Data Weaving: Bringing together the history of Trinity Episcopal Church and New England through technology

Abstract

Since 1752, Trinity Episcopal Church on the New Haven Green has embraced parishioners from all walks of life and participated in the region's long history. The contents of the church's archives reflect the community's cultural memory. Today, parishioners with connections to the Yale University Library system and New Haven's non-profit sector are implementing new technologies and technical workflows. In this paper, we will use Trinity as a case study to examine the efforts of one parish to incorporate new technologies into their archival practices. We will describe how we are digitally preserving our archival resources, giving parishioners and scholars access to our parish story, and providing church staff and the Vestry with information necessary for running the church today.

Introduction: Trinity Archives, a Background and a Beginning

Trinity Episcopal Church on the Green in New Haven, CT, is a parish with a long history that boasts national firsts and deep influences on local New Haven history. Founded in 1752, Trinity is one of the oldest Episcopal parishs in the United States. It was an active parish during the Revolutionary War and the War of 1812.[1] Its current structure, located on the corner of Temple and Chapel Street, is the first Gothic Revival structure to be built in the United States.[2]

Over the years, the church has attracted parishoners whose influence and wealth have shaped New Haven's life and culture. Many of Trinity's early 20th-Century parishoners have given significant amounts of money to start vital New Haven grant programs.[3] Parishoner support has also contributed to a prestigeous Anglican choir tradition, formalized in the late 19th Century.[4] To this day, many young men, young women, and professional singers from the Yale and New Haven communities continue to participate in Trinity's legacy of excellent choral music through giving, and in some cases, through membership in the parish.

Trinity's long history has been documented through the past 250 years by bound church records, newspaper clippings, photos, and other pieces of loose ephemera, stored mostly in filing cabinents and bookshelves in the church's office as well as the church bell tower. Other documents and artifacts were also housed in parishoners' attics and basements. Lifelong parish members, acquainted with the rich contents of the church's filing cabinets, booksheleves, and bell tower, began an informal dialogue about creating an offical parish archive where the church's cultural memory could be preserved in a thoughtful and professional manner. This dialogue became a formal proposal to the finance committee in 2011.[5] When Trinity's admistration office relocated to a building directly across the street from the church in March of 2012, the archives was given its own room, a donation that covered initial expenses, and a line in the History Ministry budget. Since that time, the Archives Team has begun to catalog the loose contents of the filing cabinets and bookshelves, a total of 25 linear feet to date, making the contents well-organized and more readily available to the parish and the wider New Haven community through digitization and programming.

Digitally Preserving Archival Resources

The current Archives Team includes parishioners who are library professionals, archivists, and skilled volunteers. Together, we have developed a well-defined tagging system and an Excel spreadsheet where we have been entering data / records. The record structure includes an element set based on Dublin Core. Some fields use controlled vocabulary terms, but we also have a notes field for free text.

Though we have a sound basis in our orginal element set, we are still learning how to write documentation that is both technologically sound and easy to follow for potential parish volunteers. The Archives Team has consulted with librarians, digital humanities specialists, archivists, and copyright experts at Yale University Library. These consultations have helped the Trinity Archives determine new guidlines and policies, as we codify our procedures.

In December of 2013, the Archives Team aquired a flatbed scanner and began the process of implementing Omeka, an open source web publishing software designed for small libraries and archives. We chose Omeka over other open source web publishing software because it was designed as both an archival service and a digital display venenue for exhibits and collections.[6] We also chose Omeka because the two primary archival organizations we collaborate with locally, The Riggs Archive (The Catholic Chapel and Center at Yale) and Yale University Library, use it for their own collections. We liked the idea of having local colleagues we could easily contact if we had any problems or questions with Omeka. It would also allow us to easily carry over our current partnerships to the digital world.

So far, we have found the program easy to instal and use. But, the data transferrance from spreadsheet to Omeka's data cloud is going slower than we would wish. Given the small size of our team, and that many of us volunteer our time, we have only a small amount of images since December 2013. This reality is giving the team an opportunity to rethink how we use our precious volunteer time. Over the summer, we will use our monthly meetings to continue the transfer. And, open up archive work to the wider parish in the Fall of 2014 by offering workdays once a month, to do tasks that will further free up the team's time to focus predominantly on data transfer.

