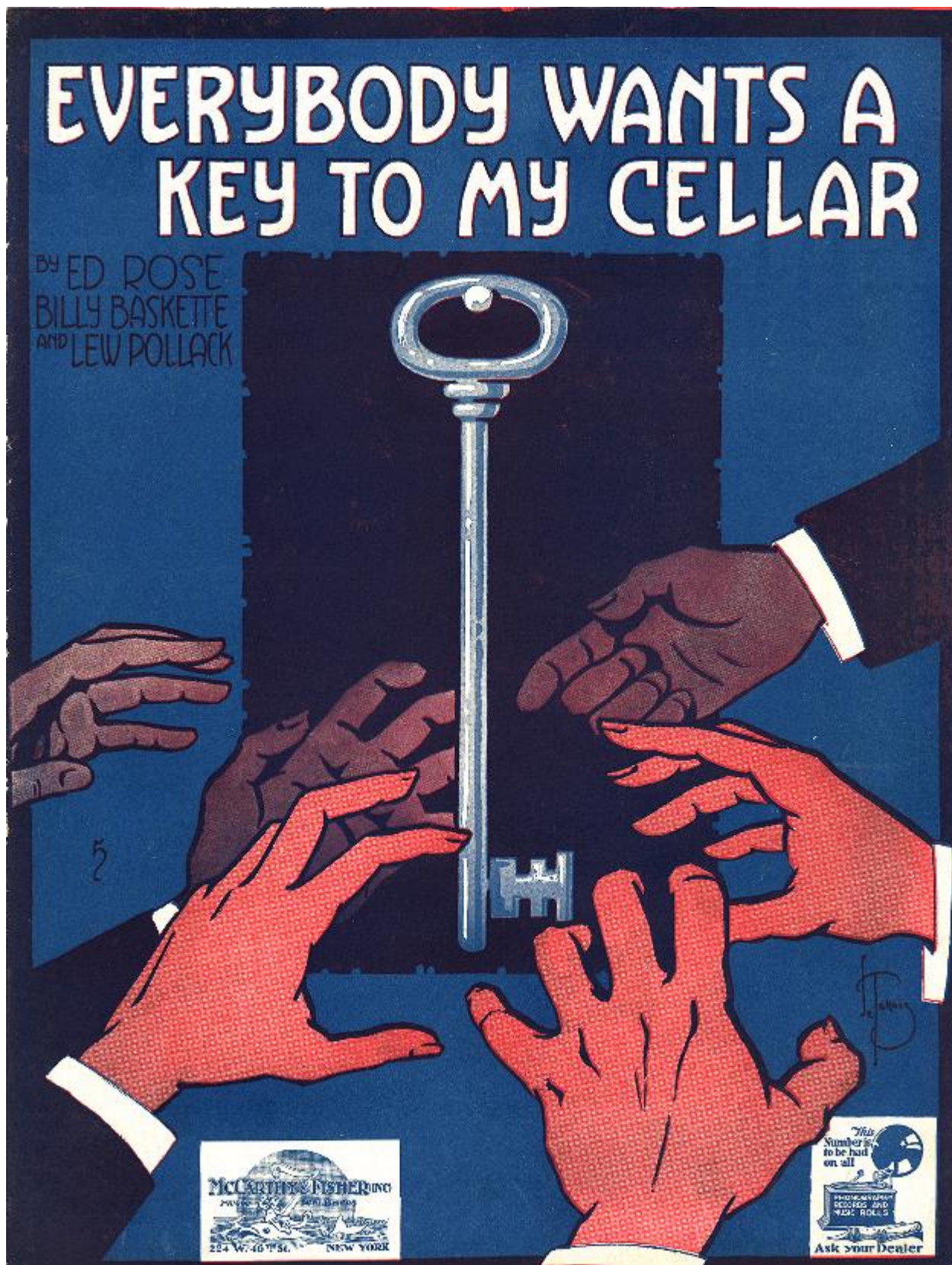


## Consuming History?



Open today's newspaper and another eBay scandal may be breaking. The recent

headlines would scare off any techno-shy historian: "EBay Cancels Art Sale and Suspends Seller." "Stolen Goods Making Way to Internet." "Fencing Schemes Use Online Auction Sites." "F.B.I. Opens Investigation of EBay Bids."

