Poems



Vanishing Point

In the great valley between Hwando and Yazoo City,
laborers tend opium poppies and cotton,
Dying of yellow fever. But on the heights, there is a calm
incense of roasting pork, a delicate mist of flesh
Lovers stroll through to the platform at cliff's edge
Where they gaze down like diligent scholars
At a landscape falsified precisely for their pleasure.
From there, a faint pentatonic music skirls
Up from the valley floor, where we overseers hone
blue notes from invisible instruments stroked
With the abrasive bow of coal smoke and acid rain.

A Reconciliation

And they were happy in the end, if by *happiness*
you mean *everything was forgotten*.
Time had been deeply layered in their bodies
like the ruins of Troy in a hill. Now the innocent
Cattle waged war on milkweed in a pasture,
while a formation of geese wedged harmlessly

Into the evening air. What had they fought about
endless years ago? Time clarifies nothing,
But buttresses of worked stone dissolve in its weightlessness.
Nothing now to defend except their bodies,
Which survived, growing lighter and more translucent
and more useless. In the night sky, stars convened
In images of gods and humans, watching for a sign
of any remnant of passion, a recognition of blood
Transcendence: old Helen fucking ruined Menelaus.

Statement of Poetic Research

The Skandalon of History

"Vanishing Point" and "Reconciliation" are from a forthcoming book of poems called *Skandalon* (LSU Press, fall 2014), a word that has in English only a ghostly existence in the realm of theology, where it means, as *The Oxford English Dictionary* puts it, "A stumbling-block, cause of offence, scandal"—scandal here meant in the ordinary sense, but also in a larger sense: anything that distracts a soul from salvation is both a stumbling-block and a scandal. So, for a heroin addict, heroin is a skandalon; for a potential saint, the stamp collection over which she obsesses, to the detriment of devotion, might be one. Dante's Paolo and Francesca each are a skandalon to the other. In Christian terms, the entire fallen world is a skandalon—a distraction, and a metaphysical scandal—and so all of human history is one.

Obviously the Greek word *skandalon* is the root of the common English word *scandal.* In ancient Greek, *skandalon* denotes the trigger of a trap, and so all the meanings dissolved in the word by Christian theology, as is so often the case, are metaphorical. The little lever in a mousetrap where one puts the cheese is a skandalon: the cheese distracts the mouse, and scandalously draws it on to destruction. So the politician's attractive aide might be like the lever in the trap; so, to Everyman, the whole "fallen" world, all of history.

Unpacking this odd word (and there is much more in it to unpack than present space permits) led me, if not to the writing of a book, at least to a means of giving form to one, which may be said to be the same thing. Unpacking a word's etymology is of course a mode of historicizing, and language being, as Emerson famously put it, "fossil poetry," I have found myself, over many decades of practice, often following the thread of etymology through the maze of my own perception of the historical.

Meditating on the maze in which we are fated to wander—take it out of the Christian frame and the consequences of the skandalon are neither better nor worse; it shifts its reference perhaps to the existential, and the trap is the void—has allowed me a fruitful process of casting and recasting the net of

process. In “Vanishing Point,” the history of privilege is scandalous; in “Reconciliation,” the act of reconciliation in the face of fact is.

After the conquest of Troy, Helen and Menelaus returned home and resumed their marriage, “history” tells us. How is that possible? In Euripides’s play *Helen*, the two are united for eternity on the Isle of the Blessed. Why? And for the rest of their lives—for the rest of eternity—what on earth (for earth is the ultimate skandalon) must they have talked about?

In the narrative of the fate of these two, what is “history” exactly? Helen and Menelaus are—even on the Isle of the Blessed—the ghosts of a scandal. “Beware of Greeks bearing gifts,” we are told, but we may equally want to beware of gifts bearing Greeks. Every “fact” of history is—as historians *and* poets learn to their sorrow—potentially a skandalon.

