



Building the Greater Philadelphia GeoHistory Network

**Saturday, December 3, 2005 Next Steps Session
Transcript**

David Moltke-Hansen, President, The Historical Society and chair of PACSCL board: First, Joan will offer some suggestions on data building blocks and goals; next, Walt will talk about some of the technology challenges and needs; then Bruce will talk about some of the processes for network development; and I'll finally raise some questions about direction.

Joan Decker, Commissioner of Records, City of Philadelphia: What I'd like to do is give you some ideas about the data and direction that the Records Department will be proceeding with. Those of you who were here this morning heard Robert's presentation on the photo archives application. As he mentioned, the City Archives has approximately two million photos. We will be continuing to convert those into digital images that will be mounted and incorporated into that application. That's probably first and foremost of the items on our plat.

I extend an open invitation for anyone else who is interested in using this infrastructure; it is open. We are not in a position to fund conversion, but the infrastructure is there and we would be able to do whatever we can. One of the questions that came up yesterday was would we accept anything beyond the boundaries of Philadelphia and we most certainly would, so that's an open invitation to anyone that thinks they have something in their collections that they would like to see added to their infrastructure.

I would also like to mention that this symposium and PACSCL have been wonderful opportunities for me to participate as a representative of the City. As a result of a lot of this and some of the applications that we have been developing, there is a little buzz that's beginning to grow. The Fairmount Park Commission, for example, contacted me this past week with interest in getting together and talking about some of the items that they have in their collection. For those of you who stay attuned, the Fairmount Park Interpretive Water Works is another application that certainly is under way, and we would welcome an opportunity to coordinate our efforts with them. We've also had interest from the Water Department, which also has an extensive collection of photos.

One of the other applications is the mapping application, the internet parcel explorer. This application is credit card enabled. The building of this infrastructure has been costly;

the conversion of the parcel maps along has cost in excess of \$3 million. That is no small sum, and we need to demonstrate that we can generate some revenue to allow us to proceed with future work.

You heard David mention that there is interest in more Civil War information, and the city Streets Department, which has a lot of survey data that goes back to at least the 1700s as well as some land documents, are very interested in participating. I will be organizing a meeting with Streets and City Planning Commission, who also has a lot of information and relevant maps from this time frame. That's something we want to focus in on and incorporate into our mapping coverage. That will also contribute to enriching the Civil War collection of data we hope to offer.

(Without needing to elaborate, let me just say that any of the applications that I have mentioned, and data and collections that we are able to develop, will be incorporated into the [hand-held] Culture Browser.)

A couple of the other applications that the Records Department has been working on and will continue to work on over the next two years have been mentioned in my talk yesterday. The Records Department serves as the county recorder of deeds and in that capacity we have many land records, such as deeds, mortgages – we have some documents signed by Benjamin Franklin – we have deeds dating back to the 1600s. We have been doing a backfile conversion. We have a modern automated imaging system, which is up and running. It helps us to do our internal processing but also that information is available on the internet – again, that also is credit-card enabled. We have data currently back to 1976, which will display not only a searchable index of names and address information but also a full image of every page of documents back to 1976. We are currently working on converting some of the data from the 50s and 60s, all of the land records, since the service copies (not the permanent copies, in safe storage) are deteriorating, as well as images of deeds dating back almost to the 1600s. What we don't complete this year we will certainly complete next year. In addition to the land record collection, we are in the process of converting the birth, death, marriage, and naturalization records. We have a collection – not even through all these years – but generally speaking, from about 1840s through to 1915. In 1916, the state department of health started collecting these vital statistics. Like the land records, they are on microfilm. We will be scanning those in. Our focus is to get as much information out on the internet as possible as quickly as possible. We had to make a decision as to how fully we could index the data. It won't be completely indexed when it's initially deployed on the internet, but it's a whole lot easier to use than microfilm. We plan a very simple index that will allow one to go through years and then the beginning initials of the last names.

We are going after a lot of the low-hanging fruit. We have the infrastructure out there, so in the short term that's what we're looking for: what can we do to get this out there in a related way? Part of using the data building blocks is to say that part of our vision is to have all this information indexed and available online, available in the culture browser. It would be very exciting to go to a spot, look at some of the buildings that have existed during the past, look at some of the photos that have come from that archive from that

particular location, be able to look up the land records by name or an address, by who owned the properties, by who mortgaged the properties, and to allow to search birth, death, marriage and naturalization papers for the individuals who lived there. It's a way to organize and combine information into a very interesting search system.

Anybody out there who has any data and an interest, you are welcome to use the infrastructure that we have built. We are happy to participate and coordinate our efforts with yours, and we look forward to that.

One of the other initiatives that has been helpful—V. Chapman-Smith has been instrumental in re-introducing National History Day here in Philadelphia. This is a wonderful way to use a theme to help us to coordinate the information that we have in our respective collections. One of the dangers is to have a lot of disjointed information there, so I think it is very important for us to work together and to provide some sort of coordinated effort and content that we can work on with this low-hanging fruit as quickly as possible.

