**Mapping the Fourth of July: Exploring Independence Day in the Civil War Era** is a crowdsourced digital archive that allows users to learn for themselves how Americans celebrated July 4 during the Civil War era. It brings together thousands of documents, ranging from newspaper articles and speeches to private letters and diaries. These sources reveal how a wide range of Americans — northern and southern, white and black, male and female, Democrat and Republican, immigrant and native born — used the Fourth to articulate their deepest beliefs about American identity during the great crisis of the Civil War era.

Between July 2015 and July 2017, our Virginia Tech project team created the Mapping the Fourth website, which is based on the Omeka content management system and enhanced by Incite, a new Omeka plugin that we custom-built for this project. We populated the database with more than 4,000 primary sources, tested the site with beta users, and promoted the site among a variety of audiences through presentations, demonstrations, news media, and social media.

The interdisciplinary project team brought together faculty, students, and staff from across Virginia Tech’s campus: the department of history, the Virginia Center for Civil War Studies, the department of computer science, the school of education, and the university libraries. We recruited an advisory board and beta users from institutions across the country to share their expertise and test the site. The entire team is depicted below:
The primary product of our project is the website “Mapping the Fourth of July: Exploring Independence Day in the Civil War Era,” publicly available via the URL http://july4.civilwar.vt.edu.

Selected Features of Mapping the Fourth:

- **Home Page:** On the home page, users can learn about Mapping the Fourth and the Incite plug-in powering it, click buttons to start contributing or create an account, read our embedded social media feeds, or watch an introductory video embedded in the page.

- **Accounts:** Users can contribute anonymously to Mapping the Fourth. At any time, a user can decide to create an account, and any previous (anonymous) contributions will be automatically linked to that account, allowing her to get credit for her work. Users can log in and log out of their accounts, which are cleanly separated from Omeka accounts.

- **Search:** Users can click the “Contribute” button in the header to access a simplified start page where they can search for tasks by document date range, location, or task type. Alternatively, the search bar in the header lets users perform this search on any page. The Search Results page displays results in both map and list form. Each list item shows the document’s title, publication year, location, status, and a thumbnail image of the document scan. Hovering the mouse over a pin on the map, or an item in the list, reveals a hovercard with additional details about the document.
**Task Pages**: Users can perform three main analysis tasks on each document: Transcribe, Tag, and Connect. Users can perform all three tasks for one document, or perform the same task for many documents, depending on their preference. Additionally, users can post comments on a document during each task, or have more general discussions in a threaded forum system.

- **Transcribe**: This task asks the user to transcribe the scanned image of the document. Additionally, the user indicates the tone of the document and provides a short summary to appear in search results.

- **Tag**: For this task, the user improves tags automatically extracted from the transcript and categorized by Stanford Named Entity Recognition (NER) software. Users can delete spurious tags, add missing tags, and correct any errors in the tag categorizations and descriptions. Users can also propose new tag categories.
- **Connect**: For this task, the user rates how relevant the current document is to high-level topics or themes related to Independence Day and the American Civil War.

- **Discuss**: The user can post comments on any task page for subsequent users to read, e.g., notes on a difficult transcript or questions about appropriate tags. There is also a forum-style Discussion section where users can post threaded replies and embed links to documents in the archive.

**Tutorial**: Each of the three tasks has its own step-by-step tutorial, which walks the user through the process of learning the interface to complete each task on a sample document. Once the user completes the tutorial, they can skip it and go directly into the task.

**Assessment Tool**: The built-in Assessment Tool streamlines the process of measuring how users’ ability to work with primary sources changes after using Mapping the Fourth. The tool is modeled on the SCIM-C framework for learning historical inquiry. First, the instructor provides testing documents with known “gold standard” answers. Second, users analyze these test documents at the beginning and end of their Mapping the Fourth session. Third, the tool can provide users with instant feedback about which of their answers is correct or wrong, and give an explanation.

- **Groups**: Mapping the Fourth has a Groups feature specially designed for teachers using the software for classroom activities. A teacher creates a group and receives a link to share with her students. Students accessing the link make a request to join the group, which the instructor approves. The instructor can provide customized instructions that only their students will see. The instructor can also monitor a dashboard showing exactly which activities each student has completed.

