

Are You Ready for Your Close-Up, John Wesley?

Digitizing a Special Collection

COOPERATIVE
DIGITAL RESOURCES
INITIATIVE

CDRI



Presenting items from the Drew
University Methodist Library
digitized with a grant from
the American Theological
Library Association's
Cooperative Digital
Resources Initiative

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METHODIST CENTER GALLERY
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Why Digitize? Why Not!

In the age of Google, we often assume that everything we need is easily accessible in quality and quantity on the Internet. Libraries and archives are frequently asked why they don't digitize their collections of books and manuscripts quickly so that they can be accessible to users from all over the world.

Most libraries and archives are eager to make portions of their collections accessible to the widest range of users possible. However, digitizing takes both time and money when it is done with the proper standards. Standards are important, because digital data quickly changes formats and is easily lost if we don't plan ahead and think how it will be accessed in the future (seen a 5 ¼" floppy disk lately?) Copyright is also an issue; items cannot be digitized and made available freely when the copyright in them is held by someone else (usually an author or publisher) who still has the right to profit from the material.

Drew University Library has a number of valuable collections which richly and deeply narrate stories of the humanities over the last few centuries. Through our partnership with the archives of the United Methodist Church, our collection is particularly rich in the story of those religious people who became known as "Methodists." Among other Methodist treasures, Drew possesses one of the four largest collections in the world of the letters and manuscripts of Methodism's founder John Wesley and some of his family members. These letters—only some of which have been published—provide an insight into society, culture, religion, music, gender issues, medicine, and economics in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries for researchers in many fields.

The opportunity to make this collection available in a digital fashion came about through the American Theological Library Association (www.atla.com), an organization with a long history of supporting and resourcing libraries with connections to the study of religion. Through a grant from the Luce Foundation, ATLA inaugurated a program called the Cooperative Digital Resources Initiative. Grant money was given to various colleges, universities, and seminaries in North America to enable them to digitize treasures from their collection. In order to receive these grants, all the digitized material had to be in the "public domain" (free of copyright), and we had to agree to abide by standards both for making the images and collecting data about them. We then agreed that the digital images would be made available to the public through a database maintained by ATLA (<http://www.atla.com/digitalresources/>). This database, which contains images from religious history both across the centuries and worldwide, is intended most especially for teachers—providing visual images to enhance the teaching of religion and religion-related fields. Because the images are in public domain, they may be used electronically in the classroom without complicated fees and permissions.

Drew received \$5000 for this project in January 2004. We purchased software and hardware, trained staff, and spent over 500 hours on the process of scanning the images, entering data, and checking the quality of the scans and data—all for less than 300 letters and manuscripts! In March 2005, we submitted copies of all our images and data to ATLA for their database. On April 15, 2005, our data went "live," enabling researchers all over the world to see the riches of Drew's Wesley collections.

The Process

Since no library or archives has the money or time to digitize everything at once, the first step in a digitizing project is deciding what to scan. Drew's collection of letters by John Wesley and other members of the Wesley family was a valuable and historically important collection of a manageable size, so it was a good collection to mark our first entry into the digitizing world.

Digitizing images for long-term storage requires meeting certain standards for the quality of the images. Here are ATLA's guidelines for image quality.

Digital images are not much use if data regarding their content and creation (referred to as *metadata*) is not stored along with them. Here are some of ATLA's guidelines for metadata. We entered metadata into a Microsoft Excel file.

Libraries and archives usually need to purchase hardware and software to support an ongoing digitizing program. Our grant from ATLA enabled the purchase of a desktop computer and scanner as well as software to manage scanned images.

We made two copies of each image—an "archival" copy, which is a large file of high quality for long-term storage, and a "use" or "access" copy, which is a small file of lower quality for display on the Web. Our archival copies (TIFFs at 600 dots per inch) were so large that all 638 files would have filled a computer hard drive several times over. We stored them on CDs, with 3-5 images per CD.

Moving Theory Into Practice (Research Libraries Group, 2000) provided helpful information on the costs, assumptions, and strategies involved in a serious digitizing project.

Here are some other libraries which were given grants for projects at the same time.

Here is what our images and data actually look like in ATLA's online database. (Since we submitted our access images as PDF files, which are only readable with Adobe Reader, the online user must click on the "PDF" icon to see the file.)

The Product

John Wesley's 1751 marriage to the widow Mary (Molly) Vazeille turned out to be an unhappy one, and they eventually separated. Perhaps hints can already be seen in this letter, written about six weeks after the wedding. John refused to alter his habits or schedule in any way, and Molly disapproved of her husband's obsessive devotion to his cause—as well as the numerous female correspondents who wrote him requesting spiritual advice.

A letter to the editor, 18th-century style.

Sarah Crosby (1729-1804) was a devoted follower of Wesley, and the first of over 40 women whom he endorsed as lay preachers for Methodist meetings.

On the back of this 1786 letter from John Wesley to American Methodist preacher Freeborn Garrettson (1752-1827) is a pleasant find—a note from Thomas Coke to Garrettson. Coke (1747-1814) was sent by Wesley to be one of the first bishops of the Methodist Episcopal Church when it was founded in America in 1784, although he did not end up getting along very well with his followers.

We own this letter from Wesley to Garrettson (September 30, 1786) only in a handwritten copy by Freeborn's wife Catherine (1752-1849). Both Garrettsons were active in spreading Methodism in the United States.

This letter from John Wesley's older sister Emelia (1692-1770), in addition to criticizing her brother's habit of walking everywhere as undignified, discusses the romantic troubles of their sister Martha or "Patty" (1707-1791). Martha's husband, Anglican clergyman Westley Hall (who had previously proposed to Wesley sister Keziah as well) eventually deserted her.

This is the last letter John Wesley ever wrote, encouraging young abolitionist and Member of Parliament William Wilberforce (1759-1833) to continue his fight against slavery until even American slavery—"the vilest that ever saw the sun"—was vanquished.

Drew has the only copy of these 1778 minutes of a meeting of the Methodist preachers in Ireland.

Manuscript copy of a hymn by Charles Wesley, addressed only to "Mrs. G.W."

This is the beginning of a lengthy poem written by Charles Wesley's wife, Sarah Gwynne Wesley (1726-1822) about the death of one of her children. Five of Charles and Sarah Gwynne's children died in infancy.

Here is the will of Charles' and Sarah Gwynne's daughter (and John Wesley's niece), named Sarah after her mother (1759-1828). The younger Sarah bequeaths her property to her mother, brothers (Charles Jr. [1757-1834] and Samuel [1766-1837]), and nephews (Samuel's children). Later revisions of this will left all her property to Charles Jr., probably in disapproval of Samuel's desertion of his wife and fathering of an illegitimate family. Sarah also requests that her name and age not appear on her tombstone.

Two letters from Samuel Wesley's estranged wife Charlotte (1766-1837), the first to her husband and the second to her mother-in-law—assuring her that she has never tried to prejudice her children against their father.

Samuel Wesley writes to an unknown recipient, enclosing a ticket for an upcoming public lecture, "the best I have yet given."

Samuel Wesley was a composer and organist by trade, and his illegitimate son Samuel Sebastian Wesley (1817-1897) became an even more famous composer than his father. Here Samuel Sebastian writes to a fellow musician asking permission to insert one of his hymn tunes in a collection Wesley was compiling.