T.R. Hummer has appeared widely in literary journals such as *The New Yorker*,*Harper’s*, *Atlantic Monthly*, and *Paris Review*. His honors include a Guggenheim Fellowship, inclusion in the 1995 edition of *Best American Poetry*, and two Pushcart Prizes. His latest book is *Ephemeron* (2011). He teaches at Arizona State University.

“I have begun again to read as I was taught.”



1. Tracts Trace Fissure

I pick up a fragile, aging photo, asking, “Who is this?”

“No idea.”

Names slip out of records or protected—

No completely legible family Bibles or cornerstones engraved. Conversion over bloodline, family branches missing or far flung. The fissure passed down: this Tract Society—

Question to begin: when no known ancestors of mine were, previous to the 20th century, here present, how do I connect to American history, to the imaginary of the American nation?

One answer might be found by de-spatializing the “here,” by looking to Seventh-day Adventism, the 19th century American religion adopted by my Estonian family while in Estonia, my newly arrived German immigrant great-grandmother in New York City, and my first-generation American grandfather on my mother’s side, one of two brothers who converted and subsequently stopped passing on any stories of their blood families—all “non-believers.” The only thing I ever heard about his mother, my great-grandmother, is that she was not an upstanding woman: “She had many different men over to her Brooklyn house.” I have never known her name.

Fig. 1

2. *The Autobiography of Elder Joseph Bates*

Catalogued in the American Antiquarian Society library, I discover this book written by an early Adventist missionary.

Am I imagining that my grandmother spoke about her mother meeting him once in person?

While trying to find, I fear my fiction grows.

Search: Adventism, American. Find: a new religion, new country, new self. An emphasis on text and religious scholarship (memory of the shelves of Bible concordances to the right of the fireplace) when none of these ancestors had ever been to college.

Religious literacy as religious liberty as cultural rebirth and upward

mobility. Lines drawn away from the old country away from family toward a church family toward:

The Word.


Fig. 2

The missionary movement: to spread The Word.

Did this Elder Bates make contact with my Estonian grandfather? No, the dates are wrong. But when did the Adventists go to Europe?

Failed search: No matches found for Baltics, Baltic, Estonia, Magi. The shame of my autobiographical obsession. Why do I want to find evidence of this first contact?

If I could read the record of the capture of my grandfather’s imagination, his conversion, could I then write my way into complete release?


Fig. 3

3. A New Body

There is an image of my mother as a baby printed up on a postcard and distributed to raise church funds: with every pound she grew, members would pledge more money.

Physical growth converts to church growth and the spread of The Word is the work, is how to be a good Adventist and healthy.

Bodies of belief are bodies valued: therefore the later devastation of her polio.

She survives, graduates eighth grade pictured under a banner reading, “The Value of Hard Work” and visibly changed: face drawn, weary for her age. It is The Depression and school equals work, a promise to plug the dam of uncertainty, of dis-ease.

“My father would not touch me in the hospital” she once told me because she had never figured out that her own parents were always also afraid.

Known or sensed: anxiety. A root, a subtext. Against which, prayer—


Fig.4

4. Scanning

I have already written about Adventism.

In *Threads* I wrote about my Estonian grandfather's dangerous religiosity during the World War II German and Russian occupations of Estonia. The story is that he had to leave Estonia because he was an outspoken Adventist minister.

I also wrote "pillow of no tradition—resting there" which is autobiographical: I am firmly apostate. I risked the connection, slipping out of that world of The Word—

Now, I am spit out: it is nearly impossible for me to read *The Autobiography of Elder Bates*. I download the file, open it several times, and note my faith in the rhythm of the double click, my readiness to learn. But I read nothing and make no decision to continue to try.

Fig. 5

Instead, I find myself searching this scanned 19th century book for torn edges, errant spots on blank pages, places where a librarian has made marks, and places where those marks have bled through.

Available for the entire virtual world to read, I already know the history of the disappointment of the advent movement and even so, my ancestors believed. In light of this, I cleave to the illegible.

