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## Participants

### **Project Director**

Lacey Wilson (PhD candidate, department of History and Art History, George Mason University)

### **Advisory Board**

Jenny Barker-Devine (Associate professor, department of History, Illinois College)

### **Research Management**

Ryan Bailey (Archivist, Khalaf Al Habtoor Archives, Illinois College)

## Abstract

This project, *Blue Boys and the War*, will use digitized letters, obtained from the Khalaf Al Habtoor Archives at Illinois College, from soldiers serving during World War I to create a website that can build upon the history of the past through first account narratives. Instead of being merely an exhibit of digitized documents, the website will build upon the history of these soldiers by using documents in the archives to create biographies and encouraging researchers and locals of the Jacksonville, IL, area to contribute personal documents or stories relevant to WWI.

### *Statement of innovation*

Our project will present WWI letters in a way not often offered online. Letters will be treated as important research sources and it will be made the first priority to provide scanned copies along with transcriptions, allowing visitors to quickly find what they desire.

### *Statement of humanities significance*

Currently in the 100 year anniversary of WWI, this topic is highly significant to researchers and the public. Interest is always peaked during an event's anniversary and this will help increase traffic to the site, assisting in our final goal in creating a growing history of the time.

# Narrative

## Enhancing the Humanities

With every major historical anniversary, researchers are eager to produce a narrative that can explore the topic in new and meaningful ways. This is often hard to do when a topic has been exhausted for a hundred years. Currently, the United States is experiencing the Centennial of The First World War and will be until November 11, 1918. This is a war that has an array of different possible research topics, but new sources are vital to creating compelling new arguments. The most favored way among digital historians to find new resources is through an online scan of materials; whether the search results in digitized sources or information where to locate analog sources, the information is valuable. In Jacksonville, IL, at Illinois College, the Khalaf Al Habtoor Archives has an abundant collection of primary sources related to WWI. This small liberal arts college founded in 1829 is hardly known to those who live in Illinois; it can be reasonably assumed that WWI historians would not be aware of the College either, let alone their collection.

This project will present digitized documents from the Archive's WWI Collection in a way that will engage both researchers and the general public through an open source website. The main documents presented on the site will be letters written home from alumni of the College. These letters provide an interesting view on war and the concerns of soldiers at the time that cannot be obtained through a text book.

The final goal of *Blue Boys and the War* is to create a growing history of the Jacksonville area from 1914-1920. The first step to achieving this is uploading the letters onto a website to be viewed without the hassle of gaining permission by the College into the archives and then manually searching for a relevant document. Instead, researchers will be able to visit our site and do a keyword search or browse through the tagging system. The second step will be engaging the visitor. Anyone who visits the site will be able to send in contributions in any format for the Project Director, Lacey Wilson, to review; all valid and relevant submissions will be posted. These contributions are expected to come from researchers exploring the topic and local residents with connections to soldiers presented on this site.

Creating this constantly growing history will provide priceless information on the local area during WWI and the soldiers who served. This knowledge will help future researchers obtain a variety of perspectives that can assist in furthering research questions and sustaining arguments.

## Environmental Scan

In order to accurately study material, it is important that researchers are able to access the original document; however, this is not always possible. In the event that an interested party cannot physically obtain access to a document, whether it be issues of transportation or fragility of said document, the best alternative is access to a digitized version. Most importantly, the digitized document should retain as many of the original qualities of the document as possible. This is especially true with these letters. It is more valuable to a researcher to see an image of the letters than to only have access to typed transcriptions.

The major concern with websites available to the public today is the lack of presentation of the original document. When covering the letters sent by soldiers during World War I, websites chose to personally transcribe the letter completely and present that version. The problem with this method is the lack of evidence of the letter's existence or that the transcription is a valid representation of the original. While there are positive aspects to presenting a transcription, such as ease of reading or text searchability, it is important to present the transcription as an *option*. The best solution for websites like these are to present the original letter to the viewer with the transcription either beside the document or as a clear separate link.

The websites where the transcription of letters is prominent are *Letters Home From the War*, *Letters Home: Over the Top*, and *Letters From the Trenches*<sup>1</sup>. All three of these websites offer only transcriptions of WWI letters. This approach is appealing as a general user, but frustrating as a researcher concerned with validity. From these websites, it is obvious the intended audience was not scholars or researchers. The websites were intended to serve a more entertainment aspect to those generally interested in the War. A common theme with these sites, also connecting to the general public, is love. The first website, *Letters Home From the War* focuses on letters sent from one soldier to his sweetheart back home. The letters depict their courtship and end with the story of their long marriage. *Letters Home: Over the Top*, the second site, focuses heavily on sweethearts as well, with the exception of two letters sent to soldiers' fathers. The third mentioned site does not focus on love. While love during the war could easily be a research interest for a scholar, these topics are more suited to appeal to a more general audience.

In seeking to appeal to a more specialized audience of researchers, it is important to offer various documents. A website that does this well is *Anzac History World War I Letters*<sup>2</sup>. The website presents letters written by four brothers from Australia, all who fought in the war. The website does an excellent job of offering the

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.u.arizona.edu/~rstaley/wwlettr1.htm> ; <https://aggsliterature.wordpress.com/wwi-letters-home/> ; <http://spartacus-educational.com/FWWletters.htm>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.smythe.id.au/letters/>

letters in a clear way; they are organized by soldier, date, and location. *Anzac History* provides transcribed versions of the letters; however, the site also presents a small image of the original letter beside each transcription. While it is not possible for the visitor to examine the original themselves, it proves that an original does exist.