**Release of Incite plugin:**

The Omeka plug-in we created can be useful for many projects beyond Mapping the Fourth. Subsequently, we drew a distinction between Mapping the Fourth (the Civil War-themed project and archive) and Incite (the Omeka plug-in powering this project).

Incite can be added to any Omeka archive to support crowdsourced transcription, tagging, connection, and discussion of historical primary sources. To support this wider usage, we created a generalized and abstracted version of Incite that can be customized to any specific project or archive, as we did with Mapping the Fourth. These customizations can be made on Omeka’s plug-in configuration page and do not require any programming knowledge.

We have released the Incite plug-in as free, open-source software, with essential documentation, download links, and installation instructions. The Incite website is: [http://incite.cs.vt.edu](http://incite.cs.vt.edu).
2. Primary sources

The basis of the entire project is the body of primary sources that our website makes available. We uploaded documents from a wide range of sources that together provide users with a sense of the diversity of celebrations of and attitudes toward July 4th from different social groups, different parts of the country, and different points in time.

The majority of our sources came from the Library of Congress’ Chronicling America database. In order to make the process of adding metadata and page scans more efficient, our team created a new standalone Omeka plugin, Cropping America. Cropping America allows team members to paste in the URL of the newspaper page from Chronicling America and crop the relevant section of the page. The metadata is automatically downloaded into Omeka, saving a significant number of steps as compared to the usual method of manually inputting metadata and page scans. Cropping America was an unforeseen offshoot of Mapping the Fourth, one that we expect will be warmly welcomed by others in the Omeka user community. Cropping America is also released as free, open-source software at http://incite.cs.vt.edu/m4j/cropping/.
We harvested other documents from an array of other sources, ranging from manuscript sources at Virginia Tech’s Special Collections that were digitized expressly for Mapping the Fourth to images, manuscript pages, and other items already available digitally, without copyright restrictions, from other repositories. All the document metadata and images have been added by the project team. We initially planned, in the early stages of website development, to also allow students and public users to add documents through the plugin, but concerns about interface complexity and permissions/copyright led us to reserve this feature to admins only. Documents can easily be added to the archive using Omeka’s built-in interface for creating new items.

3. Teaching

From the inception of the project, we intended Mapping the Fourth to be especially useful for teachers and their students. The trove of primary sources the site is based upon hold great potential for teachers at multiple educational levels. Not only do the sources open up the study of some of the major themes of Civil War era history—from race and slavery to politics and national identity—they also allow teachers and their students to develop transferable skills in primary source analysis and interpretation.

We have consulted teachers every step of the way. Our planning workshop in September 2015 included several college, high school, and middle school teachers who shared their insights into how to make the site serve their pedagogical needs. In 2016 we enlisted ten teachers at various levels to test the site with their students and report back in an online survey and online meeting. And at the end of the project in summer 2017 we solicited further online feedback on the finished site from our beta users.

Guided by teachers’ input and the educational experts on our own team, we have developed a site of substantial utility in the classroom. The underlying site design—the different tasks users can complete, the questions that prompt users to contextualize each document by time period and social perspective, and so on—all reflect the needs of teachers.

To make educational use of the site as easy as possible, we developed ten assignment guidelines, five for the high school level and five for the college level, all freely available through our website (http://incite.cs.vt.edu/m4j/incite/help/teachers). These guidelines provide instructors with concrete, easy-to-implement ideas of how to make the most of the resources. Activities cover a wide range of different kinds of assignments, including brief class challenges to transcribe, tag, and compare documents; short homework assignments; document-based question explorations; and long-term inquiry-based research projects. The guidelines employ a historical source analysis scaffold called SCIM-C to support project assignments and assessments that focus on the analysis of historical sources as part of a historical inquiry. The assignment guidelines aim to make the project as scalable and as appealing as possible for teachers to authentically and appropriately incorporate Mapping the Fourth into their classes.

The beta users particularly appreciated the way the site exposed their students to “real pieces of history,” allowing them to work in a guided way with primary sources that represent a wide variety of viewpoints. Throughout the testing period, core users also provided valuable suggestions for improvement. For example, early feedback prompted us to develop the “groups” feature, allowing teachers to see their students’ work and to provide customized instructions for specific assignments. We also followed user suggestions as we improved the user interface and added additional features, such as the ability to search documents regardless of task (transcribe/tag/connect) and the ability to edit previously completed transcriptions.