Fig. 6

5. In a Shaking Hand

In my grandmother's belongings, I find a love letter from my grandfather, written two days before he passed away, written in a shaking hand—

Of his devotion to her and to the church and how surely they will see each other again in His kingdom.

Holding this letter, I think of bindings—imprinting—shared vocabularies—

Fig. 7

What hope holds me to my family of origin, and to my beloved, the family I now make? What if there is no sacred vocabulary? No beyond?

Or, how much is my "pillow of no tradition" a pillow still marked—


Fig.8

Perhaps I wear this religion’s imprint in ghostly reverse—something seeping through, as when I listen to my landlord’s Friday prayer meetings in the basement below my apartment, not able to hear the exact words, but familiar with the cadence of the voice, praying, wondering if he is also—


Fig. 9

6. “I have begun to pray again.”

The above sentence is from section one of a manuscript entitled *GIFT*. This sentence marks my entrance into an inquiry that does not privilege the secular and mock the sacred.

This writing is the second section: “I have begun again to read as I was taught.” Subtitle: “Literacy, religion, and textual practice.”

This is what I call a gift reading practice from my childhood:

I would open my Bible to any passage of the Psalms and read. A feeling that this chance operation was divinely directed to give me a message I needed then, at that moment.

Or I would read the Psalms when I had a stomachache. The pains would go away. I would read Psalm 27 when I was nervous about school. I prayed before every test and attributed my good grades to divine guidance.

This is now the image that I need to read:


Fig. 10

I trace this remnant mark, find pleasure in its edge and shape, its pixilated borders, its mistake. Sitting at my desk, I almost recoil at the sensuality of this mark and its electricity: my now pulsing body, a transfer has occurred.

7. Prophetess

Ellen Gould White, the prophetess of this religion I was born into, had an immense literary output yet she only had three years of formal schooling. She wrote at night, from 1 or 2 am until dawn, when she felt she was most susceptible to hearing and recording the word of god.

It is rumored that she plagiarized Milton.

She was hit in the head with a rock as a little girl and after that she had visions. And so she received messages from god or Milton.

She predicted god would come in 1844 and this did not happen.

How do I read poetry now when as a child I was taught that it was our human purpose to wait and disappointment only renews resolve?

I grew up and out of the religion and I developed a disdain for her, Ellen White—the religion felt, to me, an absolute folly.


Fig. 11

8. Shame

If this is my first lesson in reading and authorship, text and purpose, then how to enter literature in college, cleanly, while secretly stained.

Whether I belong—now an author—this, persisting—


Fig. 12

9. Communities of Desire

Now, telling the story of these practices about which I rarely speak: how faith is gradually entering back into my literacy. Why engage remembering?

One answer: I want to make a connection from a sacred past to an experimental literature in the present. No one expected me to be a poet and write as I do, but it is not such a far flung idea, given that:

Literacy situated in religion is—

An emphasis on study. Growing up, we had lesson “quarterlies” for weekly study. My parents asked me, nearly every day, “Did you study your lesson?”

An emphasis on memorization and therefore sounds. Early memories of star stickers affixed to a chart listing the Bible verses I had memorized correctly. Always in the King James Version, the sound of the poetry of the beginnings of modern English.

There are titles like *The Desire of the Ages*, *The Great Controversy*, *Steps to Christ*: books by Ellen Gould White filled our home. Spiritual handbooks. The word “desire.” How to. The time of the end, “the time of trouble,” approaching. Fear and courage mediated by text.


Fig. 13

10. To instill anxiety and then relieve this tension is to read.

A lesson in scripture: contraction and release. Worry and faith.

To believe that signs are everywhere—"wonders and signs"—and a thin veil separates spirit and world, thin line between prayer and breath.

List everything you are thankful for, quickly, under your breath in case the end of times comes and you are found ungrateful.


