Smithsonian Transcription Center Review

Reviewed by Katherine Herrick, University of Missouri

Preserving archives has always been a battle against time. The delicate cursive penmanship found in historical collections of letters and the ink-stamped correspondences punched out on typewriters inevitably fade. It can take years for archivists to collect, appraise, arrange, describe, and digitize these documents, yet even after all that work, access can still be a challenge. While digitization is a great way to make materials available online, it does not automatically make them searchable. This is where projects such as the Smithsonian Transcription Center come in to (literally) rewrite history.

The Transcription Center formed in 2013 with the mission "to engage the public in making our collections more accessible."[1] The project team consists of crowdsourced volunteers who transcribe the contents of various digitized collections.[2] The Transcription Center does not clearly state its selection process for which projects are included, but there is a variety of materials from different museum and archival holdings that cover numerous subjects and themes. After nine years of tedious work, the Transcription Center's volunteers have successfully deciphered more than one million pages of handwritten letters, greeting cards, personal research notes, audio files, and various other documents in need of preservation and access.[3]

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[1] Smithsonian, "About: What Is the Transcription Center?" Smithsonian Transcription Center, last modified 2022, https://transcription.si.edu/about.

[2] Smithsonian, "Home," Smithsonian Transcription Center, last modified 2022, https://transcription.si.edu/.

[3] Smithsonian Transcription Center (TranscribeSI), "After 9 years of hard work by digital #volunpeers, we've officially surpassed #1MillionTranscribed pages of @Smithsonian collections! This means wider access, improved readability, and expanded museum search results for researchers worldwide," Twitter, March 7, 2022, https://twitter.com/transcribesi?lang=en.

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    Anacostia Community Museum Archives

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    Archives of American Gardens

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    National Museum of African American History and Culture

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    African American History

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    Civil War Era

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    Field Book Project

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    Mysteries of the Universe

    Native American and Indigenous History

    Women's History

    World Cultures

Figure 1: Users can browse collections available for transcription by institution or theme.

The Transcription Center makes it easy for volunteers to get involved; transcribers do not have to create an account or share any personal information to get started, although you can sign up for an account if you would like to track your individual contributions or help review and finalize pages. The website also has a page dedicated to general instructions for transcribing, including several examples demonstrating how to address formatting challenges that might appear in handwritten materials. These include crossed out lines, words inserted using a caret symbol, spelling mistakes, and so on.[4] The general instructions for beginners are thoughtful and thorough, and the bottom of the page directs experienced volunteers to an advanced guide that dives into more complex formatting issues.

After reviewing the instructions, I began exploring the projects in progress, and I was extremely impressed by the different features the Transcription Center provides; while I have volunteered for transcription projects before, I have never used transcription tools as sophisticated as these. For example, in other projects, volunteers simply type what they see into a text box and leave that information there for others to edit; that is the extent of the work. The Transcription Center still uses this same basic idea—to "type what you see," as the instruction page says—but it also provides additional information to help volunteers assess what proportion of the collection has been completed, see what pages still need attention, and tell whether another volunteer is currently working on a page. The transcription process is also separated into color-coded stages, notifying volunteers when a page still needs to be transcribed, when the transcription is complete but needs review, and when a page has been both transcribed and reviewed. These stages set a natural beginning, middle, and end for each page, allowing the work to reach a point when it is considered finished. When a page is finished, it gets locked, which is a useful feature that helps prevent volunteers from accidentally reworking pages that have already been completed.

