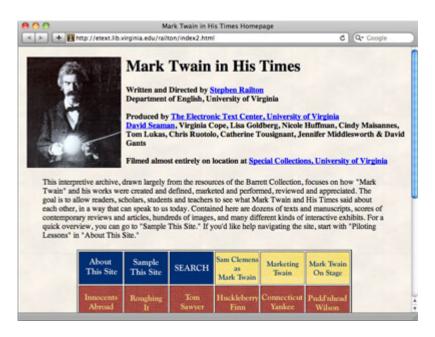# [The Mark Twain Project Online and Mark Twain in His Times](#)
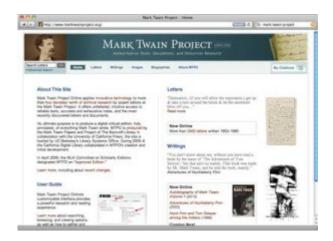

The Common-place Web Library reviews and lists online resources and Websites likely to be of interest to our viewers. Each quarterly issue will feature one or more brief site reviews. The library itself will be an ongoing enterprise with regular new additions and amendments. So we encourage you to check it frequently. At the moment, the library is small, but with your help we expect it to grow rapidly. If you have suggestions for the Web Library, or for site reviews, please forward them to the [Administrative Editor](#).

Few American authors have been as identifiable as Mark Twain, with his all-white suit, push-broom mustache, and unruly hair. A century after his death, many Americans recognize his photograph. However, most people probably do not know that in addition to writing, lecturing, and fashioning himself as a living myth, Twain also dabbled as an inventor of new technologies, eventually securing three patents. In fact, Twain was so keen on science and technology, and especially on the advance of printing technologies, that he sank $300,000 (nearly $7.6 million today) into the Paige typesetting machine, which was to revolutionize the printing industry. But the machine failed to take off, and in 1894 Twain filed for bankruptcy.

It seems fitting, then, that in the most recent chapter of the printing revolution—the Age of Digital Publishing—scholars, documentary editors, and archivists have taken their own innovative approaches to establishing an online presence for all-things-Twain. In the process, two Websites have set a new standard of excellence for digital archives and literary scholarship, essentially taking two important Twain collections out of their academic settings and offering them to the general public. The first, the *Mark Twain Project Online* (MTPO), is the database portion of the *Mark Twain Papers &*

Project [http://bancroft.berkeley.edu/MTP/], a documentary editing venture started in the 1960s at the University of California-Berkeley; and the second, *Mark Twain in His Times*, is an interactive online archive and exhibit digitized from a portion of the University of Virginia's Barrett Collection of American Literature.

The Mark Twain Project Online

According to its "About the Site" section, the *Mark Twain Project Online* is the product of "four decades' worth of archival research" at Berkeley and elsewhere. In time, the efforts of that research, amounting to seventy volumes of *The Works and Papers of Mark Twain* (thirty volumes have been published), will be completely available online. For now, however, the *MTPO* is a good beginning, a functional resource that suggests how indispensable users will find the finished product.

From an aesthetic standpoint, the *MTPO* is very attractive, featuring a user-friendly home page with a two-column interface. Within those columns users will find information about the site and the project, a detailed user guide, and a link ("innovative technology" in the "About This Site" section) to a lengthy "Online Technical Summary" which explains how the creators of the *MTPO* conceived of and realized the site.

The heart of the *MTPO*, however, appears in a horizontal navigation bar at the top of the screen. There, users find links to the various databases maintained by the site, including "Letters" (incoming and outgoing), "Writings," "Images," and "Biographies" (featuring links to nearly seventy biographical sketches of Twain contemporaries who appear in the databases). While the databases are all searchable (and contain helpful searching tips), many of them also feature a left-hand sidebar that allows the user to browse by decade, material format, names, repository, or availability (since only a small, but growing, percentage of Twain's papers are available in full-text or as digital scans).

The breadth of material in the *MTPO* is seemingly limitless, and though the site would be useful for any one with an interest in Twain or in nineteenth-century American literature in general, the potential searching and browsing

combinations could overwhelm even the most seasoned researcher. Fortunately, the design of each database is fairly straightforward and, in fact, seems to encourage cross-database queries.

For example, one could use the "Letters" section to browse through Twain's correspondence from the 1870s (3,622 of the 31,000-plus letters indexed on the site) to discover communications with other writers, and become interested by the literary and cultural views of the critic and novelist William Dean Howells (257 letters in the 1870s, 909 letters total). After reading a few exchanges between Twain and Howells, the user might become eager to learn more about their friendship. Conveniently, the user could visit the "Writings" section to search*The Autobiography of Mark Twain* (a surprise bestseller published by the University of California Press in November 2010) for anecdotes about Howells and other contemporaries.

Mark Twain in His Times

Though no less valuable than the*MTPO*, the University of Virginia's *Mark Twain in His Times*opts for a more exhibit-oriented approach, aimed at "readers, scholars, students, and teachers." Curated by Professor Stephen Railton of the UVA Department of English, the site includes images of manuscripts, contemporary reviews and articles, games (such as a "Memory Builder" game Twain designed to help his children remember the English monarchs), and descriptions of Twain collectibles (including dolls, flour, shoes, and cookbooks).

The layout of the home page is clear and easy to navigate, featuring twelve boxes containing links to mini-exhibits on important aspects of Twain's professional and personal identities. Six of the boxes pertain to Twain's most famous publications, including *Huckleberry Finn* and *Tom Sawyer*. Three of the boxes address other aspects of Twain's life and career (one on Twain the Lecturer, one on the marketing of Twain's books, and another on the divide between Twain's public and private personas). The remaining three boxes are included for navigational purposes. "About the Site" allows the user to learn more about *Mark Twain in His Times* and offers tutorials about how to use the site. "Sample This Site" gives the user a broad idea of what types of information are contained in the archives. "Search" links to not just one

search function, but five. The user can search: 1) the entire site; 2) Twain's works; 3) reviews of his books and lectures; 4) obituaries of Twain; or 5) the texts, reviews, and obituaries together.

These features are significantly supplemented and enhanced by hundreds of well-chosen illustrations. Browsing, the user may find articles about the representation of Jim in *Huckleberry Finn*, supported by the abhorrent cartoons used in the book's earliest editions. One may find reviews of Twain's lectures, replete with photographs and audio from his never-ending circuit tour. Or one might come across an article about the marketing of Twain's books, featuring images of the sales prospectus used by door-to-door salesmen as they pitched *Tom Sawyer* to readers in Abilene and elsewhere.

In designing easy-to-use, comprehensive digital archives on the life and times of Mark Twain, the teams at Berkeley and UVA have provided users with two definitive online resources for all-things-Twain. One of the main reasons the sites are so valuable is that their creators have shown an implicit understanding of the importance of user accessibility, one of the key elements in maintaining successful digital archives. Thus, it seems safe to say that as long as both projects maintain focus on the user, their digital archives will remain vital resources for the abiding legions of Twain fans.

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