Fig. 14

To skim is an acceptable way to read and "seek and ye shall find" because a book is always unbound, aglow, alive, and my mother told me to never put anything on top of my Bible.

To read while making marks: underline, highlight, margin notes. My childhood Bibles are full of these.

My grandfather marked up several Bibles. There are notebooks of his sermons in three languages: illegible marks made legible because of context. The message was always the same on any side of the Atlantic, in any language.

11. Reading the Remnant

That religious belief and religious tracts and texts will draw people together and pull them apart.


Fig. 15

Idea of remnant or outsider: we, "a remnant people," who will be saved, who may be fringe.

A son or daughter might be on the edge of the fabric or ripped from their family for their righteousness or for their sinning.

How, a continent away from America, one side of my family converts to this American religion leads to my father picking my mother, also an Adventist in his new country his new city.

At mid-20th century, when most Adventists were white, religion trumps ethnicity

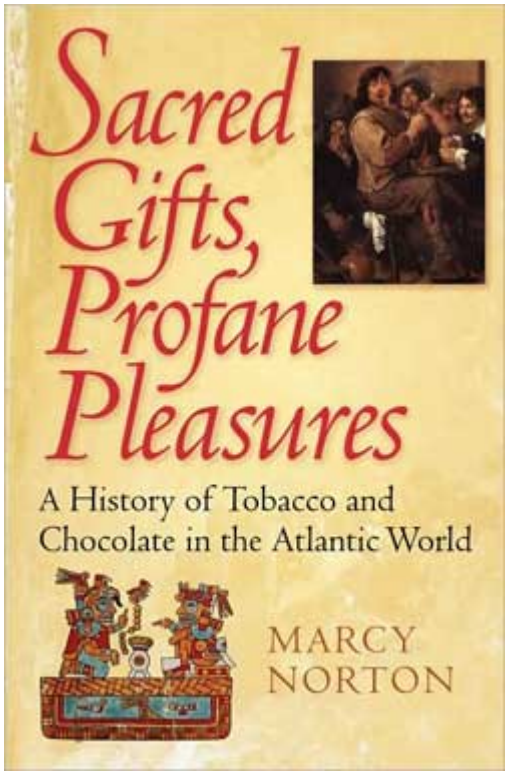
and the difference between native/refugee. All are together, called the same, “the remnant.”

Yet the individual breath and body is always a potential wedge in what is broadcast from the pulpit. A micro-remnant, even if momentarily, making the smallest utterance. Reading, listening for this divisibility—the desire for invention, the desire for belonging—is this my poetics, inadvertently gifted to me by family who took this American religion and read themselves into earthly and heavenly citizenship?

This article originally appeared in issue 12.4 (July, 2012).

Jill Magi’s text/image, poetry/prose hybrid works include *SLOT* (2011), *Cadastral Map* (2011), *Torchwood* (2008), and *Threads* (2007). Two recent collaborations can be found on-line at Drunken Boat and The Michigan Quarterly Review. She was a resident artist at the Textile Arts Center in Brooklyn, a Lower Manhattan Cultural Council writer-in-residence, and is currently a recipient of an arts grant from the city of Chicago. Jill will start a post as visiting writer in the MFA program at Columbia College Chicago this fall.

Smoke on the Water



Europeans embraced tobacco’s healing properties, just as the Aztec did, and the consumption of chocolate in European culture “simultaneously served to fortify social bonds and underscore, or even confer, distinction”

Beyond Biddle



It turns out that historians’ inconsistent chronology had not actually been “wrong”; it was incomplete.

Poetry Column Introduction



Why are so many twenty-first-century poets weaving American history into their process and product?

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



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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.

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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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A Century of Lawmaking For a New Nation: U.S. Congressional Documents and Debates 1774-1875



Gone are the days of poring over microfilm for weeks to find data relevant to particular research interests. With this sleek Website, a few pointed searches can unveil hundreds of pertinent published documents for scholars interested in various topics related to early American history.