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[4] Smithsonian, "General Instructions for Transcription and Review," Smithsonian Transcription Center, last modified 2022, https://transcription.si.edu/instructions.
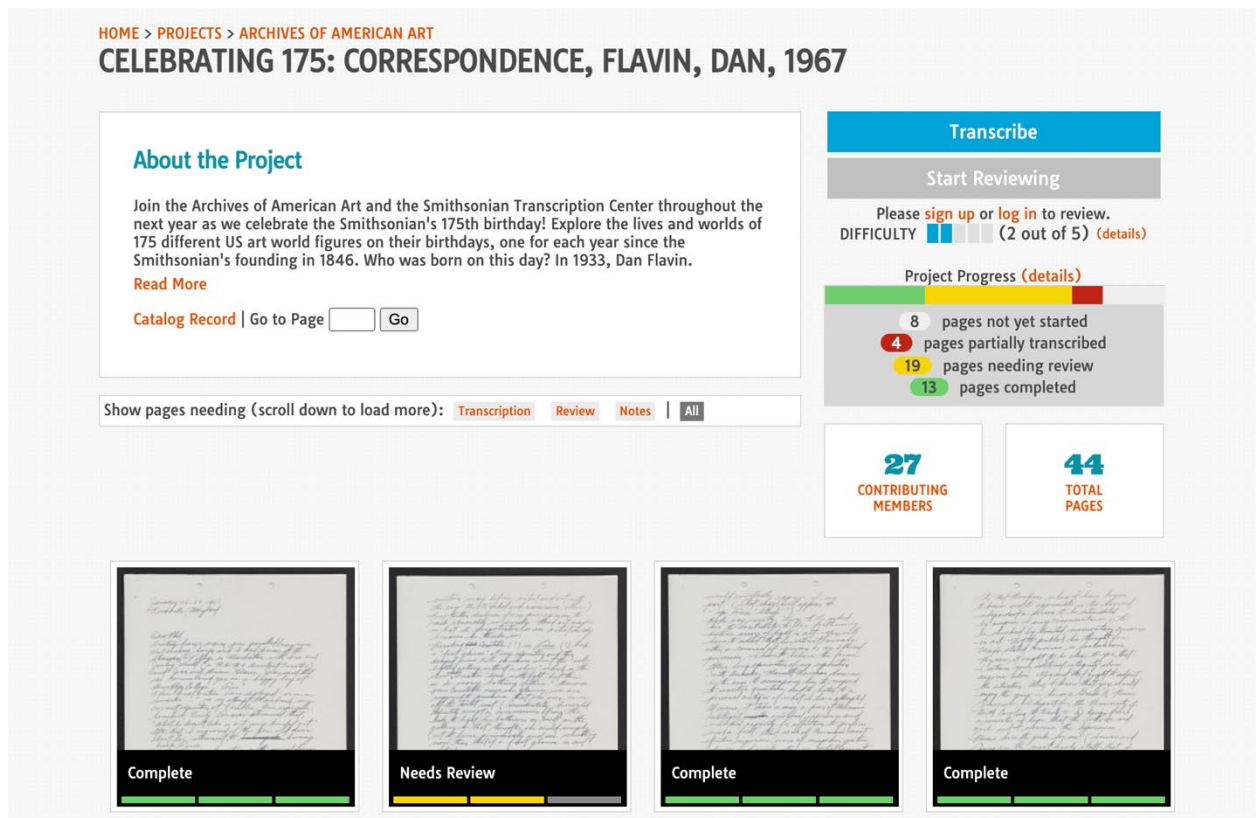
Figure 2: Information about the status of each project is included at the top of the page. Volunteers can view the difficulty level of the transcriptions, the number of pages in progress or completed, and the total number of pages and individual contributors.

While some of these flashier features are not necessarily required for a transcription project to be successful, I did feel like having this extra information was fantastic for keeping volunteers motivated. From a volunteer's perspective, clearly seeing at the top of your screen what percentage of the entire collection has been transcribed, how many individual pages are finished, and how many other volunteers have contributed helps makes the project feel like a team effort, even if the volunteers working together have never met. It also allows users to get constant updates on their progress, making even the biggest projects with hundreds of pages feel much more manageable and less intimidating to complete.

HOME > PROJECTS > FREEDMEN'S BUREAU > REGISTERS AND LETTERS RECEIVED BY THE COMMISSIONER, LETTERS RECEIVED, ENTERED IN REGISTER 13, B, JULY–DEC. 1868

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Figure 3: After adding to the transcription in the text box, volunteers can leave notes for the next contributor, then answer a simple math equation to save any changes.

