Ohio State Libraries Undergraduate Research Prize

Research Journal

How I Discovered My Topic

During winter quarter 2012, I had the opportunity to take English H590.08. The class, led by Dr. Elizabeth Renker, was designed as an introduction to conducting archival research using primary data sources. The final goal of the class was to write a 15-20 page research paper that demonstrated not only significant conclusions but a firm grasp of archival research methods. Also, as a class, we would be learning about changes that occurred in American literature during the years 1860-1910, specifically dealing with the poetry of Sarah Piatt. The Ohio State Universities Library system is fortunate to have the Sarah M. B. Piatt Collection here in its Rare Books and Manuscripts Library; it was this collection on which the class would focus and use to explore how primary data is handled, studied, and cited in scholarly work.

I first met with Dr. Anne Fields on January, 19th 2012. At this point in the class, we had studied the poetry of Sarah Piatt and the work of the leading Piatt scholar, Paula Bennett, while also looking at differing late 19th century views on poetry; we had not, at this time, actually been able to see the Piatt collection. During my first meeting with Dr. Fields, we discussed potential ideas for my paper; originally I was thinking about looking at possible philosophical models that may have influenced Piatt’s poetry. Dr. Fields was very excited by this idea, but I remember her distinctly saying, “Wait until you get into the collection before you really decide what you want to write on. One of the worst things you can do as a primary researcher is try to force the evidence to prove something that it just doesn’t prove.” I was struck by these words, and on our first day in the RBMS, I went into the Piatt Collection with a relatively open mind, but always keeping my possible research topic in the back of head.

Sure enough, after looking through folders of biographical information and personal letters of Sarah Piatt, I did not find any evidence for possible philosophical models that may have influenced her poetry! This didn’t upset me, however, because along the way I had come across two fascinating and frustrating pieces of paper. As we had learned in class, Sarah Piatt and her poetry had dropped out of the American literary consciousness. A large amount of Paula Bennett’s work has been to recover Sarah Piatt and argue for her place as one of the greatest female American poets of the 19th century. One of the papers that I found in the collection was a letter written to Sarah Piatt in which the writer claimed that she would be the greatest female poet in America, and the other was a poem which essentially exclaimed the same thing. Here were two pieces of evidence that seemed to be arguing what Paula Bennett was arguing, but these were from Piatt’s own time! The letter and the poem were both written by a man named George D. Prentice. As I continued to search through Piatt’s biographical information, George D. Prentice and his remarkable claim kept being mentioned over and over again. My mind started buzzing with all sorts of questions: Who was this man? What was his connection to Sarah Piatt? How could he make such a bold claim? Why do we not know about him today? I knew I had found my research topic.
1. **Information Needs**

After conducting several searches for “George D. Prentice” in the WorldCat database, I found that there was no biography written on Prentice. However, I did find an original 1883 book of his poetry (which included a biographical sketch and the letter to Piatt). I requested this book through the RBMS since it was part of their collection. Interestingly, once I received this item, I realized that it was the complete copy of the book from which the letter and the poem had been excerpted. As I compared the two pieces of evidence, I realized that the poem in the Piatt Collection was actually incomplete. I pointed this out to Rebecca Jewett, and with Paula Bennett’s permission, the complete poem has now been added to the Piatt Collection. It was just a small way that I got to be involved with the process of creating a rare books collection. This book was one of my main biographical information resources on Prentice, but I knew I would still have to look elsewhere in order to fully flesh out Prentice’s biography.

I soon came to realize that there were so many different aspects of Prentice’s and Piatt’s life, not just the biographical, that needed to be explored in order for an accurate view of the connection between them to be displayed. It became clear that I needed to understand Prentice’s role as a newspaper editor, the popularity of the *Louisville Journal*, Piatt’s life, and her popularity as poet both during and after the time in which Prentice was publishing her poetry. Toward the end of the quarter, I discovered that Prentice also influenced the career of Piatt’s husband. This avenue then needed to be explored. Dr. Fields suggested that I look to see how Prentice fit into his larger social and literary world. Dr. Renker advised that I also look at the history of American newspapers to discover how, why, or when Prentice and the *Louisville Journal* emerged and then disappeared. There were so many questions that needed to be answered. In fact, the more and more I researched, the more and more I discovered that I still needed to go further and dig deeper. Clearly, I was going to need several types of research databases and research tools. Not only did I discover the wide array of research tools available to me through The Ohio State University Libraries system, I also received excellent instruction on how best to utilize those resources.