A couple of other points:

As part of the vision, one of the exciting things is to coordinate not only the records and the maps but the other items in our collections, and to do this using a lot of the multimedia that is at our disposal. One of the points that came up yesterday from Amy is “how do we incorporate into a website some of the richness of the organizational knowledge in the heads of the archivists and the staff members in our institutions, and how do we convey that?” At the City Archives, we have begun doing videotapes – our archivist is taking a stroll down our aisles, describing the collections. It's a wonderful way to get together a very quick cataloging inventory of collections and to give it a personal touch with some background and context.

We've been working with the Atwater-Kent Museum on a series on how Philly works. Atwater-Kent has a number of objects, and it would be good to incorporate three-dimensional media of objects as vehix.com does with cars – to allow students and interested users the opportunity to view an object, rotate it, spin it around, turn it upside down, explore textures. It's a great way to get children involved with historical collections. This is another avenue that we can pursue and coordinate our collections in many different ways, making use of many types of technology that are out there today.

Partnerships are very important. We have partnerships with PACSCL and with individual PACSCL member institutions. We're looking forward, on an infrastructure level, to perhaps working with the University of Pennsylvania's cartographic modeling lab as we grow this collection and, in a distributed model, begin to establish clusters of related collections, information and media. Certainly we're going to think about a different infrastructure and we're looking forward to working with the University of Pennsylvania on that.

Funding is very important, and one of the things that we can do is work together as we apply for grants to help one another with letters of support, to convey how important and useful this work can be to our respective organization. I do ask you to be willing to step forward and help us along with that.

Walter Rice, R&R Consulting/The Athenaeum of Philadelphia: This has been a time for me to do little talking and a lot of listening, and I'm going to be very short.

In terms of technology, I'm realizing that it's a lot less about technology and a lot more about being able to conceive, to think, to figure out how to approach these issues. Everything I hear technology-wise I think yeah, we could build that. But thinking of how to represent an item, a place that changes in name and time and space – in size and boundaries – how do you conceptually wrap your mind around that? That's where I think the difficulties come. So, looking at our challenges of metadata, of representing time and space, of figuring out how to deal with uncertainty, looking at addresses or time periods that may be very vague, looking at change over time, and looking at user interface in particular, I think the technology is sufficient to build many of the ideas that I'm hearing. All it takes is time and money.

But none of that will happen unless we figure out how to approach these things conceptually. So I'm not going to comment extensively on any of this except that I very much appreciated what I've been hearing from the tables around here. History is not my field. I'm a "this is what we want: build it" type of guy. So hearing how you think about this and how you approach it has been very helpful. You'll hear more from me on this when we write up our reports on this symposium.

Bruce Laverty, Gladys Brooks Curator of Architecture, The Athenaeum of Philadelphia and project director, Greater Philadelphia GeoHistory Network Pilot Project: If I can, I would like to just add a little bit to what Joan said about datasets. What we've done so far: we've talked about historical maps and content and what is available. As of today, there are 200 atlas plates; the 1895 Bromley; the 1888 based map from the Athenaeum's collections that have been scanned and are in digital format. There are 200 Hexamer & Locher atlases that are scanned and georeferenced, courtesy of the Free Library; and 200 plates from the land use maps of 1942 and 1962. That's a great start. By the time we submit our final report to the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation in the spring, we will have scanned an additional 1,500 plates from the Hexamer general surveys, which the Free Library map department again has consented to allow us to use in this growing project. We'll have 2,100 plates of geographic information that will be available.

We've also done a quick calculation of available atlas plates in the public domain for Philadelphia County. There are 22,000, so there's plenty of low hanging fruit remaining.

On to process and protocols. In terms of process, I keep hearing the word Network. This is the first meeting I've ever been involved in that did not involve the U.S. Postal Service. I questioned whether this could be pulled together electronically, but it has worked remarkably well. Even with the wonders of electronic communication, though, nothing

compares to the face to face conversations that we've had around the table, so I think one thing that we can take away from this conference is the importance of maintaining both the electronic network but also perhaps setting up a formal schedule of GIS meetings – perhaps once a year, for those who could do it. So the people to people “show and tell” is so important in catching up with what's going on in our various organizations.

The other part of process is the whole issue of review, and the review of what is going on and what's been happening. I keep hearing the term “clearinghouse” being used. While we don't want the Greater Philadelphia GeoHistory Network to be only a clearinghouse of information, of scholars using and applying GIS technology to historical questions, I think we have heard that we definitely do want to be able to have some sort of accessible repository of that information. In this way, it can be made available to us as we grow the GIS but also so that it can be maintained for perpetuity.

