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Digital Paxton
www.digitalpaxton.org

As an open-access digital collection, scholarly edition, and teaching platform, Digital Paxton provides the primary-source and contextual materials necessary to explore Pennsylvania's 1764 Paxton "pamphlet war," situating that debate within a wider crisis of representation that stretches from the Seven Years' War (1756–63) to the Northwest Ordinance (1787). That crisis escalated in December 1763, when a mob of backcountry settlers from Paxton Township murdered twenty unarmed Conestoga Indians along the Pennsylvania frontier. Soon after, hundreds of "Paxton Boys" marched on Philadelphia to menace a group of Moravian Indians who had, in response to the violence, been placed under government protection. Though direct confrontation was diffused, the incident ventilated long-festering religious and ethnic grievances, pitting the colony's German and Scots-Irish Presbyterian frontiersmen against Philadelphia's English Quakers and their indigenous trading partners. Supporters of the Paxton Boys and their critics spent the next year battling in print: the resulting public debate constituted about *one-fifth* of the Pennsylvania's printed material for 1764.¹

Central to that print debate was the role of race and religion in settler colonialism, the obligations of the governing to the governed, and the proliferation of unverifiable media, or in today's terms, "fake news."² While John Raine Dunbar's 1957 edition of twenty-eight pamphlets, *The Paxton Papers*, has traditionally served as the gateway to the debate, the Paxton story cannot be fully understood through pamphlets alone.³ Digital Paxton's primary source collection therefore comprises all known pamphlets, including alternate editions and German-language translations, as well as hundreds of additional pages of broadsides, political cartoons, and correspondence.⁴ This expanded corpus provides a case study in viral media that feels unexpectedly urgent today. Pamphleteers mobilized anonymity and pseudonyms to amplify talking points,

discredit opponents, and boost legislative allies, while Paxton supporters forged unlikely coalitions by stoking fears of renewed racial violence and promising security. Surviving documents feature a trove of genre experimentation, including dialogues and epitaphs, poems and songs, and farces and satires. These forms illuminate a print culture whose multiplicity enabled innovation and idiosyncrasy, but also fragmentation and slippages of meaning.

More than a collection of scanned documents, *Digital Paxton* furnishes interpretation and analysis by way of the latest scholarship, historiography, and pedagogy while emphasizing values central to American studies. The project's interdisciplinary imperative is embodied in its keyword essays, which include contributions from historians, literary scholars, and community leaders.⁵ *Digital Paxton* expands the corpus to encompass indigenous perspectives, embracing what the editors of the Yale Indian Papers Project have described as a "common pot" or "a kind of communal liminal space, neither solely Euro-American nor completely Native."⁶ To that point, Digital Paxton features forty-seven rare manuscripts from the Friendly Association Papers, including letters between Quaker leaders and their native partners, accounts of diplomatic conferences, and the writings of Wyalusing leaders.⁷ To support integration into secondary and postsecondary classrooms, Digital Paxton hosts pedagogical resources intended to collapse the distance between historical records and contemporary interpretation.⁸

Built on Scalar, an online publishing platform developed by the Alliance for Networking Visual Culture (scalar.me/anvc/), Digital Paxton pairs rich media support for digital collections with sequences of content ("paths") that narrativize those records. When visitors load the site, they automatically enter a path that guides them through interpretive historical overviews before depositing them in the digital collection itself. Scalar both provides and extends key technologies of the book. As with a book, readers can scan the index, browse the table of contents, or add annotations,⁹ but unlike a physical book, Digital Paxton is richly extensible, accommodates multimedia, and is fully searchable. The project supports print-quality images from a host of archival partners, including newsprint from the American Antiquarian Society, correspondence from the Historical Society of Pennsylvania, congregational diaries from the Moravian Archives of Bethlehem, and never-before-digitized records from the American Philosophical Society and Library Company of Philadelphia.

Polyvocal by design, Digital Paxton's interpretative materials speak to one another but can also be read as freestanding essays.¹⁰ If a reader is interested in the history of Conestoga Indiantown, for example, he or she can use a histori-

cal overview as an entry point to the collection.¹¹ In addition to making the project more flexible for educators, polyvocality supports a philosophical end: to subvert a definitive interpretation of the Paxton incident. Though nearly complete in reproducing original print sources, the project does indeed have gaps, especially when it comes to indigenous records, and highlighting those silences will be an ongoing effort.¹² As a digital humanities project, Digital Paxton is, by design, open for critique and revision, and receptive to new records and interpretations.

Notes

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1. Alison Gilbert Olson, "The Pamphlet War over the Paxton Boys," *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 123.1–2 (1999): 31.
2. To learn more about the Paxton incident, see *Early American Studies* 14.2 (2016) and the monographs of Kevin Kenny (*Peaceable Kingdom Lost: The Paxton Boys and the Destruction of William Penn's Holy Experiment* [New York: Oxford University Press, 2009]) and Jack Brubaker (*On the Trail of the Paxton Boys in Lancaster County* [Charleston: History Press, 2010]). For an exhaustive bibliography, see Digital Paxton's "Further Reading" (digitalpaxton.org/works/digital-paxton/further-reading).
3. John Raine Dunbar, *The Paxton Papers* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1957). Scholars have since situated the incident in the context of failed diplomacy (James Merrell, *Into the American Woods: Negotiations on the Pennsylvania Frontier* [New York: W. W. Norton, 2000]), rural insurrection (Edward White, *The Backcountry and the City: Colonization and Conflict in Early America* [Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005]), and Indian hating (Peter Silver, *Our Savage Neighbors: How Indian War Transformed Early America* [New York: W. W. Norton, 2009]).
4. Aiming to be comprehensive for printed works, Digital Paxton makes all twenty-eight pamphlets identified by Dunbar freely available—as both full text and images—supplemented by thirty-nine additional pamphlets, twenty-two issues of the *Pennsylvania Gazette*, twelve artworks, twelve broadsides, and seven political cartoons, as well as hundreds of pages of related correspondence.
5. The project's keywords-based approach is modeled on that of Bruce Burgett and Glenn Hendler's *Keywords for American Cultural Studies*, 2nd ed. (New York: New York University Press, 2014), much of which is now freely available online (keywords.nyupress.org/american-cultural-studies).
6. Paul Grant-Costa, Tobias Glaza, and Michael Sletcher, "The Common Pot: Editing Native American Materials," *Scholarly Editing: The Association for Documentary Editing* 33 (2012): 1–17.
7. The Friendly Association Papers at Haverford College Libraries, Quaker and Special Collections.
8. See "Podcasting the Paxton Boys" (digitalpaxton.org/works/digital-paxton/podcasting-the-paxton-boys) and "Transcription Assignment: Exploring the Digital Archive" (digitalpaxton.org/works/digital-paxton/transcription-assignment-exploring-the-digital-archive).

9. Annotations may be created or shared using the Hypothes.is plugin enabled across the site.
10. I borrow this term from the feminist historian Adele Perry, "The Colonial Archive on Trial: Possession, Dispossession, and History in Delgamuukw v. British Columbia," in *Archive Stories: Facts, Fictions, and the Writing of History*, ed. Durba Ghosh, Jeff Sahadeo, Craig Robertson, and Tony Ballantyne (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), 337.
11. See Darwin L. Marin's essay, "A History of Conestoga Indiantown" (digitalpaxton.org/works/digital-paxton/a-history-of-conestoga-indiantown).
12. While Friendly Association correspondence sometimes gives voice to native negotiators, many letters are mediated through colonists and most predate the Paxton massacres. Additions to the collection will highlight archival gaps and silences and inculcate readers with an experiential sense of the project's limits.