editing. Was this class at Youngstown State University?

Yes, the course was at Youngstown State University. It was in collaboration with the Sutliff Family Museum located in Warren, Ohio. Under the guidance of Dr. Diane Barnes, the class learned about the fundamentals of editing- specifically digitizing, transcribing and annotating historical documents. As a part of the final project, each student had to edit a few letters from the Sutliff Family Papers collection.

Q: You suggest in your abstract that while scanning and editing the papers as a research assistant for the Antislavery Papers of the Western Reserve Project you gained a personal connection with the people who wrote the letters. Any in particular? Or would you like to elaborate?

As one of the first research assistants to formally work on the project, I have the honor of actually handling the documents. The process of digitizing the letters creates a personal connection with the author, because not only do I get to read the author’s most precious thoughts, but I get to see, feel, and smell the medium in which it was written. Having the opportunity to analyze every detail, every embellishment, and every error with more than one sense helps to quantify the significance of each letter.

With that said, the person I gained a personal connection with was antislavery advocate and Congressman Joshua Giddings. His story is one of passion, determination and the desire to better the human condition in the face of overwhelming opposition. While serving in Washington, Giddings kept a constant correspondence with his close friends and family back on Ohio’s Western Reserve. One of the most revealing correspondences was between Giddings and his law partner Flavel Sutliff. The letters detail confidential and personal thoughts between the two men--ranging from discourses on slavery, to Flavel’s underdeveloped handwriting.

Q: Your masters degree project centers on the religious motivations of abolitionist Joshua Giddings. Do you want to elaborate on that focus? Why was religion important to Giddings's abolitionist project?

My masters degree project has evolved since I first started working on the Sutliff Family Papers. Originally, I wanted to focus on what drove Giddings’s motivation to endorse the antislavery movement. What influenced his moral and philosophical compass? After researching Giddings, I realized those questions were already answered. Through his writings and speeches, it became obvious to me that Giddings was a product of the Second Great Awakening in America. His moral compass and philosophical beliefs were rooted in Christian Evangelicalism—and many scholars have

argued this point. So, instead of researching why Giddings professed his antislavery views, I wanted to research how he implemented those views.

While working on the Sutliff Papers, I stumbled across a series of letters from Giddings during his first year in Congress. This was my opportunity to analyze Giddings's early political motives and understand how he approached opposing slavery in the chambers of the House of Representatives.

Q: Have you completed the project? What did it teach you about historical research and scholarship?

My project will be completed by the beginning of December 2013. For my project, I am going to digitize, transcribe and annotate 4-6 letters from Giddings during his first year in Congress, and put the work on an interactive webpage that interprets Giddings's actions and writings. I am creating a webpage because the Internet is a fantastic medium for making scholarly research more accessible to a larger audience.

The project is giving me the practical skills required to be a documentary editor, including the importance of digitizing, transcribing, annotating, and effectively using an editorial method. By learning the steps and putting them to use, I truly get a sense of what it takes to be an editor and how important it is to scholarly research. After all, documentary editing is the first step in the process of interpreting history.

Q: What was it like to create your first poster and participate in a poster session?

The process of creating a poster was a terrific learning experience, because it was similar to creating a museum exhibit. I had to create a coherent format that flowed well and that the audience could understand. Also, I wanted to develop a proper balance between the text and the photos.

Furthermore, presenting the poster was truly a wonderful experience. It gave me the opportunity to showcase the Sutliff Family Papers, which is a collection that holds major historical significance. Personally, it was fun interacting with other documentary editors because they respect the work I have done. It was a honor to be noticed by the best documentary editors in the country, and I would recommend doing the poster session to any scholar interested.

Q: What is next for you?

In the short term, I would love to join a major editing project after I graduate in December 2013. The process of documentary editing has become an interest and a passion that I am absolutely obsessed with, because it assists me in my journey to understand the past. Ideally, I hope to start on my doctoral work soon, but I am just taking things one step at a time.