

The Digital Vaults

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In the fall of 2004, the National Archives opened a new permanent exhibition at its historic building in Washington, D.C. Located in a large gallery behind the Rotunda for the Charters of Freedom, the Public Vaults exhibition gives visitors the sensation of walking behind-the-scenes into the Archives' vaults and stacks. It combines interactive elements and thousands of primary sources from the holdings of the Archives, and invites visitors to explore not only well-known people and historic turning points but also little known players and events that provide surprising perspectives and insights.



With the great success of the Public Vaults in engaging visitors of all ages in “hands-on” discovery, the staff of the National Archives Experience knew that transitioning the exhibit to the Internet was a must—but one that would be challenging. We wanted to capture not only the content of the exhibition but also the spirit of visitor discovery, and we wanted to make the best use of new innovations associated with the World Wide Web.

Working in partnership with colleagues from Second Story Interactive Studios and the Foundation for the

National Archives, we designed and recently launched the Digital Vaults. Inspired by the Public Vaults, this unique online experience is available at www.archives.gov/nae.

The Digital Vaults is not just another website. In part, it is an online exhibit—but one that is different each time you visit, encourages creativity, and allows you to share your creations with others through e-mail. These combined elements also make the Digital Vaults more than an exhibit. In many ways, the site is a teaching tool that offers exciting

exposure to historical content and creative opportunities to practice historical thinking skills.

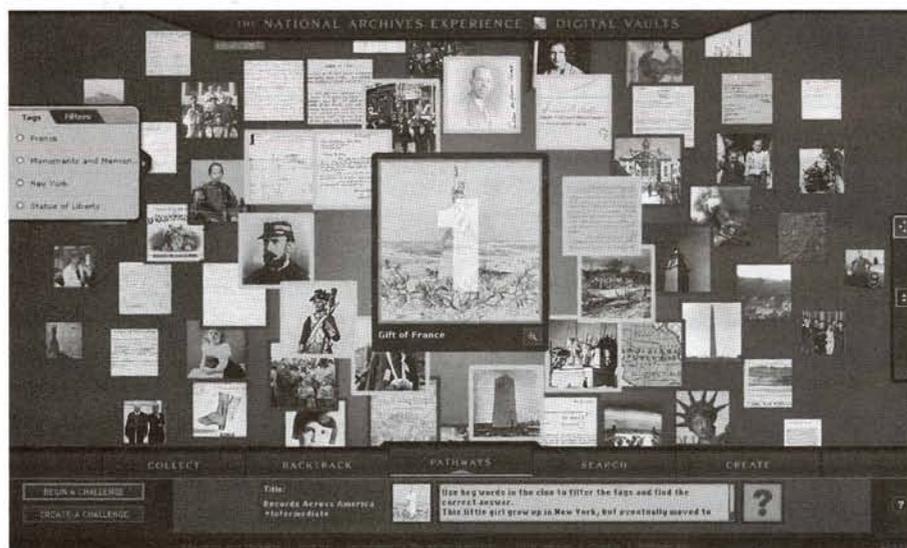
The Digital Vaults features 1,200 documents, photographs, posters, artifacts, sound recordings, and moving images hand selected from the billions of records in the National Archives. They range in topic from George Washington to The Beatles; the Statue of Liberty to Fort Wagner; the American Revolution to Vietnam. They are not displayed in a static exhibit format, nor are they presented chronologically. They are not compiled into a search engine nor are they divided into distinct categories. And by no means do they represent everything the National Archives holds. Rather, the website's interactive elements illustrate how select records can come together in unexpected ways to tell the story of America.

The site mimics historical research in that it insists on and encourages visitor exploration. When you first enter the site, you are presented with a collection of eight documents. By simply selecting one, your exploration begins. The document you have selected will move to the center, and the entire screen will reload. The new screen now features other documents that connect thematically to your selection.

For example, if the center document is a photograph of General Dwight D. Eisenhower speaking to the troops moments before the D-Day invasion was launched, the surrounding documents relate to generals, D-Day, presidents, soldiers, France, Eisenhower, and

Hints for Exploring the Digital Vaults

- When you roll your mouse over the subject tags on the left side of the screen, lines will appear to show you which documents are related to that subject. Clicking on any of the tags will reduce the web of documents to only that tag.
- The Digital Vaults showcases so many documents that they cannot all fit on the screen. Use the arrows on the far right side of the screen to reel in the documents from the outer edges.
- When viewing a particular document in detail, you can zoom in to examine it more closely. Once you zoom in, you can “grab” the image with your mouse to view other parts of the image.
- Exploring the Digital Vaults can lead to many different records. If you ever want to go back a few steps, click the “backtrack” button at the bottom of the page. It will show all the documents that spent time in the center of the web of documents. Click on the image you want to put it back in the center.
- If you want to save anything you have created or collected, you will be prompted to create an account at the Digital Vaults. On your next visit, sign in, and you will be able to retrieve everything you have saved.
- When making a movie in the Create section, you can see how a particular zoom or pan looks as you are creating by clicking on the “preview” button.
- In some Pathways Challenges, turning off some of the tags will help you narrow down the choices and find the correct answer.



World War II, or a combination of those subjects. These subject tags are listed unobtrusively at the left of the page. As you scroll through the tags, lines appear on the screen, showing you the connections between the images. You can select any one of the documents on the page and make it the center focus—and any document you choose to examine will open up a new set of tags and connections.

Introducing students to this function of the site is a great way for them to literally see how historical content and historic figures can connect to one another. It is also an excellent starting point for them to consider other connections that may exist between seem-

ingly unrelated content.