That last one was the clincher—the Feds were involved! Now there was no way I could mention eBay in an academic setting. How could I, a lowly graduate student, admit at a conference that I too have been bitten by the eBay bug? Or tell a departmental search committee that I spend way too much time browsing in eBay's "Collectibles" and "Antiques" categories looking for that one item that will make my dissertation? Probably not a good strategy in an especially tight job market.



The illustrations for this article show items acquired by the author and fellow Ebay treasure-hunters John Hench and Elizabeth O'Leary.

Yet, despite all the bad publicity, I couldn't dampen my eBay enthusiasm. I wanted to shout it among the dank library shelves, whisper it across the reading room table. I am a young and serious historian, and I love eBay! My secret would surely be out soon. How long before my colleagues figure out my username is "mac312," and I have an auction watch list longer than my bibliography?

So, I decided not to panic, and, like any good historian, fell back on the one thing I did learn in graduate school: when in doubt, RESEARCH. There had to be others like me. I surely am not alone. And, thus, I spent the next few weeks in search of other historians equally enchanted by this online auction world. It didn't take long to find them among eBay's more than 16 million registered users. They are everywhere. In every corner of the country. They are curators, hobbyists, librarians, department chairs, distinguished scholars, and graduate students. They rave about eBay and seem surprisingly untroubled by its recent bad press.

Still, while many historians embrace the new technology, others seem more disturbed by its implications. Would artifacts and manuscripts normally destined for archives now end up more readily in private hands? Is eBay driving up prices for antiquarian objects once easily acquired by archival institutions? In short, is eBay a good or bad thing for the teaching and preservation of history? What follows is an eBay balance sheet: a brief and frankly anecdotal look at the pros and cons of the web venue that has sparked so much interest among amateurs and professionals alike.

Only recently have many research libraries begun to realize the potential of the Internet. University and government libraries are rushing headlong into digitization projects that will broadcast archival documents across the Web, making them accessible to the most remote researcher or classroom teacher. But Gretchen Adams, a doctoral candidate at the University of New Hampshire,

remembers how skeptical her colleagues were when she first went online in 1994. "People thought the Internet was all pornography, sports scores, and chat rooms," Adams said. "I was warned many times about getting involved in H-Net," a now popular history listserv network. "I had trouble convincing some of my colleagues of the value of the Web."

**The same people who thought the Internet was limited to our culture's detritus may think eBay is all about peddling Pokemon cards, Hummel figurines, and fake Diebenkorns.**



In many ways, eBay is fighting that battle all over again. The same people who thought the Internet was limited to our culture's detritus may think eBay is all about peddling Pokemon cards, Hummel figurines, and fake Diebenkorns. Adams herself took some convincing when it came to eBay. She was deeply engrossed in a project on the legacy of the Salem witch trials in America when a classmate, Kate Larson, suggested she pull up eBay on her computer screen and plug in a search for items relating to Halloween. "Kate really saw the potential in this ephemera. I went on eBay very half-heartedly," Adams admitted.

But within a few months, Adams had assembled, with eBay's help, a visual map of the commodification of the Salem trials. Salem silver spoons. Salt-and-pepper shakers. Even a State Police convention badge circa 1890 sporting a witch emblem. Discovering when the "merchandising" of Salem began is crucial to her research. And, Adams notes, she "would not have known how far back these tourist items went without eBay." Still, she is quick to add that she has purchased very few of the items she tracked down on eBay. Setting herself apart from a collector, Adams clarifies: "I didn't want a house full of Salem junk. I'm using it for leads and visuals . . . I have no desire to collect this stuff."

