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Going Digital to Enrich Research and Engage the Public

ABSTRACT Developing a public-facing website expanded the scope of my book project about pioneer monuments by opening new research questions. As public attention turned toward controversial monuments, I reimagined the role of my website. No longer just a companion to a scholarly monograph, it became a central piece of a new, multifaceted public engagement project. I now seek to inform ongoing debates about controversial statues, and to spark conversations in locations where similar monuments have thus far been less controversial. **KEYWORDS:** monuments, memory, digital history, public engagement, public history

THE INTERNET ENABLES just about anyone to present historical content to a broad public audience. But can presenting so much information change our understanding of the past? How can we ensure that high-quality content reaches our intended audience? Taking my research online opened new lines of inquiry for me and enabled me to present more material to more people, free of cost. Working across Internet platforms has enabled me to reach a wider audience and gives me the opportunity to shape public debates surrounding frontier memory.

I originally created my website, Pioneer Monuments in the American West (https://pioneermonuments.net), as a companion to a book I was writing, *Pioneer Mother Monuments: Constructing Cultural Memory* (University of Oklahoma Press, 2019), on the history of frontier commemoration in the West. I studied roughly two hundred public monuments and reliefs in the process of writing the book. Printing even grayscale images of all two hundred statues in the book would have been prohibitively expensive. Online, however, I could provide multiple color photos and far more detailed histories of each statue than could fit within my four-hundred-page monograph.

Going digital also made my research far more manageable. Early on, a paper wall map of the United States allowed me to visualize the handful of sculptures that were part of my original study of twenty or so Pioneer Mother monuments erected in the late 1920s. But as I traveled the country studying those monuments, I kept encountering

additional monuments that did not fit the original parameters of my study. Expanding my scope to include all public statuary known colloquially as "pioneer monuments"— from their inception in the 1880s to the present—expanded the scope of my project ten-fold. As a result, I needed to find new ways to manage that content. A traditional wall map could no longer capture the complexity of my expanded data set. Instead, I worked with a skilled programmer to map the erection of pioneer monuments over *time* as well as *space*.

Interactive map and timeline from the website Pioneer Monuments in the American West (https://pioneermonuments.net).

My now interactive map and timeline opened up new research questions: Why did clusters of monuments appear close to one another, in relatively short periods of time? Why did interest in pioneer commemoration shift between urban and rural spaces? Going digital opened up new lines of inquiry for my users as well. By comparing their local statues to others across the nation, website users could explore the racial and gendered subtexts of those monuments at the time they were erected, and note how local reception of the monuments has changed over time. Website visitors could learn the history of the little-known statues in their community and compare the distribution of similar monuments across the nation. This, again, allowed me to include many more monuments than could be included in my book.

The Internet enables us to present tremendous amounts of information freely to the public. But, in contrast to carefully curated library collections, the Internet offers a seemingly unlimited array of content of varying veracity. How can we attract users to our high-quality sites? Toward that end, I partnered with Clio (www.theclio.com), a website and mobile app that guides the public to thousands of historic sites throughout the United States. I am now building entries for my two hundred monuments within the Clio database; these entries will link back to my website for more in-depth and comparative content. I am using Clio's software to build walking tours in cities with high concentrations of pioneer monuments,

and virtual tours of thematically related statues. Additionally, I partnered with secondary school teachers to develop model lesson plans, so that they could bring discussion of pioneer commemoration—and controversy—into the classroom. These model lesson plans are now freely available on my website. Internet-based projects like these can help educators reach younger audiences while simultaneously expanding conversations about pioneer and other monuments geographically.

Beginning in 2015, public debates surrounding controversial monuments began to spread, and I began to envision a new role for my website. Beyond educating individuals, I hoped my website could inform ongoing debates about controversial statues, and spark conversations in locations where similar monuments have, thus far, been less controversial. Toward that end, I embarked on a series of public presentations at museums, public libraries, and even a local pub. One such talk focused on San Francisco's Pioneer Monument, around which controversy has swirled since at least the early 1990s. Dedicated in 1894, the monument featured several bronze sculptures depicting California history as a progression from American Indian "savagery" to white American "civilization." Criticism focused on the monument's *Early Days* bronze grouping, which depicted a Spanish missionary towering over a Native American man seated at his feet, while a Mexican vaquero swung a (now missing) lasso over his head in the background. Complaints about *Early Days* reached a crescendo amid calls to remove Confederate monuments across the American South, and the local public arts commission voted to remove that portion of the larger monument. In July 2018, I spoke about the history of that statue and other Bay Area pioneer monuments at the San Francisco Public Library, while at the same time a lawsuit sought to prevent the removal of *Early Days*. Following my presentation, I led a walking tour to the monument itself, where we were able to view the monument in context and discuss its impact on library patrons and other visitors to the city's civic center. Two months later, the city removed *Early Days* from its pedestal and placed it in storage. Today, its plinth stands empty, testifying to the problematic nature of the monument.

Cynthia Prescott leads a walking tour of San Francisco's *Pioneer Monument*.

Photo by Lisa Allen

A year later, I spoke at a pub in Eugene, Oregon. Students and faculty at the University of Oregon had publicly challenged the hundred-year-old *Pioneer Father* statue on that campus but, interestingly, had ignored the nearby *Pioneer Mother*. Shortly after my visit, someone placed glowing red goggles on the *Pioneer Mother*, indicating new interest in a previously forgotten statue. I continue to seek out opportunities to engage the public about controversial monuments, both in person and through online publications and social media.

Pioneer Mother statue on University of Oregon campus wearing glowing red goggles.

Photo by Andrea Radke-Moss

The Internet enables us to make tremendous quantities of information freely available to users throughout the country and around the world. Digital tools enable comparative study and can open new lines of inquiry. But to ensure that this content reaches its intended audiences, we must be creative and intentional in our design and marketing of websites and other online venues.

NOTE

Cynthia Culver Prescott is an associate professor of history at the University of North Dakota.