

Manhattan College

From the Selected Works of Adam Arenson

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How Research Blogging Improves Urban History

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Available at: https://works.bepress.com/adam_arenson/24/

How Research Blogging —



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What if your sources came to you? And what if you could alert colleagues and enthusiasts about your findings, invite them to your talks, and ask for help, without waiting months for the publication to appear? You can, through a research blog. Here's how.

Setting up a blog is free and easy – with Wordpress.com, Blogger, or Blogspot, for example, you can simply pick a template and start typing. A few snapshots from your research trips (whether from the archives or from the corner store) add life to the site. And a few hundred words—or even a shorter post: blogging rewards brevity—will get you started.

Whether you post every day, every week, or twice a year, you will have hung out your sign, announcing your project, and letting the power of the search engines work for you. This can work if your project is published, almost finished, or just begun. Blog posts can be new thoughts or scraps that got cut out, jewels of great material or haunting, unanswered questions. Next time someone types “antebellum library furnishing and design” or “bank mosaics southern California,” they will find you and your expertise.

And they will. My Home Savings Bank Art blog started with almost nothing: a list of the few banks I knew about, the name of the coordinating artist, Millard Sheets, and a series of requests: Where are

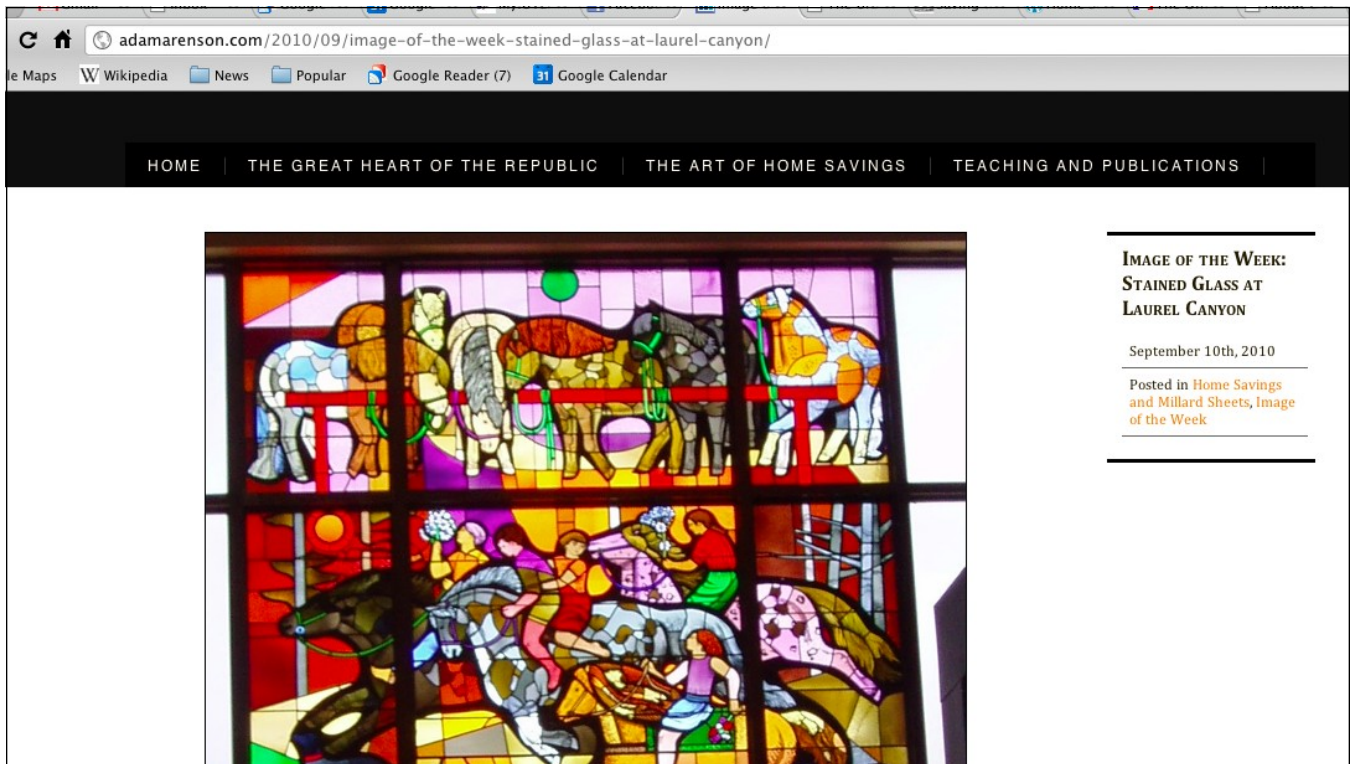
there more of these? Who created them? And how can they be preserved? In the first week, my knowledge about the banks doubled, by tips coming to me; in the two years since, the response on my blog has motivated me to take this “side project” and put it front and center, dedicating additional research time, applying for grants, and prioritizing its completion, all in response to its popularity.

On the blog, I have been contacted by the artists' children, and the once-young studio assistants; I got a tour of bank sites around Claremont from the man who photographed their installation; I heard from archivists who held relevant collections; and I started conversations with historians at all levels, from undergraduates to professors, working on related projects who used the blog to find me. And all of that happened in the gaps of time when I had the project on



The mosaic (completed 1977-1978 by Denis O'Connor from a design by Millard Sheets and Sue Hertel) on the front of the former West Portal location of Home Savings and Loan in San Francisco introduces a Pacific Rim theme.

— Improves Urban History



This screenshot of the Home Savings Bank Art blog shows the stained-glass artwork in Studio City, California, (completed 1967) designed by Sue Hertel for the Millard Sheets Studio.

an “eventually-I’ll-research-this” list, and in less time than it takes for a paper submission to finally be presented at a conference.

In this Internet-search-driven age, a research blog can help any sort of project, but it can especially highlight urban-history research. Urban history attracts public interest, whether from building owners, neighborhood residents, local museums and government officials, or historic-preservation groups. Urban historians can provide context, comparisons, and perspective—and the Internet can provide access to your expertise instantly. Add a Google Alert on your topic and you will see who is quoting you, where your topic is in the news, and where your input would be valuable.

A research blog will further your academic writing, too. Making time to report on your findings will motivate you to write more than those 500 words, saving your big arguments and academic intervention for your manuscript. Writing for a wider public can help hone your prose, bringing forward the telling examples or the vivid, personal stories that illustrate the larger abstract points. The instant feedback will allow your preliminary conclusions to be revised, as the conversation online changes your perspective or arguments. And, when it is time to sell your book, you have a built-in audience.

So start that research blog now. You never know who has been searching for your urban history project.

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