Indeed, eBay's association with the world of collectors and collecting may fuel some of the reticence among scholars. A sort of ivory-tower snobbery seems to set in among academics who want to distinguish their interests and pursuits from those of amateur historians and hobbyists. One scholar equated being on eBay with admitting you do genealogy—an analogy that insults eBay users and family historians alike. Another young professor said she had no problem bidding on vintage Fisher Price toys for her toddler but felt "icky and cheesy" after winning an auction for an eighteenth-century family Bible record. When Gretchen Adams mentioned to a colleague that she was going to be interviewed for this piece, the person warned her: "You sure you want to be quoted in that article?"

I, too, have experienced the chill that eBay elicits in some academic circles.

In researching this article, I posted a query about eBay to a well-respected book history Listserv. The posting was firmly rejected by the list owner, who made clear that he did not want to clutter subscribers' e-mail inboxes with anecdotes of the "my experiences on eBay" variety. The list owner ended his reply by emphasizing that the list was a scholarly one, only there to discuss the "history of books." Ironically, once I did post my query to another, more open-minded, list, it became apparent that many of the respondents were using eBay for book history projects.

Like many scholars who use eBay, John Hench was not drawn to the medium for its research potential—at first. He was looking for a good light meter. A photographer friend suggested he check on eBay. "I was astounded to find the lifelike picture of this light meter on the computer screen. I bought one, and it came pretty quickly," said Hench, Vice President for Academic and Public Programs at the American Antiquarian Society in Worcester, Mass.



That was about two years ago. Before long, Hench was trawling eBay for other things. In November 1998, he began amassing a diverse collection of World War II-related items including homefront ephemera and Armed Services Editions of novels and popular magazines. His collection now boasts more than 400 books, magazines, and homefront collectibles, most of them acquired online. Hench is unashamed about his eBay enthusiasm. "I'd not had much luck in used book stores. And you just don't see many of these kinds of items listed in dealers' catalogues," he notes. "This collection simply would not have been possible without eBay."

Professional historians who were already avid collectors pre-eBay are the most unapologetic about their eBay habits and tend to scoff at anyone who would not use the technology to its best advantage. "The difficulty is often finding what you want. So, for someone to say they aren't going to use eBay to buy something they need is like saying you're no longer going to work on Thursdays. It just doesn't make sense," said Terry Belanger, University Professor and Honorary Curator of Special Collections at the University of Virginia.

At first, Belanger's interest in eBay was mainly personal. He collects nineteenth-century Victorian pottery and found on eBay a well of transferware dealers he would normally only find at antique malls. However, Belanger wears a variety of hats at UVa and in one capacity helped undergraduate students assemble an exhibition of Thomas Jefferson and Monticello ephemera in the University's Rotunda Dome Room. They acquired, with Belanger doing the bidding and purchasing, over 250 items on eBay—most costing under \$10. The exhibit included Thomas Jefferson milk bottles, money clips, paper dolls, and pencil tablets; a scale model of a nuclear submarine named for Jefferson; and Monticello letter openers. "Monticello tonic was a real find at \$26. We spent \$52 on a Monticello beer can. That was probably the biggest damage the show

did," Belanger said. Most of the items are now in storage, but Belanger expects before long to put the collection up for sale again with the help of one of the online vendors. "This surely gives loan exhibition a new meaning," Belanger said. "Go into eBay, buy it, then sell it back with enhanced value because it was featured in your exhibition."



Don't get me wrong. All of this eBay cheerleading does not mean we should be uncritical of its faults or unconcerned about the trends it may encourage. Fraud, for example. Six-figure fakes may make headlines, but they aren't the only frauds on eBay. One archivist witnessed bogus Salem trial testimony put up for sale. A museum curator spotted a Maxwell House coffee can classified as "vintage" when it was an obvious reproduction. And eBay's not like the local antique shop. You can't pick up the item, smell it, feel it. Photos are nice, but they can't substitute for the real thing. Some curators say they just don't trust the descriptions offered by sellers. They'd rather not participate than risk being burned.

