University of Maine

From the SelectedWorks of Desiree Butterfield-Nagy

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Graduate Student Project Provides Digital Access to Civil War Materials

Desiree Butterfield-Nagy

Available at: https://works.bepress.com/desiree_butterfield-nagy/23/
Edward Andrew Kobylarz, a graduate student in history at the University of Maine, has digitized and transcribed a wide selection of documents from the Paul W. Bean Collection held by Raymond H. Fogler Library’s Special Collections Department. Color scans and searchable text allow researchers a new way to access an array of letters that refer to events taking place in Maine and in various locations where soldiers were stationed. A selection of pamphlets and ephemera, including vouchers, a postcard, and receipts, provide an additional glimpse of activities, political opinions, and personal reflections during and after the Civil War.

The project served as a summer internship for Kobylarz, who was able to bring to the project some prior experience in digitizing and transcribing documents. As an undergraduate student at Colorado Mesa University, a class exercise of transcribing one letter from the Revolutionary War sparked a summer project of applying the same skill to a little over a hundred more. When his mother found a book on the Boer War in South Africa in an antique shop, a work that she knew would relate to his course on the British Empire, Kobylarz began scanning pages to preserve the rich images he found there. When looking toward graduate school, and perhaps leaving the state of Colorado where he was born and raised, he was drawn to the work of UMaine Professor Liam Riordan in 17th and 18th century America, and hoped to develop his own research interests in early North American history and issues of race, religion, and social memory.

To begin this particular project, Kobylarz surveyed several Civil War–related collections held by the Special Collections Department. Of those materials, the Bean papers stood out as having potential for a digital collection partly because Bean had typed transcriptions for many items before they were donated in 1972. As Kobylarz went through the materials, he also discovered a compelling story in the letters of Frank Lemont, the youngest officer in the 5th Maine Regiment, wounded the same year that his father died and attempting to assist his mother in settling the estate and managing the farm from a distance. Other letters from women on the homefront included mentions of goings-on in Maine communities, school activities, and deaths, sometimes those of small children. Another memorable letter from an impatient Viola Adams teases that if she doesn’t get a longer letter and a photograph soon, she will haunt the recipient, John L. Ham.

A mayflower and four leaf clover had been pressed and saved with two of the letters. “When generally going through and trying to figure out how to put this together,” Kobylarz noted, “the pressed leaves really stood out as having personal significance.” These items, which seemed to Kobylarz to speak particularly of personal attachment and memory, and are now over 150 years old, were ones he wanted to carefully capture for the digital collection.

While there are many additional documents in the Bean papers and the hope is that additional students might continue the project in the future, the collection currently includes color images and transcribed text for seventy documents. The new Paul W. Bean Digital Collection is available through DigitalCommons@UMaine at http://digitalcommons.library.umaine.edu/paul_bean_papers/.

Desiree Butterfield-Nagy is an Archivist/Special Collections Librarian at the Raymond H. Fogler Library at the University of Maine, Orono. She is on the faculty of UMaine’s Digital Curation certificate program. •