FUTURE FOUNDATIONS: MAPPING THE PAST

Building the Greater Philadelphia GeoHistory Network

Reflections on Day 1
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I am in fact not going to try to summarize what happened yesterday but rather comment on it.

The questions we in PACSCL started with a few years ago in our strategic planning exercises were how to increase the utility of our collections in the Age of Google, how to extend their reach to current and new audiences, and how to open them to modes of discovery made available by the web. Among PACSCL members a number of digital projects were under way and we tried to think about how to pull them together in a coherent way under a "Philadelphia identity." We applied for a planning grant in order to continue experimentation and to give us occasion for thinking about ways to further build on our own base, notably the work done by City Records Dept. and Athenaeum.

The purposes of this symposium, then, were to

1. Bring together experts to help us test and probe our thinking, our assumptions, and our nascent goals.
2. Use the occasion to provide a medium in which those interested in GIS might grow their community of interest.

We heard panelists on various uses to which they put GIS: government uses, academic uses in social sciences and humanities, in research & teaching, student projects, etc. We also heard from "our locals" – Athenaeum and the City Records Department -- to give a flavor of the base from which we're working. I was struck by Diana Sinton's display of a table of data and then a map of the same data and by her observation that we can't see patterns until data is thus graphically arrayed.

A few themes, points for further work:

In our local case, we need to define the scope and content of resources to digitize, our audience or audiences, and the purposes for which we might address those audiences.

Decisions on such matters will determine both the data we work with and the levels of access we will need to offer (e.g., city government staff in their daily work, researchers, teachers, commercial interests, enthusiasts). We also need to address questions of design and configuration as well as of data preservation and archiving.

Several other questions for PACSCL as we proceed with planning for the GeoHistory Network:

1. Outreach. We here today are the choir; we in PACSCL need to talk to many more potential members of the congregation before we know what we're doing. We need to consult with others in the GIS community about best practices; we need to look at other metropolitan or national projects.

2. Can we use this project as a catalyst for collecting future history? We recognize that our history in Philadelphia doesn't end in 1800; we begin with old archives but need to archive new things (late 20th and early 21st century) in new formats and from various sources. Can we use this system as a means for doing this, for encouraging the creation of new archives?

3. How can we best handle the cross-sectoral mix of audiences, knowledge bases, and purposes that will come to bear in this project? PACSCL has a diverse group of members already (size, staff, scope). When we add to this mix everything else-- schools, government, tourism, and so on--we're creating a particularly yeasty mix, but a potentially ungainly environment in which to find common purposes. The payoff is finding links and determining common purposes that would shape a larger and more interesting body of material for future use, larger and more interesting than our archival institutions have been accustomed to collecting.

4. How do we create technical and staffing structures to make a go of this, given our disparate collections, staffing levels, resources?

5. More generally, given the cross-sectoral interests GIS has, can we in this room find a way for GIS communities nationally (government and civic, commercial, archival, academic, technical) to interact on the model of this symposium, that is, in a geographically more comprehensive version of this meeting? Resources for development of the local Network are scattered among different departments of PACSCL, non-PACSCL institutions, and other professional domains of research and practice. How do we discover and take advantage of these resources (how do we find out about something in city government, for example, that will help us at Haverford College figure out how to teach history better)? At a national level, given the different domains involved and the dispersion of their interests, might the national GIS community look for some way to share research and practice more than in the ways we now do by referring each other to various meetings and issues of journals? I might suggest that we think about a national meeting, convened perhaps in large part by invitation, perhaps under the auspices of the Digital Library Federation or Coalition for Networked Information and perhaps

with funding from Mellon, to increase the community that has developed in this meeting and in others like it.

The mention of the Digital Library Federation gives me a segue to my introduction of David Seaman…..