In terms of protocols, I learned a wonderful word that I'm going to have trouble working into everyday conversation: “disambiguity.” We seem to have come to a common agreement that it's necessary to have a gazetteer of nomenclature for placenames; we owe a debt of gratitude to Jefferson Moak for his years and years of effort in the pre-computer age, for compiling the list of street name change in Philadelphia and then keeping that list alive through generations of software and computers and then generous enough to make it available to us. It's a wonderful foundation we can start with. I also think that having a gazetteer and system of nomenclature for features, as Lex Berman pointed out, is also going to be very important.

Lastly, we talked about the importance of having standards. Whenever you get catalogers or metadata engineers together and you talk about standards, suddenly things slow down significantly. I think that one of the dangers we have to worry about is not letting that slow us down to stopping. Rather than focusing on the items of a standard that we disagree on, we need to concentrate our efforts on the items that we do agree on and build from that. We know that we all have different approaches, needs, and constituencies, but we need to cooperate with one another and identify what our shared needs.

This has been very informative for me; I'm very excited about what I've seen and heard here this weekend, and I look forward to going forward.

David Moltke-Hansen: I want to talk about vision as challenges and direction rather than simply the glorious horizon. It strikes me that we've been hearing that Philadelphia and PACSCL need to think about going at least in two directions and do so in multi-relational ways. In those multidirectional relationships, bidirectionality, are in a sense at once dialogic and dialectic, and we need to think of them in these ways. We're at once bringing the world to Philadelphia, but we're also bringing Philadelphia to the world. I don't mean only things about Philadelphia. The resources here for China, or for many other parts of the world, are extraordinary. While it makes sense for us, given the beginnings we've had and the extraordinary work at the City and the Athenaeum, to concentrate on what we can give about Philadelphia history. We obviously are denying ourselves and a variety of potential users a lot if we're not also thinking about the wider

array of offerings that we may have. Our network may be a point of concentration for work on Philadelphia. It also needs to be a way to communicate beyond the “Philadelphia-interested” the resources for the wider world.

We’re building on existing data but many of the GIS users, who don’t know what know what data are available to them, we’ve heard. And that’s part of the challenge of the coordination effort that we’ve talked about. At the same time, new data are being created all the time and we need to coordinate knowledge about and access to those after the fact of their creation.

We’re setting priorities in two radically different ways. On the one hand, we’re addressing constituencies or constituents’ needs. On the other hand, as we’ve just heard from Joan, we’re determining key building blocks, datasets, to add; and we’re doing so without references in some instances to these large external constituencies – we’re doing so for a variety of reasons internal to our members, individually or collectively.

Communication – the networkers, continually, face to face as well as in a distributed fashion, is going to continue to be a challenge. Promoting uses of these data that we’re making available in such rich fashion is a challenge. But the first challenge here is education, because, we’ve heard, that many of the potential users (such as the users taking weekly courses at the Penn CML) [something missing] is critical, as is training educators and with them, their students. This could be of interest to funders; certainly it is of interest to scholars such as Lloyd Benson, who spoke to some of us earlier about bringing groups of students to Philadelphia to orient them to our data. But it’s not about the data; it’s about the uses and their potentials.

David Seaman this morning spoke about his nightmarish anticipation of what happens when the ten year olds take hold of the world. I live with that nightmare every day – my children are postliterate (and I’m a preliterate as far as they’re concerned). We’re going to be educating the preliterate very differently than we’ll be educating the postliterate, and that’s part of the challenge that we’re facing.

Service in the end, despite all our concerns about datasets, is the key of what we’re about. That seems to me, essentially, to be about facilitating data uses through interface construction, layering of data offerings and simplification, cost-free access to the extent possible. But where does this take us five years from now? I think five years from now Philadelphia should be, even more than it is now, the most historically researchable, historically accessible city in the United States. Ten years out, it should be the most historically researched city in the United States. It’s not there.

I understand that’s bringing us back to Philadelphia as a place rather than Philadelphia as a resource for places around the world; but, in the end, we have more about Philadelphia than we do about any place else. How this research capacity and access capacity builds out is the challenge that we hope you will help us to continue to think about as we stumble towards tomorrow.

Thank you very much for the two days that you've given. Thanks very much to the Chemical Heritage Foundation and to ESRI, as to the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation for their support of this. Just because weekends are supposed to be periods of rest between periods of intense exhaustion doesn't mean that, in my case at least, I'm not going away stimulated in a fashion that weekends don't normally allow. Thank you.

Laura Blanchard, Executive Director, Philadelphia Area Consortium of Special Collections Libraries: One of my functions at PACSCL gatherings is to consider what the tangible and prosaic next steps are going to be. One of the things that I know that we all need out of this is a product that will allow us to refresh our memories of all the information that's been exchanged. The question of precisely what that product is – whether that would be Power Points on a website somewhere, or summaries, some iteration of the audiotapes – still remains to be answered. But a product needs to come out of this and means for further conversations developed.

By virtue of the fact that this was an electronically publicized and electronically registered conference, we have all your e-mail addresses, so we can communicate with you electronically to let you know that this product is available and to continue the conversation.

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