In their defense, eBay executives say that only a small fraction of the house's auctions go bad. About 5 million items are listed on eBay every day—more than 50 million in the second quarter of 2000 alone. Of those listings, about one in 40,000 results in an insurance claim, according to eBay's spokesman Kevin Pursglove. "The statistics speak for themselves. Chances are you are going to have a positive trading experience," Pursglove said.

Price—alongside authenticity—is another sore spot for eBay skeptics. Yet again, it's not the issue grabbing headlines that is of greatest concern to scholars. When the F.B.I. opened an investigation of shell bidding on eBay, few historians shuddered. Employing or recruiting shells to bid up prices may occur in auctions for the higher-end items like fine art or vintage cars. But it seems an awful lot of trouble for the more measly two-figure sums that many goods of greater interest to scholars command. Yet prices on eBay can reach the sky without the use of shells. Just try bidding against someone you know is an avid collector and your efforts begin to feel futile. Often, resource-starved non-profits just can't afford to compete with an enthusiast's deep pockets.

**. . . whether we like it or not, eBay's made it easier than ever to consume history.**

In this charged, competitive atmosphere, surfing eBay becomes, for many historians, a schizophrenic pursuit. As professionals, we tell ourselves we're pursuing history on eBay. Our participation is simply an extension of our scholarly mission. And what about all the other bidders? They are **consuming** history, in the dual sense of the word: buying it up, and using it up. They are the ones glued to PBS's *Antiques Roadshow*. They are the ones scouring the attic for family heirlooms that might fetch a good price online. And, yes, they are

most undoubtedly the ones who prevented you from acquiring that one item essential to your next book project. With such rhetorical gymnastics, we eBay-addicted scholars work to separate ourselves from eBay's "rabble."



But of course, scholars too, are consumers. Our interests—whether for scholarly or other ends—are encouraging this online buying frenzy as much as collectors' are. We may pursue an auctioned object with an eye toward including it in an exhibition or discussing its significance in an academic journal, rather than displaying it on our parlor shelf. Nonetheless, we also inflate its monetary value.

And, whether we like it or not, eBay's made it easier than ever to consume history. It has opened up the market for historical objects, large and small, and brought with it a dark side. Imagine people prowling public library shelves, county offices, or parish archives for records or books they could turn into quick cash online. It may sound like a stretch, but historians have reported seeing church records that go missing from the local parish mysteriously show up on eBay. And there was a recent case in Anderson County, Tennessee, in which county records were put up for auction on eBay. Luckily, someone alerted the county historian, who "won" the records back. Elizabeth O'Leary, a guest curator at Maymont Foundation, a historic house museum in Richmond, Va., uses eBay to collect images and housewares for an exhibition on domestic life in a Gilded Age mansion. She admits feeling a pang of guilt each time she sees an advertisement on eBay she knows has been torn from an old periodical. "The scholar in me hates that these journals like Harper's have been cannibalized for their ads ... but I just love that I can pull it up and look at it," said O'Leary.

Before we end the historical (hysterical?) hand wringing, there is one more trend worth mentioning: eBay has become a convenient dumping ground for material libraries are eager to toss. Even though the general public is not likely to gasp at this development, it may bring a chill to many in the historical and library professions. In a recent article in the *New Yorker*, novelist Nicholson Baker shined a bright and disturbing light on the long-running, if rarely publicized, tendency of repositories including the British Library and the Library of Congress to discard (or de-accession in library lingo) bound volumes of newspapers that have been microfilmed. Although eBay was not Baker's target, he did mention finding there a 1908 volume of the *Panama City Star & Herald* that had once belonged to the Library of Congress. At about the same time Baker's essay appeared, the Milwaukee Public Library announced it would sell more than 3,000 bound volumes of its British patents collection on eBay to free up yards of needed shelf space. EBay officials say there is little they can do about such uses of their venue. "As long as the sellers are the legal owners of the merchandise, the item can be sold on eBay," explained Pursglove.

