[“It is finished” can never be said of us: The New Dickinson Electronic Archives](#)

A REPOSITORY FOR THE STUDY OF RESOURCES RELATED TO EMILY DICKINSON

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http://www.emilydickinson.org/

In the technological fervor of the 1990s, the online archive was the primary site for early digital humanities work, the next stage for librarians and archivists, and the unfamiliar to traditional analog material-driven scholars. According to some, digitization has reignited the canon wars, with the most “prestigious” (sometimes misread as “deserving”) authors being fitted for online outfits. It was in this period that the canon of digital preservation

projects began forming, with some of the earliest being the [William Blake Archive](#) housed at UNC-Chapel Hill, Stephen Railton's [Uncle Tom's Cabin and American Culture](#) (hosted at the University of Virginia) and the [Walt Whitman Archive](#), currently led and edited by Ed Folsom (University of Iowa) and Kenneth Price (University of Nebraska). The Web became a new frontier for many scholars, extending the presence of the now seemingly ubiquitous digital humanities, and providing alternate methods to facilitate research for academics still focused on the text. With this phenomenon came new discussions of textual scholarship and editing practices, an increasing awareness of how encoding was an act of interpretation, and the theorization of the material as it moved from analog to a digital format.

Amidst these discussions was the [Dickinson Electronic Archives](#), a repository for Dickinson's writings and a site for born-digital scholarship directed by Martha Nell Smith at the University of Maryland. The DEA holds encoded images of the manuscripts or transcriptions of Dickinson's writings, including correspondences, and the writings of family members like Susan Dickinson (Emily's sister-in-law). In addition, the DEA has produced critical exhibitions on various topics in Dickinson scholarship. Smith has long been a voice in the digital humanities community, presiding over the DEA since its inception amid the archive-mania of the 1990s, as well as advocating for digital work as being just as research-driven and rigorous as traditional literary scholarship. This is represented by some of the earlier exhibitions from the site, like the born-digital examinations of Emily Dickinson's correspondence which, alongside representations of the manuscripts, seeks to demonstrate how Dickinson's writing, no matter the medium, seemed to come under the influence of her poetic abilities. The DEA was not just a place for the hosting of manuscript images and transcriptions, but also served as an active producer of scholarship and a resource for researchers to find new arguments, theses, as well as teaching tools for Dickinson studies. And impressively, the site has not ceased updating and producing.

It is noteworthy when an online archive goes against what seems to be the expectation of abandonment in the digital sphere and continues to reinvent itself in the face of newer technologies, methods, and ideas. The DEA has been such an example, with its recent redesign, a complete facelift for the archive, accompanied by a feature of a new daguerreotype thought to be of Emily Dickinson. A new image of the poet seems the perfect fit as an introduction to a new look for the archive, but the updated version of the DEA represents more than a simple aesthetic makeover. The new DEA maintains Smith's consciousness of the evolution that scholarship undergoes online, presenting two new exhibitions at the time of this review's composition: "1859 Daguerreotype: Is This Emily Dickinson?" and "Ravished Slates: A Scholarly Exploration of Material Evidence," each of which make use of the possibilities of digital technology, as one would expect of an electronic archive, with photographic slide shows, external links, and even commentary and meditation on the exploration (and contextualization) of physical archives.

But more than just reiterating the practices that Smith extolled in the previous version of the DEA, the new archive features more forward-thinking methods of literary scholarship by attempting to create an active community. The discussion forum section of the DEA was meant to facilitate and "advance the conversation" about the archive's exhibitions, especially the daguerreotype. There is more focus on collaboration in this incarnation of the archive, with an open invitation for essays and responses from the site's patrons, both scholarly and even "more personal and reflective," a seeming invitation to undergraduate or classroom involvement with the site. The DEA is interested in connecting the Dickinson fans of the world; rather than being a one-way source of information for the reader, the inclusion of a space for discussion and collaboration allows for the DEA to become a place where knowledge and critical investigation can be formed in a more overt way. This view of the site is in line with Smith's previous arguments for the viability of digital work as real scholarship, but also for centering the work of humanists on the dialogues they form around particular ideas, and transposing that into a visible online medium.

At this point, however, the discussion has not been as active as it could be. The forum for the "Ravished Slates" exhibition saw no activity other than an introductory post by Smith, though the discussion board for the daguerreotype saw a decent amount of activity, with forty-nine posts (although the last one was made on December 26, 2012). The discussion here was a collection of individuals engaged in analyzing the image, including the owner ("Sam Carlo") of the daguerreotype, and they compared historical notes, suggested methods for inspecting the photograph, and theorized about the popular perception of Dickinson as the somber teenage girl whose portrait is reprinted in anthologies versus this more recently discovered image and its more mature subject. The thread was productive and lively because the archive enables this sort of scholarly discussion, but it would have benefitted from more voices and a longer lifespan to bring one of the largest features of the new DEA to life. With increased visibility, and perhaps more progress on the research of the new daguerreotype, this part of the site could flourish and become what it seems intended to be.

The new DEA is conscious that the old should not totally replace the new, but rather enhance and complicate it. Smith, after all, is a textual scholar and editor, aware of the qualities of the previous version of the DEA she left behind when upgrading to the new version. So that the history of the site is not forgotten, the 1994-2012 edition of the DEA is still viewable and easily found via the newer interface, giving the audience the chance to see where the newer format for the site comes from and the changes it has made, visually but especially content-wise. The content of the older site remains relegated to that section, even the writings of Dickinson, though they will also find a home in new online archives created by [Harvard and Amherst College](#) (borrowing from Smith's XML encoding in the DEA). However, it is uncertain whether those will be migrated and become primary features of the new site, or if readers will need to find them by trekking through the older interface.

With a radical update like the DEA's, we can see how the scholars engaged with this sort of work continue to think about their approach to digital scholarship. There is the temptation to treat online archives like monograph projects: research, write, publish, and leave behind, and the lack of funding for the continuous staff, server, and upkeep can sometimes dictate this decision. But online archives and other such projects require constant attention to remain in the forefront of the humanities' discourse. This is what the DEA attempts to do by implementing, with its new exhibitions, a new ideology behind the way research in the twenty-first century is conducted. As the 1859 daguerreotype shows, information does not remain static, and neither should that which is responsible for holding it. Not only is the archive to be perused and drawn from, but it should invite contribution and discussion if it is to serve researchers' needs.

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