Founders Online Review
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Founders Online[1] is an intriguing source of digitized documents from six of the most influential figures of the American colonial and revolutionary periods: George Washington, Benjamin Franklin, John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, Alexander Hamilton, and James Madison. A brief search of these primary sources reveals not only some of the most spirited debate of issues surrounding the formation of the United States, but also delves into the founders' personal thoughts and relationships. That this rich compilation allows researchers to quickly and easily access the private lives of these key founders is what sets Founders Online apart from other historical research websites.

The project is administered by the National Archives and funded by NHPRC, National Endowment for the Humanities, and more than a dozen additional funders and sponsors. Material is freely available for searching in Founders Online and represents 50 years of collecting projects at the University of Virginia, University of Chicago, Princeton University, Columbia University, the Massachusetts Historical Society, the American Philosophical Society, and Yale University. Staff at these six partner institutions have located, transcribed, and annotated all of the more than 151,000 documents. Documents from some archives and private owners are not visible on Founders Online. However, the source notes inform users where such documents are housed.

Founders Online is structured around users searching people, time periods, and concepts. The search box is centrally located on the home page above three entity boxes for author (who wrote the document), recipient (who the document was sent to), and time period (spanning the Colonial period from 1748 to 1775 to the post-Madison presidency, from 1817 to 1836). The interface is clean and intuitive, echoing web design conventions seen on retail sites like Amazon.com, and is navigable for novice to master researchers. For example, rather than scrolling through the 104 pages of materials received by Abigail Adams, one can instead narrow search results by author, time period, or a manually-entered date range. These options are clearly placed on the left-hand side of the search results. A number next to each option indicates how many related materials there are, so users can decide whether or not to view all 38 items John Quincy Adams gave Abigail Adams. Users can also view the beginning of each document without having to click on an individual listing by choosing the view style: compact (one line of text), detailed (four lines of text), or tabular (a modular view showing author, recipient, title, and date), a function that could inspire future models for making manuscript documents accessible online

The ability while searching to see a list of previous searches by the user, return to search results, and start a new search from any page is helpful. Search results offer six sorting facets: earliest date, latest date, author, recipient, editorial order, and relevance. While viewing a record, other tools are located within a "you are looking at" box containing the record's citation and links to related records (e.g., a letter's reply).

On the homepage, the documents perhaps could be searchable by subject as well as the author, recipient, and date modules. Although the current organization of the homepage's access points fit into a tidy design, an additional search feature organized by subject could save scholars of the American Revolution, for example, some time. Right now, researchers must dig through the records of the founding fathers for references to slavery and pick out the most contextual ones, whereas a "slavery" subject access point on the homepage, ranked by number of matches or by relevancy, could save researchers a possibly tedious process. This could be a project for a group of aspiring archivists to do, if staff and funding would not allow otherwise.

Maintaining an ongoing web project without as much support as Founders Online could be difficult for an archives or archival web project. What helps is having a focused collecting area, scope, and a sense of scholarly anticipation. Fifty years of collecting, work on editions of materials credited in Pulitzer Prize-winning pieces, and user confidence in the website's quality of design and functionality are what make Founders Online a successful project from the standpoint of an archivist.

Researchers include students learning about the Federalist Papers to historians whose lives are devoted to the pursuit of primary sources about their subject, allowing archivists to promote Founders Online as both an authoritative scholarly reference tool and as an easy-to-use resource for all educators. Archivists can also model their own projects after what went into Founders Online before its launch and how the project was organized, while considering how partnerships with other institutions could replicate the Founders Online approach to access to strong and unique collections. Overall, one cannot praise the National Archives and its NHPRC enough for entering into this cooperative agreement with The University of Virginia Press so this site could exist and make these fascinating historical documents freely accessible.

Citations:
[1] http://founders.archives.gov/