

Descriptive Enhancements of the Rice Family Papers

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This summer I worked on the project Descriptive Enhancement of the Digitized Rice Family Papers, under Caleb McDaniel and Amanda Focke. The project revolves around a set of 419 documents stored at the Heritage Society in Houston. These documents, a mix of business and personal letters related to William Marsh Rice, were of great research value to the university's task force on slavery, segregation, and racism, which had them swiftly digitized to be used for research. A crowdsourced service was employed to transcribe the letters, and the documents were subsequently uploaded to the University of North Texas's Portal to Texas History. Because the letters were not already archivally arranged and described, and because of the speed at which they were digitized, the metadata for this material was very preliminary, calling for a review. Additionally, once I began working I found that a large number of the documents in the collection had not been given metadata at all. Over the course of the summer, I reviewed and corrected existing metadata and wrote metadata for documents that had none. When it came to making changes to the metadata, there were three overarching problems: first, instances in which the metadata's author was clearly confused; second, euphemistic language; and third, diminishing the presence of free and enslaved Black people.

Let's begin with a couple instances of human confusion entering the metadata. One good example is this letter to William Marsh Rice to his brother Fred. The original metadata listed this letter as "Trey Bonn to Frederick A. Rice," and if you look at the signature, you can understand

why, as the name Fred appears somewhat secondary to his signoff of “trey bonn,” a misspelling of the French for “very good.” Confusion over letters often appeared in the description metadata field, like in this letter to Rice regarding an insurance claim on goods lost by a particular boat called “Rival.” The original metadata, however, did not put together that Rival was the name of a boat, and describes the letter as referring to insurance “from their rival.” A very similar case comes in this letter to Rice regarding a contestation over land ownership. There is a tenant renting a house on land claimed both by Rice and someone in the town of Comanche, Texas. In the description, the original metadata twice asserts that, rather than being a person in Comanche, the other claimant is himself a member of the Comanche nation.

These were fairly humorous at times, but they also allowed me to reflect on the way we preserve documents and the way we do history. In particular is one letter, entitled in the metadata as “Marginalia to Sister Lottie.” The person inputting the metadata for this letter drew information from the crowd-sourced transcription, rather than the letter itself. In the transcription, the transcriber noted that there was illegible writing in the margins of the letter by ending the transcription with “[Marginalia, left, illegible].” The person inputting the metadata understood this to be the name of the writer. The actual writer was William Marsh Rice, who wrote his initials, as it happens, in the marginalia. I think this stands out to me for a couple reasons. First, it’s funny, because Marginalia is not a name, or at least not a common one. But beyond that, it’s an interesting example of contingency in the construction of objects. In order for the construction of the title “Marginalia to Sister Lottie” to exist, a series of processes had to converge in a singular way: William Marsh Rice needed to run out of space in the letter and sign his name in the margin, the transcriber needed to comment on the marginalia in a particular place that made it look like it could be a reference to a signature, and the person inputting the metadata

needed to be unfamiliar with the term marginalia. A lot of this project has made me reflect on the ways that human error compounds, but the Marginalia letter is less about error and more about compounding human actors.

The next problem is euphemistic language. If the purpose of metadata is to facilitate research, ambiguity or euphemism should be avoided. For instance, one letter to Rice is described in the original metadata as “discussing the lack of opportunity given to discuss a difficult subject with the boy.” In addition to being based off of a misreading of the letter, this description has nothing to do with the majority of the contents, which are about cotton shipments and financial accounts. My favorite case of euphemistic came in a letter to Fred Rice from an overseer on his plantation. The letter is nine words long: “please send me some tobacco, don’t forget it.” While this letter would be extremely easy to precisely summarize, the metadata actively inserts mystery by describing the letter as “discussing the need to be sent an item.”

The third problem was representation of free and enslaved Black people. As Rice was engaged in slavery’s capitalism, these letters touch on enslaved people in the antebellum period and freemen after the war. Making sure that these people entered the metadata was important for me. In one instance, a document with the benign title “Document Securing Payment for Notes Given by William M. Rice,” was actually a record of the sale of enslaved people, including names and physical descriptions. In another case, a letter is described as “discussing a runaway slave,” which is dehumanizing language, especially considering that the text of the letter contains the man’s name, Captain. Making sure that these details enter the metadata is important for research, but it’s also important in confronting the dehumanization of Black people in the historical record. The process of writing metadata implicitly the question of what is important to

a document, to erase the presence of free and enslaved Black people is to reaffirm a white supremacist system.

While I was able to verify the names of the senders and recipients of almost all of the letters, two remain unsolved. One is written from Maria to Mary, the other from Lizzie to “my darling baby.” The lack of last names made the task of tracking down the identities extremely difficult. By pulling details from the letters, I built profiles of the senders and recipients, as well as overviews of what I could glean about their relationship. Armed with these details, I searched for people in Rice’s orbit with the right names, but I ultimately came up short. I have some theories, but nothing to hang my hat on. After a visit to the Heritage Society to seek further information about the letters, I passed off my notes and this part of the project to them. Hopefully they will be able to ascertain what I could not through further time and effort.

This project served to make the Heritage Society’s set of Rice family papers more accessible by creating precise metadata. This was my first time working with metadata, and it led me to reflect a considerable amount about its importance. Additionally, this project gave me an opportunity to use and experiment with the tool AirTable, through which I found ways to streamline and automate various parts of the work. I am thankful to the Fondren Fellows program, as well as my mentors Caleb and Amanda, for this opportunity.