

University of Virginia Library to Explore Internet Future of Rare Books

The economics of electronic versions of rare books is the subject of a two-year study being undertaken by the University of Virginia Library. Sponsored by a \$400,000 grant from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, the project will compare usage and costs between electronic texts and original printed editions of rare early American fiction.

As part of the economic study, 582 first editions of the most important novels and short stories will be digitized and put on the World Wide Web. Called the Electronic Archive of Early American Fiction, the online collection will include books published between 1775 and 1850. The books chosen for the project range from the earliest American novels, such as Susanna Rowson's *Charlotte* (1791), through James Fenimore Cooper's *The Last of the Mohicans*, Edgar Allen Poe's *Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque*, and Nathaniel Hawthorne's *Scarlet Letter*. All the texts will be taken from rare first editions in the Barrett Collection and other collections in the Library's Special Collections Department

"This project is an exciting opportunity to investigate how rare materials can be distributed widely through new computer technology," said Karin Wittenborg, University Librarian. "We are delighted that the Mellon Foundation will provide funding for the project.

Wittenborg added that a major goal of the project will be to determine if rare research materials can be made available at a reasonable cost on the Web. "Until now, if you wanted to see the first edition of Poe's *Tales*, you had to travel to one of the few libraries that had copies, and even then the copies are so fragile that they can't be handled very much. The copies on the World Wide Web will make it possible for researchers around the world to see accurate reproductions and searchable texts of these wonderful records of American civilization."

Wittenborg said that an important part of the project will be an evaluation phase in 1998. Teachers and students will be asked to compare factors like ease of use of original rare books and of the electronic versions of them.

Two versions of each text will be made available for the project on the Internet, according to David Seaman, Coordinator of the Electronic Text

Center in the Library. "We plan to have computer images of each page of each of the 582 volume--125,000 pages altogether," he said. "More importantly, there will be searchable texts. Look up a word like 'Liberty,' and you will get a list of quotations showing how authors in the early Republic were using that word." The E-Text Center will add these texts to some 15,00 other electronic books that it makes available on the World Wide Web.

Because most of the books to be used in the project are fragile, the computer images of each page will be prepared in the Special Collections Digital Center in the Library. The Coordinator of that Center, Edward Gaynor, pointed out that a specially adapted camera is used to take digital images. The \$35,000 camera purchased through an earlier grant from the Gwathmey Trust. Gaynor noted that the images produced by the digital camera result in high quality reproductions of rare book pages on a computer monitor.

The 582 volume in the project are taken from two standard bibliographies: *Wright's American Fiction 1774-1850* and *the Bibliography of American Literature* (BAL). Included in the selection will be all first editions by 82 authors, including Melville, Hawthorne, Cooper, Poe, Washington Irving, Longfellow, and William Cullen Bryant.

Michael Winship, Professor of English at the University of Texas and editor of BAL, "This project will make available for use by scholars and students the electronic texts of an extensive and important group of early American novels. Furthermore, it demonstrates once again the commitment of the U. Va. libraries to preserving and documenting our literary heritage and to creating and promoting rigorously prepared electronic editions."

David Seaman
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