

## Feature Article

### The Stuff Archives Are Made Of

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Consider a facsimile edition. A facsimile is a physical book and a highly accurate one will mimic the look and feel of the original. Yet it is not the original. It is a copy. A facsimile edition conveys all the information of the original object yet is lacking in an almost intangible way. It is not the original, and we know this.

Also consider a digital surrogate of an archival document, say the letters of someone living in the seventeenth century. Similar to the facsimile, digital copies convey all the information contained in the original letters and are also able to give insight into life during that time. Indeed, a digital surrogate is not an original and we know it. It too lacks some quality which the originals have.

Facsimiles and digital surrogates can feature informational and evidential values that most researchers will need, but when it comes to leading instruction sessions in our archives or special collections reading rooms, there is the third type of archival value—intrinsic value—that truly draws in the curious and brings the history in our collections to life.

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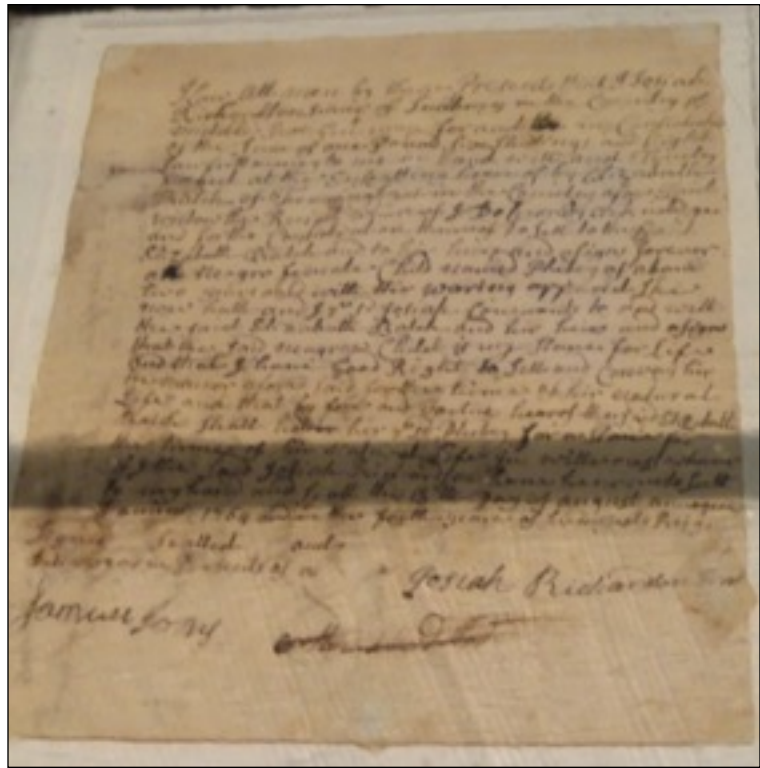
Intrinsic value is defined by the SAA glossary as: “The usefulness or significance of an item derived from its physical or associational qualities, inherent in its original form and generally independent of its content, that are integral to its material nature and would be lost in reproduction.” For me, the intrinsic value of an object—be it book, document, or artifact—is linked to the concept of “historical empathy,” which can be a powerful way of connecting students of all types to the historical figures and times represented in our collections.

Historical empathy is a pedagogical term of which I was only recently made aware. Jason Endacott and Sarah Brooks define it as, “the process of students’ cognitive and affective engagement with historical figures to better understand and contextualize their lived experiences, decisions, or actions. Historical empathy involves understanding how people from the past thought, felt, made decisions, acted, and faced consequences within a specific historical and social context.” (Endacott & Brooks) Although historical empathy may be gained by examining primary sources via digital

Jason Endacott and Sarah Brooks, “An Updated Theoretical and Practical Model for Promoting Historical Empathy,” *Social Studies Research and Practice* 8.1 (Spring 2013): 41.

surrogates, there is an immediacy to the effect when someone is able to be placed in physical proximity, if not actual contact, with the object. In the Special Collections and Archives at CU Boulder, one powerful example of objects creating historical empathy are documents related to the history of American slavery. For students who have only learned of slavery in textbooks, seeing the evidence of these practices with their own eyes is a powerful experience.

We can draw a parallel between archiving digital materials and the debate on whether to migrate files to new formats or to emulate the systems and programs that created them. Migration ensures their continued access and will most likely retain their informational and evidential value, but emulation holds the key to preserving the intrinsic value of born digital materials. Through emulation we can work to preserve the experience of accessing a Word document in a Windows 3.1 system, or perhaps also be distracted by the lure of Minesweeper and Solitaire. The experience of working in digital is more than just a static PDF or Excel spreadsheet, it is the operating system and desktop as well.



*Example of slavery document*

But the debate over digital surrogates v. paper or emulation v. migration is not an either/or proposition. We have choices and we have context to consider. Moreover, I'd argue for archivists not think in dogmatic precepts, but rather proceed on a careful case-by-case basis. For so many of our collections, digital surrogates are acceptable and are especially needed for remote researchers. However, when we consider the important question of primary source instruction and what we want to achieve with it, we should consider what objects will best create historical empathy for our students via their physical presence in the classroom. When we do this, we can build a rich learning environment that will reinforce not only the importance of our collections, but also help craft a worthwhile learning experience for our students and visitors.