

# Dealing with Death and Digital Assets:

## Crowdsourced Transcription of a Cemetery's Pre-existing Digital Surrogates During a Pandemic

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### Overview

What pre-existing digital assets do individuals and institutions have, and how can they be leveraged to expand access and audiences?

*Transcribing Mount Auburn*, a crowdsourced project at Mount Auburn Cemetery, shows how institutions of various sizes can expand access and create a digital impact even during the pandemic.

### Mount Auburn Cemetery

Established in 1831, Mount Auburn Cemetery is the first rural cemetery in the United States and remains an active site for burial and commemoration. Located in Cambridge, Massachusetts, the 175 acres of the Cemetery include more than 45,000 monuments that span nearly two centuries of American architecture, sculpture, and funerary art from its inception through to today. (Banta and Winslow, 2015)

The Cemetery's Historical Collections & Archives represents over 3,500 linear feet of material and holds information related to individuals who are buried, cremated, and remembered at Mount Auburn, as well as important records relating to early landscape architecture and design, horticulture, commemoration, and land conservation. Presently the Collections team is made up of a full-time curator, four consultants, and six volunteers, while Mount Auburn Cemetery has approximately 50 year-round staff members and an additional 50 seasonal staff.



Fig. 1. Mount Auburn Cemetery, Collections Storage, 2019



Fig. 2. Screenshot of *Transcribing Mount Auburn*, 2021

### The Push to Make Public

The project was conceived to allow member of the Collections Team to work remotely, but the online platform allowed for the added benefit of the greater public to read, transcribe, and research right away. This public nature meant that attention had to be paid to what material was shared. The decision was made to focus on the earliest records of the Cemetery. Our founding records have now been made public, from early sculpture commissions of Thomas Crawford and other 19<sup>th</sup>-century sculptors to superintendent's possible misdoings. History is most valuable when freed from censorship and told with as much detail as possible. By sharing as much as we have, we are allowing the public to access and discover the wide range and importance of Mount Auburn Cemetery's rich and complex history.

Moreover, the transcribed text appears in search engine results. By making the information freely available, there are now numerous points of entry to discover and use our collections. Conservators can research where sculptors may have sourced their materials, for example. The construction and maintenance history of our buildings and structures can be explored. The greatest benefit may in fact be how this project enables lesser-known stories to be discovered and shared. While this information is invaluable for those researching the Cemetery, this new open access allows those researching lesser-known carvers, sculptors, and workers, more points of information.

### Remove Barriers and Expand Access:

The pandemic forced us to remove many self-imposed barriers that could have prevented the project from launching. Not having all the answers, made us set realistic expectations and become more adaptable. As the project expanded our reach, we realized the need to continually reevaluate our audience. For example, we reassessed our catalogue descriptions and replaced industry jargon with more universal language. Started as a means of providing access to a specific collection of digital surrogates, *Transcribing Mount Auburn* has transformed our entire approach to accessibility.

Digital assets and crowdsourcing expands access through many creative means:

- Crowdsourcing subject tags to enhance searching digital collections
- Subsisting collection survey photographs in online collections until new photography can take place.
- Sharing scientific data that would be given on request

### Conclusion

Through relatively simple means, *Transcribing Mount Auburn* was able to quickly allow staff and volunteers to work during the pandemic. A small team transformed previously inaccessible digital surrogates to establish new relevancy for the Cemetery and greatly expand access to our history. If institutions reevaluate their existing digital assets and embrace creative ways to provide access, they will expand their reach. Expanding access done on the microscale can have a resounding impact on an institution.

### *Transcribing Mount Auburn*: A Case Study

With the COVID-19 pandemic, Mount Auburn prioritized its role as an active Cemetery and required all nonessential staff to work remotely. Only the curator had access to the Cemetery's network and our collections database, and no one was able to work directly with collections. These restraints required a unique solution. It became evident that the Collections Team could leverage a backlog of underutilized digital surrogates of our archival records.

Within a month of switching to remote work, the team launched *Transcribing Mount Auburn*, on *From the Page*, an online crowdsourced transcription platform. This rapid launch meant that aspects of the project were developed as they were implemented. Building from other transcription projects, and trial and error, we have succeeded in creating a workflow that is responsive to the open-source nature of the project.

