





Tessa, how did you get connected with Michael? How did the two of you, with your areas of research, really start to form this partnership?

Tessa Murphy:

Yeah, it's a great question, because it was very serendipitous and I'm just so grateful that it happened. I know one person who works in the I School. I can't say I'm particularly connected to the I school. And so as I started to realize that the amount of information I was dealing with was really beyond my capacity as a non-data driven historian, I reached out to her and I said, I don't think this is your area, but do you know anyone who might be able to help me here? And so she put me in touch with Michael. I think I just shot him an email. This would've been a couple of years ago now. And luckily for me, he was very interested in it. And since then we've been able to hire people through respective grants through the SOURCE, which is Syracuse's Office of Undergraduate Research and Creative Engagement, I believe is the full name there. And so we've both been really fortunate to hire students from our respective disciplines who can also contribute to this project. So it's collaborative between the two of us, but also now including a lot of undergraduate and then also a couple of graduate students who have helped us build and analyze this database across a couple of years now.

John Boccacino:

And Michael, from your perspective, I know you mentioned a little bit earlier that this really typifies what you want and do and what you do with the I school and taking data and kind of humanizing it and making it have a relevant purpose. What was your first reaction when you heard from Tessa?

Michael Fudge:

Well, as Tessa explained, it was like a cold call, and I get a lot of cold calls. I got to be honest with you. When rumor gets out that you have a certain area of expertise, you tend to get reached out a lot. But what really attracted me to this was the potential impact that we have there. I just had a vision of a family member somewhere trying to track down a long-lost relative and how difficult that would have to be if you're looking through digital pages of information and how us as part of this digital humanities project, making this information more accessible.

And it actually brought up also a very unique challenge, as I'm sure we'll talk about as we get further in the podcast, but the actual nitty-gritty of transcribing the data is non-trivial. And if it were trivial, Tessa wouldn't need me and there would be other ways to do it. But it's a very distinct and a challenge that we had to come

Yeah. Well, luckily, because I started this project during the pandemic. The pandemic hit and I realized I'm not going to be getting to an archive anytime soon. And very fortunately, the ledgers themselves like the registries are these large bound books that are held in the British National Archives, which are just outside of London. But there was no way I was getting to London anytime soon. And luckily, photographs of those documents are digitized on ancestry.com and are available through SU's library subscription, but they're handwritten and the quality of the photos is not great.

And to add another kind of wrench in the works, although St. Lucia at this time was a British colony, 90% of this particular registry is in French, because it had been a French colony until it was conquered by Great Britain during the Napoleonic Wars. And so the people who are registering their enslaved people are French speaking.

And so this is the one registry in the entire British Empire, there are 671 in total, these two registries are the only ones that are in French just by some fluke. And so it's been interesting research, because especially when we were in the transcription stage, it was imperative to hire student transcribers who could read 19th century French handwriting. And as you can imagine, those students are a bit few and far between. So it was great to kind of seek them out often through the Department of Romance Languages and Literature and to work with them with this kind of unfamiliar at times vocabulary, antiquated and often offensive terms. And certainly just figuring out what letter is that. Because the handwriting has changed a lot over the last couple of hundred years.

John Boccacino:

And how detailed were these records that you're coming across on ancestry.com?

Tessa Murphy:

The registries for St. Lucia and for other crown colonies, so that would be Trinidad and then Burmese, which becomes part of Guyana. They're incredibly detailed. And this is because Crown colonies didn't have elected assemblies. And so it was actually officials in England who were able to say, okay, this is the information that we want.

In other British Caribbean colonies like Jamaica or Barbados, there are really powerful local elected assemblies that when British Parliament says, okay, you need to register every enslaved person in the colony, the planters who are members of those ELE elected assemblies say, fine, we'll register them. We'll do their first name, their color, maybe they're height and whether they're African or American-born, and that's it. So that's still something, but it doesn't give us anywhere near this level of detail.

And so with the registry is for St. Lucia and Trinidad and Burmese, these crown colonies, we've got, I believe, nine columns in the original registry, first name, last name, height, color, occupation, age, distinguishing physical characteristics, family ties, and then corrections. So any updates that are made in future iterations of the registry. And then as Michael will be able to tell you, we engineered other columns to give us more information about those individuals and families.

John Boccacino:

And I want to keep with you, Tessa, for a little bit before we go to Michael, because you obviously are the one who, this is your expertise when it comes to dissecting and studying this and I know you're a researcher who is proficient in this field, but I'm sure, what did you learn about maybe

Yeah, the database I think is going to be such a powerful research, but also teaching tool. And in fact, I used examples from the database in an upper level history seminar that I'm teaching right now. I used them just yesterday where I distributed examples to different students and I had them analyze these as primary documents and said, what do you get from looking at this sheet that you didn't know before about the realities of slavery? And it's fascinating to see what students come up with.

So they were all struck by how short people were and what that suggested about malnutrition. That for the distinguishing physical characteristics, they asked questions about why might people be branded, as some of them were, and what does that suggest about their experiences of the middle passage being

database. Pick up the story from there. What are you doing? How did you incorporate this data when she and her team come to you, and how did we get going with this searchable database? What was your role and how did this all play out?