In my opinion, keeping volunteers motived is key for transcription projects. The process of transcribing materials is extremely time consuming and takes patience. Despite the guideline "type what you see," which makes the work sound simple and easy, it isn't. In practice, transcription is often complicated and messy. However, the Transcription Center has likely been so successful due to the inclusion of small, thoughtful details to help volunteers track progress and feel like they are moving toward creating a final product that will eventually get used. The Smithsonian staff is also available to help answer volunteers' questions via email.

Access and use are why archivists do the work they do, so ensuring volunteers approach projects with the same goals in mind is important. Ironically, I was reminded of this as I was reading a letter from one of the collections called "Celebrating 175: Reginal Marsh, Correspondence, War Art Unit, 1943."[5] On page 3 of 57, George Biddle, the writer of one letter, said, "[The work] can be roughly divided into two phases: the rapid accumulation of data, notes, photographs, sketches and impressions at the scene of action; and secondly, the rendering or working up of this material into a more permanent form." Of course, this quote referred to creating artwork in a time of war, but I found this line exceptionally fitting for the transcription project itself. It reminded me that even while documents

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[5] Smithsonian, "Celebrating 175: Reginal Marsh, Correspondence, War Art Unit, 1943," Smithsonian Transcription Center, last modified 2022, https://transcription.si.edu/transcribe/44803/AAA-marsregi00003-000085.

in need of preservation continue to pile up, there is still hope for processing these collections and making them usable if archivists can successfully recruit and retain volunteers to help complete this important work, just as the Smithsonian Transcription Center appears to be doing.
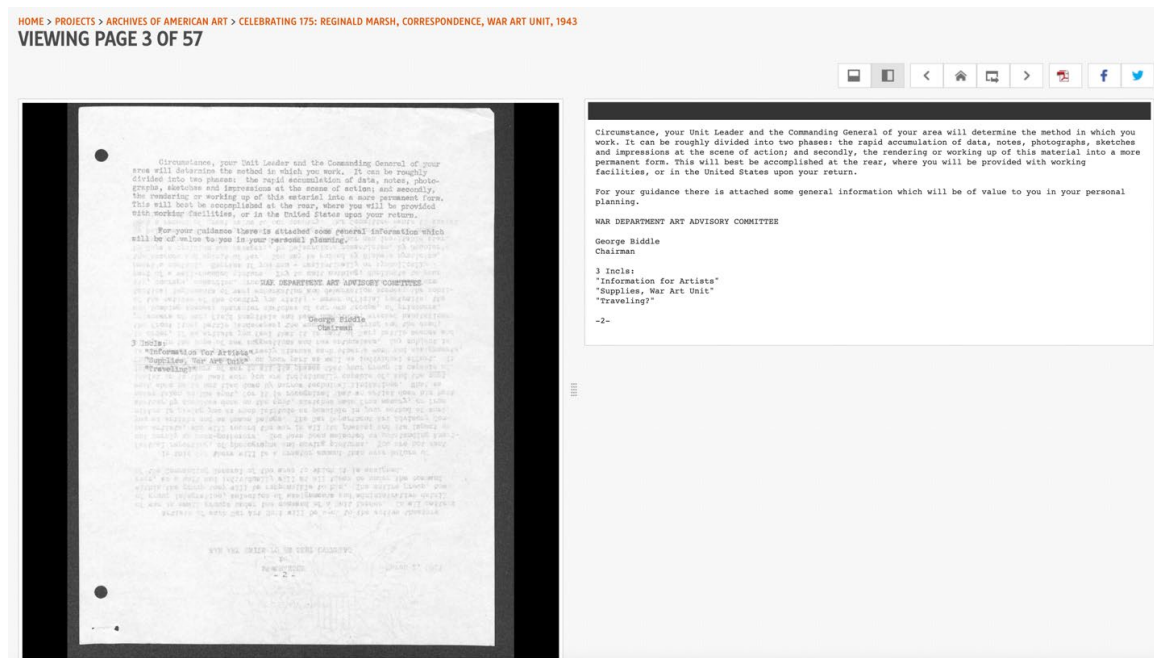

Figure 4: Screenshot of George Biddle's letter from the project "Celebrating 175: Reginal Marsh, Correspondence, War Art Unit, 1943."