The only significant difficulty we discovered during the design and testing phases is that the content of many documents is too advanced for effective use at the middle school level. We remedied this by refocusing our promotions and beta testing on college and high school teachers, rather than middle school teachers. For example, we delivered presentations and/or demonstrated Mapping the Fourth at professional meetings such as the Virginia Forum, the National Council on Social Studies conference, and the Organization of American Historians conference.
With increasing numbers of high-quality digital humanities projects competing for the attention of users, one of the major challenges is attracting users. Throughout the grant period we have endeavored to promote the site to potential users, ranging from teachers to Civil War history enthusiasts to professional historians.

One of our major promotional activities has been to deliver 19 presentations/demonstrations of the project to a variety of audiences:

- March 5, 2016: Virginia Forum (Yorktown, VA)
- March 19, 2016: Virginia Tech Civil War Weekend (Blacksburg, VA)
- April 8-10, 2016: Display booth at Organization of American Historians conference (Providence, RI)
- April 11, 2016: Tri-city Civil War Roundtable (Kingsport, Tenn.)
- May 17, 2016: Outer Banks Civil War Roundtable (Southern Shores, NC)
- June 9, 2016: Old Baldy Civil War Roundtable (Camden County, NJ)
- June 28, 2016: South Bay Civil War Roundtable (San Jose, Cal.)
- June 29, 2016: Virginia Tech Alumni Association (San Diego, Cal.)
- August 18, 2016: Powhatan Civil War Roundtable (Powhatan, Va.)
- October 20, 2016: Virginia Tech CLAHS Dean’s roundtable (Blacksburg, Va.)
- November 11, 2016: Civil War and Digital History Workshop (UVA)
- December 12, 2016: National Council on Social Studies Conference (Washington, DC)
- January 12, 2017: Big Data Science Workshop (Blacksburg, Va.)
- February 7, 2017: Institute of Lifelong Learning (Blacksburg, Va.)
- April 24, 2017: Brandon Oaks Retirement Community (Roanoke, Va.)
- June 30, 2017: Independence Day Transcribeathon, Blacksburg Public Library (Blacksburg, Va.)
- July 4, 2017: Pamplin Historical Park (Petersburg, Va.)
- August 8, 2018: Onondaga-Cortland- Madison BOCES Problem Based Education workshop (New York)

At these events we have typically distributed hard copies of the Mapping the Fourth brochure (included in the appendix). The brochure has also been distributed at other Virginia Center for Civil War Studies events, such as the annual Civil War Weekend and the Civil War Film Series, and it was mailed out in early summer of 2017 to a number of Civil War historians, museums, and other institutions.

We have also promoted the site through social media, particularly around the Independence Day holiday in 2016 and 2017. Our [facebook](https://www.facebook.com) and [twitter](https://twitter.com) feeds promoted various aspects of the project with regular posts and updates, from featured documents and teaching tips to media coverage. And a special email advertised the project to more than 500 members of the Virginia Center for Civil War Studies email list.

We publicized Mapping the Fourth through references in the news media. Our project was featured or mentioned by the NPR affiliates [WVTF](http://wvtf.org) and [WCVE](http://wcve.net), the [National Council on Public History](http://www.ncph.org), the [Miami Herald](http://www.miamiherald.com), and the [Virginia Tech News](http://www.vt.edu) in 2016 and 2017. The project also gave rise to two newspaper op-eds: one in the [Roanoke Times](http://www.roanoketimess.com) on July 4, 2016, and another in the [Richmond Times-Dispatch](http://www.richmond.com) on July 3, 2017.
Finally, we worked with Virginia Tech’s library staff to build an **exhibit** on Mapping the Fourth that occupied a prominent place close to the library’s circulation desk between late May and early September 2017. Photographs of the exhibit are below; more are available via [facebook](https://www.facebook.com).
5. Conclusions and possible future enhancements

Mapping the Fourth is fully functional and has attracted positive feedback from beta users and presentation audiences. We are especially proud of the depth of the learning experience enabled by our software and content. Many other digital humanities sites offer a quick reward: short documents or instant visualizations that don’t require much from the user. Mapping the Fourth requires a greater time commitment, especially in the case of the longer documents, and in return it offers a greater payoff in the form of enhanced primary source interpretation skills and wider knowledge of the multifaceted debate surrounding Independence Day during the Civil War era. Consequently, Mapping the Fourth offers a deeper-level digital humanities experience, one better suited to serious history enthusiasts and highly committed teachers than casual users.