All told, the charges lodged against eBay sound grave: peddling fakes,

inflating prices, putting history up for sale, and encouraging the pillaging of library shelves. But the long-term impact of these trends may be as difficult to gauge as the future of the Internet itself. Many historians say they will continue to peruse eBay's offerings despite the obvious dangers of forgeries and high prices. As with any purchase, the best policy is "buyer beware," O'Leary said. And, when it comes to the over-heated collectors' market, is eBay really to blame?



After all, eBay, based in San Jose, Calif., has only been around since 1995, while these trends have been happening for decades or longer. eBay itself is simply a new venue for an old addiction—collecting. Many of the great libraries and research archives in the United States began with a personal passion for owning the past. The Huntington Library, the American Antiquarian Society, even the Library of Congress were built on the foundation of personal collections: those of Henry E. and Arabella D. Huntington, Isaiah Thomas, and Thomas Jefferson, respectively. "Private collectors have been consuming history, in the U.S. at least, for easily 200 years, which has made amassing a public manuscript collection of certain time periods and historical figures a very difficult, and expensive proposition," wrote one curmudgeonly curator by e-mail. "This trend predates eBay, the Antiques Roadshow, the computer, the television ... I think that any hypothesis that postulates that eBay is somehow significantly new, or significantly alters the existing trend is just another inane byproduct of Internet über-hype."

To be sure, collecting is an ancient pursuit. But eBay has changed the landscape of collecting and scholarship in some key ways. It has transformed the way many historians do research. Take, for instance, Priscilla Brewer, associate professor of American Studies at the University of South Florida. Brewer is currently chair of her department and, thus, has found it difficult to get to archives in the Northeast to examine college yearbooks, student scrapbooks, letters, college brochures, and other ephemera for a project on student life at American women's colleges. Because she was "desk bound," she decided to begin sniffing online for material. She is amazed at the success she has had. "The material I'm finding on eBay is similar to antiquarian book shops. If I had the time to go to bookstores all over the world I might have amassed the same amount. But there is a minor revolution in terms of scale," she said. "I check eBay every day from the office. I now consider it part of my research program." Brewer's greatest find, acquired online at an antiquarian book site, is a collection of student letters that had been owned by a book shop in Sydney, Australia.

Never before have scholars had this kind of reach from their homes. And some historians, uninitiated to collecting, have slipped by necessity into this exciting and often addictive pursuit. Indeed, scholars working in less traditional fields of study—in popular culture, for example—find eBay more

valuable than most archival collections. The material they study simply is not found in libraries. Psyche Williams Forson is finishing up a dissertation on African American foodways. She scours eBay for advertisements that “herald the stereotype of ‘chicken loving darkies’” and postcards or objects that depict African Americans in “compromising, bedeviling positions with chicken.” Forson, of the University of Maryland, College Park, said she is even more interested in how the sellers characterize these images as “cute,” “hilarious,” or “wonderful.”

eBay also offers a stash of great teaching tools. Ilana Nash, who teaches courses on youth culture in the American Studies department at Bowling Green State University, has found “real treasures (on eBay) that are quite literally not findable anywhere else.” She uses the items she wins on eBay for her own projects and teaching. “When scholars use eBay to find scarce items which they then incorporate into their work, they are establishing a body of knowledge that will grant historical legitimacy to the objects,” Nash said. “Thanks largely to eBay, there will someday, hopefully, be respected academic discourses in subjects that are currently scorned or severely under-studied.”

A boon for scholars like Brewer and Nash, for curators, eBay’s impact has been mixed. Some say they can’t afford to bid on eBay items and generally do not trust the accuracy of the item descriptions. At the Winterthur Museum, Garden and Library in Delaware, curators adhere to an informal policy to acquire materials only on approval and that is difficult to do on eBay, where sellers may be reluctant to accept returns. Others, such as O’Leary, are more enthusiastic and perhaps more creative about plumbing eBay’s riches. Like Brewer, O’Leary says eBay gives her a broader reach. “Whereas Richmond, Va. materials (today I purchased a liquor merchant’s price list, 1911) are available and inexpensive in distant states, they are almost non-existent in the immediate region,” O’Leary said. Even when she can borrow such items from a local history museum, she added, “reproduction and permission fees far exceed [the cost of] actually acquiring artifacts” on eBay.