Michael Fudge:

First and foremost, the original scans, well, they weren't originals, but the ones on ancestry.com, most people's approach to this might be to try to OCR that where you run software that tries to read the characters itself so that a person doesn't have to read the characters. In my eye, there's one reason why it wasn't going to work. And then two, the second reason is why it shouldn't be done in the first place. And the first reason is it's probably not going to work. And it didn't work when we tried it. I didn't think it was going to. And then it didn't when we tried it, because of the nature of the script that was written in the early 18 hundreds I should say, just is not something that the OCR, the opt 0 Td

John Boccacino:

How seamless of a process was it for you? And you mentioned making it searchable, that's a buzzword that people have to throw around, but how hard was it to, in reality go through, some people might only have four or five data set entry points and others have all the criteria put down by the slave holders. So how did you merge the discrepancies to come up with what we have today?

Michael Fudge:

Yeah, there was a lot of review that was done between my student who was a grad student, Ian, over at the I School at the time, and Tessa's students who were doing the transcriptions. There was a lot of collaboration that went on where they would review inconsistencies and then any inconsistencies that they couldn't figure out, they would bubble them up to Tessa to review. And that's the way we tried to maintain most of the data integrity as we were going sheet to sheet. Now, the program that combines them all together was relatively trivial, I should say. I don't want to say it's totally trivial, because you're talking about hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of Google Sheets on a Google Drive. But once we had the structure pretty well laid out in the Google Sheets, it was fairly simple programmatically to combine them all together.

Now when you combine them together, you might not get very consistent data. So that's where a lot of the things like the look-ups and that kind of logic really sort of helps out. And we were very careful in the completed database to indicate which columns came from the original page and which columns we manufactured from the original page.

I'll give you another great example. Tessa mentioned height, and height is transcribed in the registry as like four foot three inches, so four' three.". You can't do any kind of quantitative comparison on that because it's a textual value. So rather than having a person that we hire to change four foot three into 45 inches, we wrote software to do that, to read those. And what happens is if it can't figure it out, it lets you know, and then someone has to review it and a human has to go in there and fix it. And those kinds of things really enrich the data set, because the more dimensions of data that you have to explore these individuals by, I think the greater stories you can tell.

John Boccacino:

Yeah, it's really remarkable just hearing these anecdotes of, again, this interdisciplinary research that's being merged between Maxwell and the I School. And Tessa, I know that this

And so what we can hope to get from them is much greater for St. Lucia. We've started now to work on Trinidad, which similarly was a crown colony that the British acquired during the Napoleonic Wars. And as a result of being a crown colony, the registries that were created there are equally detailed, but there's also far, far more people who are enslaved in Trinidad. And so that will be a bigger task. It will be a task that's all in English. So our ability to hire people who they don't also have to be able to read 19th century French. So we should have a bigger pool of applicants, I would hope.

And what's great is now we have this kind of template of what this information looks like and how it might be entered, and so hopefully that will facilitate getting this done. But the plan is we've done St. Lucia, we hope to do Trinidad. We may also do British Honduras, which is now Belize, because they also have the family groupings there. We may do Burmese. Those are conversations that we'll have down the line. But my goal is certainly to produce a second book project that really centers the experiences of people who were enslaved at the newly acquired frontiers of the British Empire in what's usually



and build out a tree, a family tree if you will, so that contextually, when you're on an individual, you can see that individual's family tree. And that while it's structurally relatively simple to do that graphically, it might be a little challenging, but I would love to see things like that added. And I always enjoy getting students involved in this project for those reasons. It's a great learning opportunity.

Tessa Murphy:

Like Michael, I'm really excited about the prospect of continuing to use this for teaching. I found it to be really useful in terms of helping my students grapple with the realities of slavery as a lived experience and asking them and looking at this data, what can you deduce about the lives of the people whose names you're seeing here? And I think that for many of our students, slavery can sometimes remain an abstraction. They've learned about it since they were very young, but being able to give voice and give a name to people who are enslaved is not necessarily something that they've been able to do. And so I hope that it will be a valuable teaching tool and be useful to researchers who may want to put this information in comparative perspective.

As far as members of descendant communities, I am really looking forward to getting this website up and to making this information freely available because the images that are on ancestry.com are available through subscription, and so they're not available without paying for it, of course. And also, there's a language barrier, potentially the descendants of the people in the St. Lucia registry are almost certainly English-speaking rather than French-speaking now.

So I'm looking forward to making this information available. But I'm also very conscious that this is a very painful history. And so descendants may or may not want to find their ancestors here because it's one thing to maybe know that your ancestors were enslaved. But it's another thing to know that your enslaved ancestor was forced to bear the child of a white man when she was 15, which is something that the registry makes perfectly clear by the fact that the color of the person indicates white parentage, for example. Or to know that your ancestor was missing a limb, whether that was a result of an accident when processing sugar cane or whether somebody amputated that limb as a punishment. So you really see the brutality of slavery in these documents, and I'm very aware that people might prefer not to see that. And I think that what we can hope to do is make this information as accessible and as interactive as possible, and then allow individuals to decide whether and how they want to interact with that information.

John Boccacino:

I commend the two of you for coming together to work on this project, Slavery and the Age of Abolition. It's a tremendous collaboration between the I School and Maxwell.

And the last question for both of you I have before we wrap up on the podcast is I don't know how unique this type of collaboration is in university settings, but how fortunate do you both feel that at Syracuse you were given opportunities to pursue this line of research and turn it into something that can be, again, used for good and used for knowledge? I mean, how fortunate do you feel that you've got that opportunity here at the university?

Michael Fudge:

Yeah, I'm so grateful if for no other reason that every time I work on this, I learn something new. And Tessa brings a perspective that as a historian, I just don't have the capacity to understand until she explained it to me. I'll be honest with you, because it's not my area of expertise. And that's actually what