The Bethlehem Digital History Project



The Website provides a taste of the abundant repository of sources available at the various Bethlehem archives.

Examination Days: The New York African Free School Collection



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.

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https://www.nyhistory.org/web/africanfreeschool/. Site content developed by Anna Mae Duane and Thomas Thurston. Website developed by Columbia University Digital Knowledge Ventures. Reviewed November 2011 to January 2012.

In recent years, there has been a sharp increase in scholarly studies about the history of childhood. In 2003, for example, the *Encyclopedia of Children and Childhood in History and Society* (edited by Paula Fass) was published and included over 400 articles about issues pertaining to the history of children. Moreover, in 2008, the Johns Hopkins University began to publish the *Journal of the History of Childhood and Youth* to share new academic research about the history of children. Examining the history of childhood can be tremendously challenging, however. As leading historian of childhood Peter Stearns has pointed out, children rarely leave written records or speak for themselves.

In an effort to address the challenges of finding primary sources by and about children, a Website hosted by the New-York Historical Society showcases a treasure trove of school records created by black children in nineteenth-century Manhattan. *Examination Days: The New York African Free School Collection* is a beautifully designed site that provides digitized documents from New York City's African Free School.

The history of New York's African Free School is a fascinating one and reveals much about the experiences of African American children. White abolitionists of the New York Manumission Society founded the first African Free School in 1787 to teach children subjects like reading, arithmetic, grammar, geography, and lessons in morality. The white founders of the school had a complex relationship with the black students. Whites claimed that it was their responsibility to rescue the children from lives of primitive culture, vice, and immorality. In spite of this paternalistic bent, however, African American students and their parents embraced education, hoping that schooling would improve the future lives of black children.

Examination Days: The New York African Free School Collection contains four types of material: digitized images of students' schoolwork, a historical overview of the African Free School, biographical sketches of black leaders who graduated from the school, and two classroom guides. The digitized images come from one of the four volumes of African Free School documents housed at the New-York Historical Society, the *Penmanship and Drawing Studies, 1816-26*, Volume 4. Choosing to digitize the schoolwork images seems like a wise choice

given that they provide insights into the experiences of black children themselves. The Website does not showcase the other three volumes of archival material, which primarily contain meeting minutes, reports of visiting committees, and public addresses. Until now, the four volumes of material from the African Free Schools have only been available for use within the New-York Historical Society manuscript collection.

The Website is simply elegant. Developed by the Columbia University Digital Knowledge Ventures (recently reorganized as the Center for Digital Research and Scholarship), the Website is extremely easy to navigate. Users can view thumbnail images of the primary documents, which have been meticulously prepared and organized. Once a document has been selected, a larger image of the original appears along with a description of the document and a transcript. Moreover, visitors can limit their search to specific genres of schoolwork, including cartography, literary work, or mathematics.

In addition to including these digitized documents, the Website also includes a thorough historical overview of the school, including a timeline of black history in New York City and an interactive map of black New York. This contextual information helps visitors to understand the racial climate in the city when the school opened.

The Website also contains biographical sketches of prominent graduates from the school, including controversial activist Henry Highland Garnet as well as Shakespearean actor Ira Aldridge. The site also provides a biography of Charles Andrews, the white schoolmaster who was dismissed for his support of colonization. Through these short biographies, the Website reveals the historical controversies over the goals and curriculum of the African Free School.

The materials on the site are useful for both researchers and secondary teachers. The site contains two classroom guides for use with students in grades 9-12. The lesson plans are extremely thorough and include primary documents from the Website as well as clearly articulated learning activities. The lesson plans could also be used in a variety of courses, including American History, English Literature, or African American History.

Examination Days: The New York African Free School Collection should be considered a model Website for showcasing archival material for both researchers interested in the history of children and K-12 classroom use.

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The Mark Twain Project Online and Mark Twain in His Times



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.