Those curators logging the greatest success on eBay tend to be those acquiring artifacts or materials for the last century. At the Minnesota Historical Society, Supervising Curator Patty Dean has used eBay to help develop the museum’s rock & roll and furniture and design collections. Kevin Hearle, a scholar of American literature, has purchased yearbooks and other Steinbeck-related ephemera for the Steinbeck Research Center at San Jose State University. At the Hagley Museum and Library in Wilmington, Delaware, Curator Debra Hughes has found items related to the DuPont Company and acquired artifacts to furnish a 1925-era kitchen.



Does this mean early Americanists should not even bother with eBay? Hardly. It may be harder for us to find the treasures that curators after more modern wares can load up on without much effort, but they are there. I conducted a small, and embarrassingly unscientific, experiment. I gave myself only 15

minutes to cruise eBay's "Antiques & Art" and "Collectibles" categories in search of pre-1850 matter. In less than 10, I produced a handful of "hits" in various price ranges, finds that would surely make some in the fields of early American history salivate. The short list ranged from a mid-eighteenth-century sampler from Pennsylvania (\$1,375) to an 1830 farmer's account book from Massachusetts (\$22). With only a few days left before the end of these auctions, neither of the items had elicited a bid. Now the sampler may be a bit pricey for some historians. It's definitely not in my budget. But others seemed well within reach.

The fact is historians after modern material may have had more success on eBay because they have nowhere else to go. Let's face it. Early Americanists, especially those relying on more traditional sources, have plenty of places to turn to find what they need. Libraries have been collecting this material for years. And microform collections bring a lot of the most heavily used items to those working in smaller or more remote libraries. So early Americanists may believe that they don't need to plumb eBay to round out their bibliographies. Those scholars doing material culture and modern American studies are more likely to invest the time and money required on eBay because there are fewer research avenues open to them. Yet, some early Americanists realize the dangers of that assumption, as one curator commented. "I am concerned that we might be missing out on some worthwhile manuscripts," he said.

Despite such concerns expressed by some history pros, others stubbornly cling to more traditional methods of acquiring the past. Besides not wanting to their waste their time and money, some scholars claim that the online auction site is peddling the same merchandise you'd see in dealers' catalogues. The dealers have just moved their markets online, right? Well, not exactly. EBay may be a great resource for avid collectors, but it has also opened up a world of antiquarian goods that may have never found their way into an archive or museum before now. Traditionally, archival or special collections librarians rely on dealers' catalogues to pinpoint material for acquisition. Oftentimes, a library will develop a close relationship with a dealer who will keep them apprized of items of particular interest. While eBay has not eliminated these modes of acquisition, it has enabled curators to explore other purchasing avenues never before open to them.



For the first time, curators such as Russell L. Martin III of the American Antiquarian Society are able to purchase items from individuals who are not professional dealers. Martin has acquired over 30 items on eBay for AAS, admittedly a fraction of the "hundreds of titles" the library acquires every year through more conventional means. Still, Martin relishes the opportunity to locate small treasures online. He recently won a run of a German-language periodical called *Americanische Schul-Zeitung* published in Louisville, Ky., in the 1870s. Another of Martin's most cherished eBay finds is an 1877 pamphlet entitled "Meal Feeding and Animal Digestion: Addresses Delivered Before the

Annual Meeting of the Pennsylvania State Dairyman's Association at Meadville, Pa., 1875." "More than likely, this pamphlet would never have graced a book-dealer's catalogue, but it is a previously unrecorded edition ... Who should care? AAS, of course," said Martin, curator of newspapers and periodicals.

