Mapping Layers and Archives Discovery Systems

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> **Abstract:** This research is still in the literature review stage but I have narrowed the focus from the abstract, as presented this past summer at the SAA Research Forum. Its purpose is to determine the extent to which extent geographic referencing, or geocoding, and associated mapping layers could prove useful to certain archives patrons groups, either as standalone web exhibits, or associated with online archival resource discovery systems. Typically, place based information about records is presented in a purely textual way in archival description applications. Geographic names are commonly standardized and identified in archival catalogues alongside other access points. At present, there are some relatively well known tools such as Historypin that that take advantage of mapping layers to provide access to or exhibit visual resources such as photographs. My initial hypothesis was that these sites take advantage of a latent interest on the part of at least some archives patrons in searching based on places.

Problem Statement

The problems are twofold, albeit closely related: 1) are there archives patron groups that want map and place based online access to a broad range of archival resources? and 2) to what extent would archivists would place a high priority on, and be comfortable with, such innovations? Presumably, archivists would place a higher value on geocoding and mapping layers, if they knew significant numbers of their patrons would benefit.

Methodology

The methodology thus far has entailed a review of any existing literature on the topics. Later, it will entail the circulation of surveys to archivists and their patrons, possibly followed upon by targeted focus groups and/or interviews. I am developing the survey questions, and hope to release one or more surveys this winter. This research report focuses on the review of literature thus far. This has focused on archives and library journals, conference papers and institutional and other website documentation.

Tentative Findings

The literature consists primarily of case studies of work in progress or recently completed projects. Some of these point to the importance of place based access to archival resources. For example, a 2011 paper from the United Kingdom outlines an initiative at their National Archives to gather and standardize place based information for England and Wales. This initiative gathered some evidence of the importance of geography in information seeking. In 2009, an archives' in-house study found that 20% of 3000 queries to its catalogue were place based[i].

Similarly, the rationale for the National Archives of Australia's *Discovering* [formerly Mapping] *our Anzacs* site, which provides map based access to World War One service records, was the assumption, probably based on informal input, that a "spatial pathway into ... [these]... records would make sense for

local communities where, in many cases, a World War I memorial is central to the town and the community".[ii]

Other studies reinforce the importance of place based information and mapping layers as one of a set of options to improve access. For instance, a 2012 paper outlines the development of the Library of Congress/National Digital Information and Infrastructure Preservation (NDIIP) application Viewshare and how it was used to improve access to the Fulton Street Trade Card Collection[iii]. The Fulton Street exhibit site provides map-based access to a digitized collection of local business advertisements from a major street in Brooklyn, New York. It is easy to imagine how this might be applied to other digital collections that are clearly place based, such as maps, postcards, photographs and certain textual records.

There are some issues arising from this literature that must be taken into account. Firstly, mapping layers may be seen as part of a much larger development in the "visualization" of cultural, including archival, resources. Many available software products provide more functionality than georeferencing and map making. For example, Viewshare offers the ability to visualize archival collections in other ways such as timelines and tag clouds[iv].

Secondly, geocoding and mapping archives are not simply one activity but rather a series of at least 3 interconnected activities, the first two of which are quite labour intensive. These are: 1) standardizing georeferences (e.g. the latitude and longitude of a place) and/or place names *over time*, 2) embedding and encoding these georeferences in archival descriptive records and 3) installation of mapping layers on archives catalogues or sites. Progress has been made in standards and techniques for geocoding (e.g. inclusion of geographic coordinates in the new EAD release) and this is a requirement for the development of mapping layers. Challenges in implementing georeferencing relate to the presence of historic place name data. Adding mapping layers is quite feasible, as long as a geographic coordinates or place names are present in record. Finally, it has become clear that there is as yet no one tool, rather many locally developed and open source tools, not necessarily associated with one institution or consortium. Products such as Viewshare, Historypin, Google Maps API or Open Layers can be used, but their sophistication and comprehensiveness varies.

Further research is required before firm conclusions can be made as to whether or not the momentum for place based access to, and innovative map visualization of, archival resources can overcome the significant technical and resource challenges that are present.

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i Clough, Paul, Jiayu Tang, Mark M. Hall, and Amy Warner. 2011. "Linking Archival Data to Location: A Case Study at the UK National Archives." *Aslib Proceedings: New Information Perspectives* 63 (2/3): 127-147. doi:10.1108/00012531111135628

ii *Mapping our Anzacs* archived website. https://web.archive.org/web/20140626100807/http://mappingouranzacs.naa.gov.au/about.aspx.

iii Bailey, Jefferson and Trevor Owens. 2012. "From Records to Data with Viewshare: An Argument, an Interface, A Design." *Bulletin of the American Society for Information Science and Technology (Online)* 38 (4): 41-44.

iv ibid.