2. **Research Tools**

Once I had discussed and hammered out my topic with Dr. Renker, she suggested that I use Google Books in order to find extra sources of biographical information on both Piatt and Prentice that were not included in the Sarah M. B. Piatt Collection. When searching for “George D. Prentice,” I found Watterson’s memorial address for Prentice and Kate Sanborn’s book on newspaper wits. When searching for “Piatt”, I also discovered new biographical information on both Sarah and her husband, which ended being immensely helpful in determining how Prentice both gained and then lost his place as Piatt’s literary guide. Dr. Renker also suggested the use of Chielens, Mott, and Lutes in order to fully explore the nature of antebellum newspapers and the decline and fall of the *Louisville Journal* as a newspaper. Along with those suggestions, I also searched the OSU Library Catalogue for books on the popular press during the mid-1800’s. I found several books that looked enticing. I had to OhioLink most these books as OSU either did not have the books or its copies were already out on loan. Dr. Fields showed our class how to use OhioLink during our first information session; this library service was extremely important to my research, as these books were not available on Google Books, and I could not have quickly gotten copies of what I needed any other way.
Once I had decided that my topic was Prentice, I e-mailed Dr. Fields to update her on the change, and she suggested that I look at the WorldCat – FirstSearch version. She told me that this was a database for finding actual archival material, some of which might be available online. When I looked in WorldCat – FirstSearch, I did find several libraries that contained archival material relating to Prentice. Unfortunately, none of the materials were available to be read or looked at online, and Dr. Fields had warned me of this possibility. I also visited the Kentucky Historical Society’s Online Resources site, but again, I could find no letters of Prentice that were available for online utility. However, I was not discouraged by this. Rationally thinking, I knew that my financial (no research stipend) and time (ten weeks) constraints for the paper hampered my ability to fully seek out and explore all of the archival options available. If anything, my lack of success in finding online archival material about Prentice and antebellum Southern newspaper editors made me realize just how undervalued and understudied this topic was, and that it was an excellent area in which I could conduct critical research.

Dr. Fields also suggested that I look in American Periodical Series to see if I could find any information on the Louisville Journal. I cannot overstate how important this database ended up being for my paper. Not only did I discover information on the Louisville Journal, but it was information gathered from APS that allowed me to place Prentice as a figure within his own time. My ability to do so was key to the success of my paper. The sources were exactly what I needed as they came from his lifetime or just after his death. I used editorials and articles about Prentice, the Louisville Journal, and newspaper editors to flesh out Prentice’s stature as a great literary figure in 19th-century America. This made the reason for how his letter claiming Piatt’s greatness ever came to be published much more understandable.

Many of my sources came from the Sarah M. B. Piatt collection which meant that I had to be trained how to work within the Rare Books and Manuscripts Library. It was challenging to learn how the system worked, how to request materials, how to handle the materials, keep them catalogued properly, and then to learn how to use them as pieces of evidence. Rebecca Jewett and the staff at the Rare Books and Manuscripts Library were so helpful in this regard. Whenever I had questions about how to care for and protect an old book, they were always there to help and guide me. Having the opportunity to learn how archival libraries work was really fascinating and important as I plan on continuing my studies in a field where most of the primary data is housed in rare books libraries.

I remember Dr. Renker saying on the first day of class that conducting archival research was akin to working as a detective; we would be sifting through evidence and clues to clarify a mystery and try to find its answer. She was right. After discovering the mystery, my research morphed into a choose-your-own adventure story. I would fully research one topic of my paper, then Dr. Renker and Dr. Fields would tell me to turn around, go to a different page, and pick up another avenue of research to add onto what research I had already completed. By doing so, the whole story emerged about who George D. Prentice was, and how he impacted the life and career of Sarah Piatt. But without Dr. Renker and Dr. Fields, I would have had a much more difficult time navigating through the various research pathways I needed to complete in order to fully back up my thesis. They were truly some of my greatest research tools. One of the most
important things I have learned about the research process is that people, as well as databases and catalogues, help yield critical results.

3. Reflections

To say that I did not know what I was getting myself into at the beginning of the quarter would be an understatement. As I began my research, I felt overwhelmed several times by how much more information I still needed to find and go through. I felt at times that I would never be able to get it all done. I admit that I am somewhat of a perfectionist; I honestly felt that if I could not do justice to my topic then I would rather not write the paper at all. But something about this project drove me; quitting was not an option, and so I worked harder and longer to make my paper the best it could possibly be. What really excited me was that the more I worked and the more I learned about my topic, the more I became convinced of its literary significance. I felt as if this man was reaching out to me from the past, his story yearning to be told, and that if I did not help him, no one would. The project started as simply a paper and became a calling.

I find the immense experience and knowledge I gained through this process difficult to put into words, but I will attempt to do so. I was made aware of the many tools that The Ohio State University Libraries system provides, and I became comfortable using them. I learned about a time in American history and literature that I had not previously studied in depth. I came to understand a forgotten man and his influence on a rising American female poet. I experienced how much time, effort, exhaustion, and exhilaration go into creating a unique, significant research project—a project of which I am very proud. Looking inward, I found that I have the abilities to be a true researcher. I was unsure of myself before I had this opportunity; I’m not any more. Above all, I have learned that I still have so much to learn! It is a journey of discovery that I look forward to.

I am pleased to submit “Recovering George D. Prentice: The Lost Mentor of Sarah Piatt” as an entry for The Ohio State University Libraries Undergraduate Research Prize. The paper is the culmination of ten weeks of research and several sessions of guidance from two invaluable mentors, Dr. Renker and Dr. Fields. I am grateful to them for their support and dedication to my project. I also wish to thank you, the committee, in advance for your consideration.