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Spatial Histories, Temporal Geographies

The AAG continues to build on the successes of our five-year Geography and Humanities Initiative (see Richardson, "Geography and the Humanities," AAG Newsletter, March 2006, for details), which was begun in 2004. Significant outcomes to date include the initiation of an AAG Geography and the Humanities Symposium, co-hosted by the University of Virginia in 2007 in Charlottesville, and the opening of a new generation of sustained engagement and dialogue between geography and several humanities disciplines. Two new books inspired by ideas and relationships generated during the conceptualization and implementation phases of the Geography and the Humanities Symposium are also scheduled for publication early next year.

I am pleased to report here on an important new outcome of our continued exploration of interactions between geography and the humanities, the award to the AAG of a Chairman's Grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) to create the **Historical Geographic Information Systems (GIS) Clearinghouse and Forum**.

As most geographers know well, GIScience and technology is helping to transform many fields of study, including the discipline of history. Geography and GIS allow historians and related scholars to ask new questions from new perspectives, and to integrate and analyze large amounts of historical data that previously remained impervious to traditional historical methods alone. As Civil War historian Ed Ayers demonstrated in his Symposium address, which examined the location and frequency of lynchings in the American South over time, the use of geographic technologies such as GIS can have a profound effect on historical research, and create radically new understandings and interpretations of our past.

A number of prominent scholars at the forefront of the digital geographic history field were present at the Geography and Humanities Symposium. These included featured speaker

and Symposium co-sponsor Ed Ayers (President, University of Richmond), Peter Bol (Professor of East Asian Civilizations and Director, Harvard Center for Geographic Analysis), Ian Johnson (Director, Archaeological Computing Laboratory, University of Sydney), Ian Gregory (Senior Lecturer in Digital Humanities, Lancaster University), Karen Kemp (University of Redlands), and Amy Hillier (University of Pennsylvania). Discussions at the Symposium underscored the pressing need for an interactive online resource available to historical researchers who use geographic technologies to address the significant challenges involved in creating GIS-based historical archives and conducting historical research using GIS.

Often coupled with traditional methods of historical and geographical analysis, the use of GIS technology for historical research is growing rapidly, and the number of major international historical GIS projects continues to expand. Examples of such projects include the China Historical GIS, the Great Britain Historical GIS, the Tibetan and Himalayan Digital Libraries, the Hawai'i Island Digital Collaboratory for Humanities and Science, the U.S. National Historical Geographic Information System, the Holocaust Historical GIS Project, and many others.

Although the field continues to grow, scholars still face many core theoretical and conceptual challenges. For example, Peter Bol delivered a paper at the Geography and Humanities Symposium, "What Humanists Want, What Humanists Need" outlining the need for coordination of geographic data on place names over time and the alignment of those names with geographic coordinates across systems of measurement. This is exactly the kind of need the Historical Geographic Information Systems (GIS) Clearinghouse and Forum will be designed to address, by providing updates of cutting-edge projects and promoting ongoing discussion about various Historical GIS (HGIS) challenges and their solutions. In addition, many incipient HGIS research projects have often remained



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isolated with no common thread to pull them together, or to achieve inter-operability with other efforts underway. The AAG HGIS Clearinghouse and Forum will provide an exchange venue to facilitate standards development, and to allow other interested researchers to draw on best practices or identify common pitfalls to be avoided. Moreover, the forum also will provide basic online instructional materials on GIS technologies, which are relatively new to many historical researchers and can be difficult to implement, particularly when using its more complex and powerful capabilities.

Thus, the AAG's development of this online digital humanities resource will serve two primary functions:

1. *A clearinghouse of newly developing, GIS-based historical archives and research projects from around the world.* Also included will be links to georeferenced historical data; historical gazetteers; and related ongoing projects and programs. As mentioned above, such research exists but has nowhere been gathered together to function as a resource or benchmark for what has been done. We will work with authors to create metadata for indexing and cataloguing of these projects for the use of historians, geographers, and other humanities scholars, so that information and resources are easy to locate.
2. *An interactive discussion center that provides an online forum for historians, geographers, and other humanities scholars to network with each other and discuss pressing research needs and topics such as:*
 - a. Challenges facing historical GIS work,

- b. Best practices in GIS-based historical research,
- c. Key technical issues and how to resolve them,
- d. Data consistency and comparability issues, including data standards,
- e. Theoretical and conceptual issues in approaches to incorporating geographical data into historical research projects, and
- f. Additional themes or discussion threads to be developed by participating researchers.

In addition, we envision that this discussion center will create a digital commons that brings experts in different topical areas together and helps facilitate dialogue across these groups. Because GIS-based historical research is a relatively new concept, we feel there is an enormous benefit to be gained from providing a "place" where research and researchers in this area can find each other. The Historical Geographic Information Systems (GIS) Clearinghouse and Forum will be hosted by the AAG, but available via links from many other university and related websites, including the National Endowment for the Humanities and the Library of Congress Geography and Map Division.

To encourage participation in the Historical Geographic Information Systems (GIS) Clearinghouse and Forum, we plan to publicize this site widely by contacting scholars through the AAG's Historical Geography Specialty Group and the Geographical Information Science and Systems Specialty Group, as well as through the Harvard

Center for Geographic Analysis, the American Historical Association, the Royal Geographical Society, the American Council for Learned Societies (ACLS), and other organizations. The establishment of this resource is planned to coincide with the launch of the AAG's new website in late 2009, and we are currently organizing a number of scholarly panels and workshops on historical research and geographic technologies for the AAG's 2010 Annual Meeting to be held April 14-18, 2010 in Washington, D.C. Based on the response to special sessions we organized this past year in Las Vegas on topics of Historical GIS, we expect the 2010 workshops and sessions will be of particular interest both geographers and historians involved in research at the intersections of our fields.

This Chairman's Grant has grown out of several years of conversation and correspondence by the AAG with NEH Chairman Bruce Cole and others at NEH regarding the value of geographic perspectives and of GIS as innovative and interactive resources for digital humanities research. By funding this project, the NEH has placed itself at the forefront of an important and growing trend at the nexus of historical and geographical research, and we are grateful for their support. We also feel strongly that, by building on the work the AAG has already completed in the area of geography and the humanities, this project will provide a very substantial resource and forum for geography and history researchers within a relatively short timeframe. ■

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