#### EXISTING ASSETS

- Team of 3 volunteers, 2 consultants and a curator
- More than 50,000 digital images of archival materials
- Existing crowdsourced platforms to choose from

#### HURDLES

- Bottleneck of tasks that can only be done by the curator
- Garnering outside interest in the project
- Creating adaptive workflow
- Online collection portal does not support reading multipage documents

### Broaden Our Digital Reach

At the end of 2020, 125 participants of *Transcribing Mount Auburn* were sent a survey and 45 responses were received resulting in a 36% rate of reply. The survey gathered their demographic information, professional impact of the pandemic, experience with projects, and their interest in Mount Auburn Cemetery. The responses showed that the project expanded both the geographic and demographic reach of the collections. Individuals with no prior connection to the Cemetery have been just as active as our own Collections Volunteers. (Burns 2021)

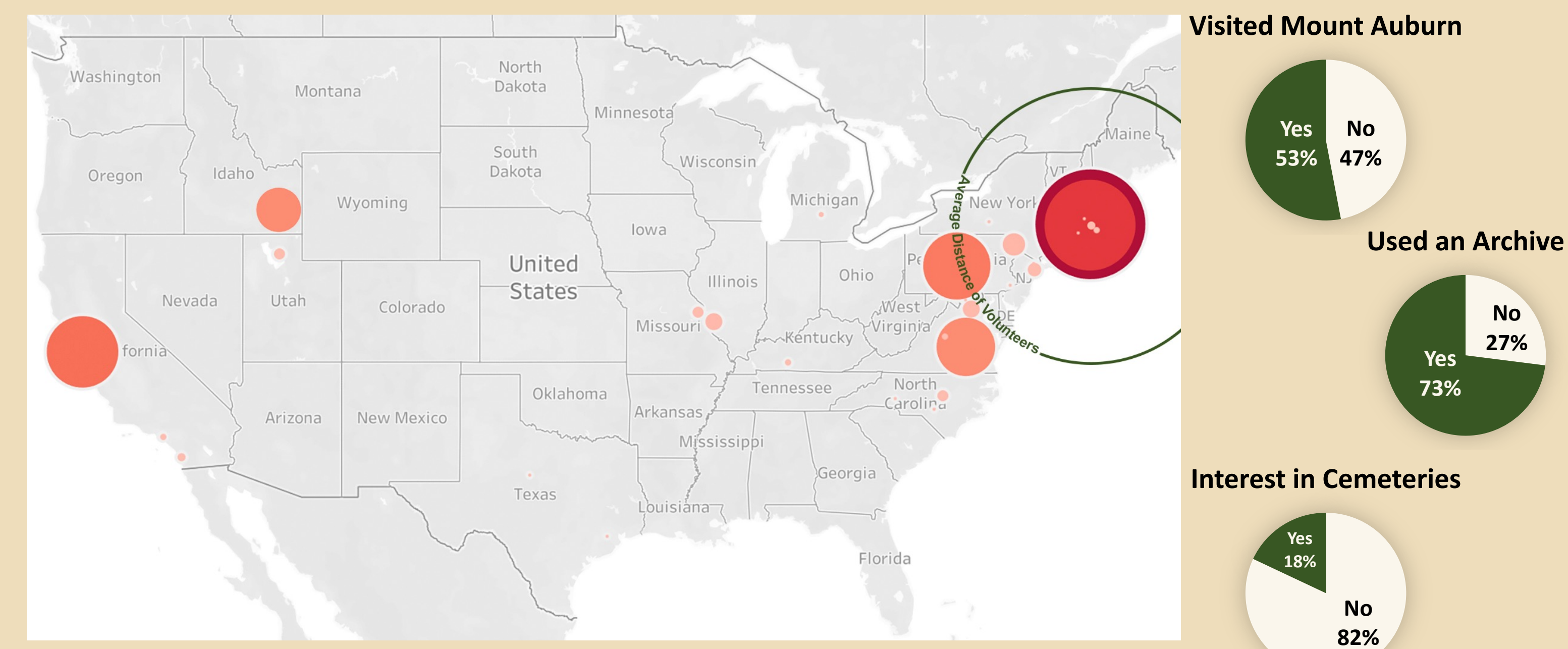


Fig. 3. Map showing location of volunteers and the amount of work done

**170 Individual Digital Volunteers**

**19,115 Hours of Work Equal to 9.5 years of One Full-Time Person**

### References

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