In the past, the World War I letters being used for *Blue Boys and the War* have been presented online one time. A few years ago a history class at Illinois College used a small selection of letters in their online narrative titled *Illinois College in World War I*<sup>3</sup>. The site told a story about the home front during the War; more specifically about the College and surrounding town. While many valuable documents were used throughout the narrative, very few are viewable as more than a thumbnail. The documents presented through our project will go beyond that. All letters will be presented in 300 dpi so researchers can examine the contents for themselves.

### History and duration of the project

The digitization of the documents used for this project was done by Project Director Lacey Wilson in the fall of 2012 while working as an assistant archivist for the Khalaf Al Habtoor Archives at Illinois College (then known only as the Illinois College Archives and Iver F. Yeager Special Collections). The documents were all uploaded into a shared Google Drive folder with the hopes to one day make them all text readable and to upload onto a website for researchers to access. Since that time, the documents have only been used to create a website narrative for HI 208 at Illinois College and in the creation of a senior thesis by Lacey Wilson discussing the militarization of the College during WWI.

All letters were converted to image format in 300 dpi so they are easily viewed by a visitor. All documents will need to be transcribed and then text will be run through a software to determine key recurring words. Behind the scenes, letters will be under different categories to meet the research needs of the visitor: writer, year, content/purpose of letter. These will also be made into tags so the visitor can move from one letter to another similar one.

Future development of the project will involve intensive research in the Khalaf Al Habtoor Archives at Illinois College by student workers. Research will be assisted by Advisory Board member Jenny Barker-Devine and will be implemented into the project's website as profiles for soldiers and relevant members of the community for the time. All contributions by visitors will be managed by Project Director Lacey Wilson; any research needed for current events mentioned in visitor-provided content will be researched by Ryan Bailey and student workers. With the use of student workers employed in the Archives by Illinois College, the project will no longer need to pay for research work.

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<sup>3</sup> <https://sites.google.com/a/mail.ic.edu/icinworldwari/>

Saving most research responsibilities until after the period of grant funding will allow the project to be mostly self-sustaining in a year's time.

## Work Plan

We are requesting Level II Start-Up funds for support of a year's work from January 2016 until January 2017. The end goal for this time is the creation of a fully functioning website for a growing history of World War I. A guide to how we will reach this goal can be seen below.

Transcription of Documents (January-March 2016): All letters will be manually transcribed by Lacey Wilson to allow for future searchability.

Sorting of Documents (March-May 2016): Lacey Wilson will sort letters according to year, sender, and major topics. All letters will be run through the program VOSviewer, an open access tool that will visualize key words throughout the letters. This will be used to gather a list for possible tags.

Research (May-July 2016): On-site research will be conducted at Illinois College by Ryan Bailey for the three soldiers with the most letters. This will allow the team to create a structure for all future site profiles. Ryan Bailey will create three profiles and submit them to Lacey Wilson and Jenny Barker-Devine for approval.

Creation of Website (July-August 2016): A website will be created by Lacey Wilson using Omeka and their many plug-ins for presentation of the documents. Jenny Barker-Devine will be consulted to ensure the site meets the future needs of Illinois College; ensuring their future involvement.

Importing of Documents (August-November 2016): Documents will be uploaded to the website by Lacey Wilson. All documents will have metadata entered individually and be sorted according to results found from March-May 2016.

Site Organization (November-December 2016): The website will have all the documents and data organized behind the scenes to make it ready for launch. At this time, the three profiles created by Ryan Bailey will be imported into the site.

Site Testing and Fixes (December-January 2017): At this time, all three staff members will test links, tagging structure, and images on the site. If any issues are found, they will be fixed at this stage.

After the completion of the funding period, Lacey Wilson will evaluate the success of the start-up period based on these criteria: how well the project stayed on schedule; how effective the tools used were; how many minor or major issues were found during testing; and how user friendly is the site. Data will be collected and presented on the *Blue Boys and the War* blog February 2017.

## Staff

Project Director Lacey Wilson, PhD candidate at George Mason University, will be responsible for general management and design of the project, handling of digitized documents, data preparation, website creation and management, and writing of white papers for project.

Advisory Board member Jenny Barker-Devine will be responsible for: collection of original analog documents; delegating digitization of further documents; managing future staff working on the project.

Research Manager Ryan Bailey will be responsible for: research of the Jacksonville, IL, area from 1914-1920; research on individual soldiers; creation of soldier profiles; conducting research for visitor-submitted content.

## Final project and dissemination

Encouraging discussion about the *Blue Boys and the War* website from the start, the project team will together run various social media accounts to keep the public updated. A WordPress Blog will be used to give accounts of successes or difficulties encountered along the way. Blog posts will be made bi-monthly and encourage feedback from followers. The project will also be active on Twitter and Facebook with personal pages. Twitter will be updated with short updates and links to new blog posts. Facebook will be used to create a page for the project that will link to new blog posts and provide sneak peeks into the website and the letters that will be available.

Once the website is near completion, the team will reach out to local newspapers in Jacksonville and Springfield, IL, to promote *Blue Boys and the War*; it is our hope that this action will encourage local residents to start thinking about stories of their loved ones who shared memories of World War I. After the site is fully launched in January 2017, we will reach out to newspapers once more, as a way to remind the public of the site and invite them to contribute. An interview will be conducted with *The Rambler*, the Illinois College newspaper, as well in order to inform the student body of the project and possibly inspire current history students to conduct research with our documents that can be later incorporated into the site.

Lastly, a white paper will be written by Project Director Lacey Wilson, explaining the *Blue Boys and the War* project from start to finish. The paper will chronologically go through the steps outlined in our work plan. Each step will be thoroughly explained and any complications or successes will be discussed; including what this meant for the project at that time. The white paper will end with a proposed future for the website as well as explaining how it will sustain itself with some maintenance.