"eBay, at present at least, strikes me as a venue for the 'little guy'," Martin notes. "The great majority of my eBay transactions have been with individuals, not dealers." Thus the former owner of the AAS's *Americanische Schul-Zeitung* was not a professional antiquarian bookseller, but a man from Indiana who was also selling a "Cat Tail Cookie Jar," some "Cobalt Blue Swirl Salad Plates, and a "Dove on a Nest Milk Glass." As Martin summed up, "eBay is a national garage sale." As such, Martin admits, eBay will never replace the AAS's reliance on booksellers' catalogues, quotes, and expertise. But eBay does provide an additional and valuable tool.

A lifelong stamp collector as well as a professional historian, Dane Claussen hopes the embrace of eBay among many scholars may encourage historians to seek out private collectors for research assistance. Claussen thinks academics tend to be too arrogant or reticent when it comes to seeking out the assistance of layfolk. "I wonder if some scholars ... either a) doubt that nonscholars are/can be experts on subjects of interest to scholars and/or b) are threatened by the fact that some nonscholars really do know more about certain subjects than scholars do," said Claussen, an assistant professor of communications and mass media at Southwest Missouri State University. "Scholars need to start doing their own detective work and seek out collectors and ask to see their collections."

Because eBay provides e-mail addresses for all its sellers and bidders, it has never been easier to reach out to collectors who may share a historical interest. While some historians complain that they cannot compete with collectors' passions and deep pockets, others realize that they don't necessarily need to own an item to use it for their research. E-mail the winning bidder. She might invite you to view her collection or perhaps even borrow an item or two. You might find someone like Frank Scaglione, who retired early from AT&T Bell Labs to take up his hobby full time. He's a collector-turned-dealer on eBay and trades in everything from Revolutionary War documents to dinosaur eggs. Or Tim Franklin, who quit a 9-to-5 job to sell on eBay. "The neat thing about [eBay] is that I have the entire world looking in my little window to see what I have for sale, whereas if I had a shop here in Bloomsburg, PA, I'd be starving," Franklin said. Instead, Franklin now counts on the business of a nation full of addicts . . . like me.

I was introduced to eBay in the summer of 1999 by a retired manuscripts curator who heard me deliver a paper at the Berkshire Women's History Conference. The paper was on nineteenth-century commercial pocket diaries, a chunk of my dissertation on the evolution of the daily diary in America. Before my talk, I apologized to the small crowd because I didn't have a pocket diary to pass around the audience. They would have to content themselves with dimly-lit

slides. The curator, already an eBay convert, suggested later by e-mail that I might find a few diaries on eBay.



Well, he was right. EBay opened up a world of diaries I never knew existed. Like more traditional archives, eBay had its share of Civil War diaries, travel journals, and farmers' almanacs. But with a quick click of the mouse I uncovered diary formats it would have taken me years to assemble from more conventional collections. Dozens of Boy Scout diaries. A host of diaries published by the Wanamaker Department Store. Diary almanacs hawking everything from liver pills to horse feed. Even the Spice Girls had their own diary, published annually and geared—I can only imagine—toward teenage girls. I certainly wasn't going to turn up that gem at the local historical society. More than two dozen diaries later, the only thing I probably need now is a good 12-step program. And the "A-ha" moments continue even though I've been browsing eBay regularly for more than a year. I continually find new diaries or diary-related innovations that reinvigorate my undertaking and will push me forward to, hopefully, a rousing finish.

All this said, my enthusiasm for the dot.com auction medium has not erased my doubts about its acceptance in the academy as a venerable research tool, nor eliminated some of the more disturbing trends cited above. But it is a good feeling to know I am not alone. EBay appears to hold great promise for me and many others in the business of doing history, and I'd say more about it if I had time. Got an auction ending in 5 minutes. EBay is calling.

### **Further Reading:**

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Molly McCarthy is completing her dissertation on the history of the daily diary in America at Brandeis University. Before returning to graduate school, McCarthy was a journalist and member of the Newsday reporting team awarded the

1997 Pulitzer Prize for its coverage of the TWA 800 crash.