The other challange the Archives Team has encountered in using Omeka is the price we must pay for server space. With our current budget, we were only able to do the Gold plan from Omeka.net. This gave us 5 GB of Storage and unlimited themes.[7] 5 GB will allow us to catalog our collection for the next one to two years; but, we soon hope to partner with a local, more cost-effective host who will give us more server space as we continue to expand our digital collection.

We are currently targeting archive contents that will be useful to the current matainance and outreach needs of the parish. Due to our limited server space, the team decided to follow the example set by the Metropolitan New York Library Council, and created an internal collection policy to help our small team prioritize our digitization efforts.[8]

With our efforts over the Summer of 2014, the Archives Team hopes to open our Archives to the public both through Omeka and the Archives' portion of the new church website by late Fall / early Winter of 2014.

Providing Parish and Scholarly Access

As we continue the slow migration process from Excel spreadsheet to Omeka, the Archives Team has not yet allowed online access to the parish and the scholarly community. Archival inquiries are made directly in person, via Facebook, and through the church's website and are addressed by members of the team as needed.

In order to maintain an online presence, the team updates our Facebook page once a month with interesting archive findings and news about upcoming parish history programs. We have also uploaded short audio clips of team member's lectures for those unable to attend the parish history programs.

To maintain a physical presence in the parish, we collaborate with the Events committee of the Trinity's History Ministry. Together we have planned lectures and helped bolster church-wide events that focus on the history of Trinity on the Green with archive information. The Archives Team has provided the History ministry with appropriate handouts and artifacts for these history-inspired events. The most recent being the 250th celebration of the laying of our current church's corner stone this past April. The Archives Team put together an 1814 fashion fact sheet and a recording of a parishioner reading excerpts of the original corner stone homily for the History Ministry. In Fall 2013, the Archives Team sponsored a series of "Trinity Discovery Stories." These were short lectures given by knowledgeable members of the parish community on various historical topics pertaining to the church. Each talk took place on Sunday, after our last service, and lasted for thirty minutes with a brief question session at the end. There were three in total. The Archives Team recorded each of these talks and plans to make them available to the parish, through the church's new website, which is still in the

construction phase and will hopefully go live later this year. As mentioned above, excerpts from these talks can be accessed through the Trinity Archives' Facebook page.

The Archives Team hopes to make the Trinity Archives fully accessible through Omeka in the future. Through Omeka's online display options, we can continue to supplement History Ministry programming with additional information and online exhibits. We also plan to create exhibits of our own that will give a first time online visitor an introduction to our parish's story as well as an understanding of the breadth and depth of our archives.

The Past Informs the Future: Archive Projects and Church operations

The parish has asked the Archives Team to undertake four projects to help with church operations and future parish outreach. These projects do not currently rely on the use of Omeka, but will in the future.

Endowment Evaluation

Last fall, Trinity's Vestry asked the Archives Team to compile a history of monetary giving, using past church records now stored in the Archives, in an effort to evaluate the presence and status of the church's current endowments. A member of the Archives Team, with a background in both banking and non-profit fund management, has worked closely with Trinity's treasurer and clerk to help them better understand how deceased church members, starting as early as the 18th Century, wished for their monetary donations to be used by the church, and, if the church has followed those

wishes. This is a project that will continue well into the next year and will help the Vestry better understand how to use the funds of the current endowment.

Creating an Archive for the Choirs of Trinity

As mentioned in the introduction, Trinity on the Green has a rich Anglican music tradition that has been a well-established part of parish worship since 1885, when the Trinity Choir of Men and Boys was formed. The Trinity Choir of Men and Girls, formed in 2003, and the Parish Choir share in the musical leadership of Trinity's three Sunday services.[9]

The Trinity music staff recently gave the Archives Team the music archive to sort and catalog. This archive spans the past 100 years and includes formal pictures, informal pictures, program bills, church bulletins, and miscellanious ephemera pertaining to the choirs. The Archives Team is working hard to sift through this material, catalog it, and make it available through Omeka to the parish's emerging Choir Alumni Association.