There are a number of features we would like to add in the future, if possible. To enhance the visual experience of Mapping the Fourth, we would like to include historical map overlays on our current map interface. We would also like to add other capabilities to encourage user contributions, such as a dynamic progress bar for overall contributions on the home page, the ability to select documents by difficulty level, and a system of user levels or badges to recognize frequent contributors with increased status. Finally, we would like to add features for historians to more easily find, download, and work with transcripts and annotations created by users. These and other enhancements would both appeal to new users and encourage existing users to keep coming back. With new funding from the NEH, a subset of the Mapping the Fourth team is continuing development on the Incite plug-in to pursue some of these next steps.

Our team has built a fully functional website based on a custom-made plugin for the Omeka content management system, complete with innovative features that facilitate complex user analysis of primary sources, analysis that is informed by current pedagogical theory. We have populated the underlying Omeka database with more than four thousand primary sources that allow users to explore a wide range of perspectives on July 4th. We designed the site with two major audiences in mind: history enthusiasts from the general public; and, even more so, teachers and students at the high school and college levels. We worked to make the site user-friendly and rewarding, and promoted its use with presentations and media outreach.

For the support that made all of this possible, the project team is extremely grateful to the National Historical Publications & Records Commission and to various departments and units of Virginia Tech: the department of computer science, the Virginia Center for Civil War Studies, the department of history, the school of education, and the university libraries.
Mapping the Fourth trifold brochure:

Mapping the Fourth is a collaborative digital humanities project at Virginia Tech. Coordinated by the Virginia Center for Civil War Studies, it involves faculty, staff, and support from the Center for Human-Computer Interaction, History, Computer Science, the School of Education, and the University Libraries. Mapping the Fourth is funded with a "Literacy and Engagement with Historical Records" grant from the National Historical Publications and Records Commission. The site uses the Omeka content management system, along with the new open-source Incite plugin developed by our team.

**Project Directors**
- Dr. Paul Quigley (History, VCCWS)
- Dr. Kurt Luther (Computer Science, HCI)
- Dr. David Hicks (Education)

**Contact Us**
- pqquigley@vt.edu
- 540-231-9090

Website queries: incite-gil@vt.edu

---

How did Americans celebrate Independence Day when their nation was falling apart?

www.july4.civilwar.vt.edu
The fascinating story of Independence Day in the Civil War era is waiting to be discovered. But we need your help.

Our digital archive allows anyone to explore the history of July 4 during America’s greatest conflict. Thousands of primary sources—letters, diaries, newspaper articles, and more—reveal the intense struggle over the meaning of America that took place every 4th of July.

Did you know that many white southerners stopped celebrating the Fourth at the end of the Civil War?

Frustrated by defeat and emancipation, they did not fully resume their own celebrations for years. Northerners, meanwhile, used the Fourth to celebrate Union victory while African Americans embraced the opportunity to claim their place in the national community. For everyone, July 4 was a day to argue about who counted as an American and what that meant.

Visit the Mapping the Fourth website to take part in a community effort to collect and interpret these sources.

You can transcribe, tag, connect, and discuss the sources.

We can’t uncover these stories without your help. Thank you.

www.july4.civilwar.vt.edu

Mapping the Fourth is an innovative teaching tool that brings the experiences of Civil War Americans alive for your students.

Whether you teach at the college, high school, or even middle school level, your students will jump at the chance to learn about how a previous generation of Americans celebrated the Fourth. (Yes, there were fireworks!) These are engaging documents that open up big themes: North-South differences; the causes and consequences of the Civil War; African American experiences of emancipation. On our website you’ll find lesson plans and assignment guidelines that make it easy to integrate it into your courses.

Try it out in your next class. Your students will thank you for it.