Teaching Suggestion

Before introducing students to the site, explore it yourself and select three to five documents that initially appear to be unrelated. Divide students into small groups and provide each group with copies of the documents. Encourage them to consider people, subjects, themes, time periods, and other categories that they think each document relates to. Ask them to determine connections between the documents based on their selected categories. Invite students to share their categories and connections with the class.



Because the Internet allows sites to share more information and details than a physical exhibit can, each featured document in the Digital Vaults provides links to enhance your experience. Links take you to related articles, online exhibits, “Teaching with Documents” lesson plans, and websites of other government agencies. Each link reinforces the fact that there is always more to learn and that acquiring knowledge is a process.

Sometimes a document can be so interesting that you or your students will want to do some additional research. Fortunately, the Digital Vaults bridges the worlds of “visitor” and “researcher”

by providing a connection to the Archival Research Catalog (ARC). ARC is an online catalog that provides a tremendous amount of information about the National Archives nationwide holdings in the Washington, D.C., area; regional archives; and presidential libraries.

Teaching Suggestion

Invite students to explore the site and to select a document of interest to them. Ask them to follow the link from the document into ARC and find out the following information about their document: what government agency produced it, when it was created, why

it was created, and in which National Archives facility the actual document resides. Encourage student volunteers to share their findings with the class.

As you explore the site, you will notice five section headings at the bottom of the page. The first one is “Collect.” This tool allows you and your students to save your favorite documents from the site for the next time you visit. For example, if you are anticipating an upcoming lesson on George Washington, you could explore the site and create a special collection of documents related to him. Then you could return to the site on the day of your lesson to share your collection with your students, or you could link into ARC and copy your documents into a Power Point or other presentation.

“Backtrack” allows you to view all of the documents you have selected during your visit. It provides you and your students with an immediate reminder of all the content you have explored during a visit to the site.

The “Pathways” section leads you to unique activities we call Pathways Challenges. While the tags associated with each document enable lines to appear on the screen that illustrate topical and thematic connections, these thought-provoking exercises take exploration much further and encourage creative thinking about the kinds of connections that exist. They invite you and your students to search through the web of documents for the answers to a set of clues. Selecting the correct document leads you to the next clue. With three levels of difficulty, the Pathways Challenges go from simple to quite complex.

Teaching Suggestion

Encourage students to attempt a Pathways Challenge and report back to you about their success. Then, assign students to create their own Pathways Challenge to share with one another.

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2. Multicultural education is defined in the *Handbook of Research on Multicultural Education*, 2nd edition [James A. Banks and Cherry A. McGee Banks (Jossey-Bass, 2004)] as "a field of study designed to increase educational equity for all students that incorporates for this purpose, content concepts, principles, theories and paradigms from history, the social and behavioral science, and particularly from ethnic studies and women's studies."
3. M. Ashworth, "Projecting the Past into the Future. A Look at ESL for Children in Canada," in *Beyond Multicultural Education: International Perspectives*, ed. K.A. Moodley (Calgary: Detselig, 1992), 114-131.
4. Robert D. King, "Should English Be the Law?" *The Atlantic Online* (1997), www.theatlantic.com/issues/97apr/english.htm.
5. R. Daniels, *Concentration Camps, North America: Japanese in the United States and Canada during World War II* (Malabar, Fla.: R.E. Krieger 1981).
6. Gary Y. Okihiro, *The Columbia Guide to Asian American History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001).
7. Ibid.; Anna Cecile Scantland, *Study of Historical Injustice to Japanese Canadians* (Vancouver, B. C.: Parallel Publishers Ltd., 1986).
8. John T. Grant, "Black Immigrants into Nova Scotia, 1776-1815," *Journal of Negro History* 58, no. 3 (1973): 253-270.
9. "Remembering Black Loyalists: Black Communities in Nova Scotia," Nova Scotia Museum, 2001, <http://museum.gov.ns.ca/blackloyalists/who.htm>.
10. Dominic Casciani, "The Legacy of Slavery," BBC News (March 20, 2007), http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/6456765.stm.

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Although the Digital Vaults is not a search engine, you do have the ability to search the site. In the "Search" section you can look for documents by keyword or by the tags associated with each document. When the search results appear, they do so as thumbnail images.

In the "Create" section, you and your students can make your own poster or make a movie. To make a poster, you can use the documents placed in your collect tray or documents provided in several different categories. Categories include the Civil War, Civil Rights, Presidents, and more. The process is easy—you can select a document and drop it onto the poster screen, change background colors, alter the size, rotate the image, and add text or clip art to enhance your creation. Upon completion, you can save your poster, print it out, or e-mail it to a friend.

Teaching Suggestion

Assign your students to create a poster using the Digital Vaults site about whatever topic you chose, and ask them to e-mail their completed poster to you.

Creating a movie is similar to creating a poster. Using the same drag-and-drop technology, you and your students can begin by selecting a starting point from the list of topics, then work your way through the list of additions to the movie maker, adding the background layers of sound and color and an opening title. Finally, you and your students can use the tools to make the images you selected come alive, such as adding a zoom or a pan to the image to create movement on the screen, or adding a caption to the bottom of every image to help tell the story. When finished, you simply need to press "play" to view your masterpiece—then save it or e-mail it to a friend.

Teaching Suggestion

Instruct students to make a movie

using the Digital Vaults about whatever topic you chose, and e-mail it to a classmate. Direct students to take on the role of a film critic and assign them to write a one-page critique of their classmate's film. You may choose to develop a rubric or set of evaluation criteria with students for this activity prior to the writing exercise.

We hope you and your students enjoy this new online experience and that you will return frequently to discover new resources and activities that enable you to further teach with documents. 📄

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