The Buckland Papers

Early last year, the Archives Team discovered a large collection of papers, attributed to Edward Grant Buckland, a Trinity Vestry member and church treasurer during the Great Depression. While serving the church, Buckland was also employed as the Chairman of the New York, New Haven, and Hartford Railroad. The contents of this collection provided the Archives Team with a fascinating look inside Trinity's financial history during The Great Depression. It also provided us with an opportunity for outreach. One of our team members personally got in touch with Buckland's descendants

to let them know what we found. The descendants, amatuer historians themselves, sent our Archives more documents from Buckland's personal life to suppliment our current collection. We plan to send his descendants a digital copy of their ancestor's papers and invite them to spend some time with us at Trinity over the next year.

Archival Outreach

Though Trinity on the Green has a substantial amount of its orginal documentation, other local cultural heritage institutions house items that are a significant part of our church's history. We have already reached out to these organizations, and anothor priority of the Archives Team is to create closer, more formal, ties to these institutions, including: The New Haven Museum, Yale University Library, Yale University Divinity School Archives, and the Connecticut State Library. We plan to create digital links to these various holdings on the Archives' portion of Trinty's new website, and in the process, better connect our church's story with the stories of New Haven and Connecticut.

In the past two years, we already created strong ties with The Riggs' Archives at Saint Thomas More (the Catholic Chapel and Center at Yale) and Yale University Library. Both organizations have been useful resources: The Riggs'Archives at Saint Thomas More is another small archives in the New Haven area. By creating a strong working relationship between the two Archives, both are able to benefit from the mutual sharing of equipment (like a scanner for digitization) and professional consultants. Resources that neither organization would have access to on their own, due to their small budgets.

Yale University librarians have been useful consultants to the Archives Team, helping the team envision and create sound collecting policies, digitization workflows, and copy-right documentation. These individuals are people at the top of their fields who are able to give the Archives Team trustworthy advice.

In Conclusion: Data-weaving and the Future of Parish Outreach

With the help of current information technology, connections and collaboration with other colleauges and parishioners, and our ties to other local New Haven institutions, the members of the Trinity Archives Team are expanding our work—weaving together both parish and community stories in the process. This weaving is both our struggle and strength. Sometimes, a digital conversion project from spreadsheet to cloud will take longer than expected. But, when these connections do work out and our Archives becomes digitized, we are knitted into a rich world of stories, history, and warm relationships between professional web developers, archivists, librarians, and the community. While preserving our past, we are weaving together old documents with new teachnology, creating a new outlet of parish outreach to the present and future New Haven community in the process.

Endnotes

[1] Getlein, Edward J., *Here Will I Dwell: A History of Trinity Church on the Green*, (New Haven, CT: Trinity Church on the Green, 1976), 50-55.

[2] Ibid, 75.

[3] The Buckland Papers, Trinity on the Green Historical Archives.

[4] Owen, Barbara, *Music on the Green: The Organists, Choirmasters, and Organs of Trinity Church New Haven, Connecticut*, (Richmond, VA: Organ Historical Society Press, 2010), 20.

[5] From Trinity on the Green's History Ministry website: http://www.trinitynewhaven.org/Home/History/HistoryMinistry/tabid/260/Default.aspx (Retrieved, April 30, 2014).

[6]"Digital Tools: Zotero and Omeka. *Zotero,* http://www.zotero.org; *Omeka,* http://omeka.org. Projects of the Roy Rosenzweig Center for History and New Media, George Mason University. Reviewed Oct.–Dec. 2010," in *The Journal of American History*, (December 2011), 952.

[7] "Sign Up for a New Account," https://www.omeka.net/signup. (Retrieved April 30, 2014).

[8] Bor Ng, Kwong & Jason Kucksma, eds., *Digitization in the Real World: Lessons Learned from Small and Medium-Sized Digitization Projects*, (New York, NY: Metropolitan New York Library Council, 2010), 562.

[9] "Music Overview," http://www.trinitynewhaven.org/Home/Music/MusicOverview/tabid/233/Default.aspx. (Retrieved April 30, 2014).