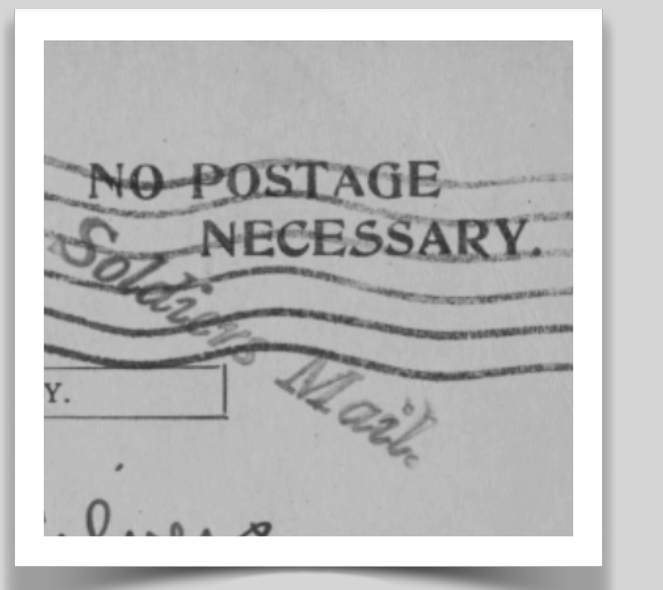


'In an alien land': Finding Solace from Librarian-Led Digital Humanities Pedagogy in a Pandemic

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Abstract

The turn to working from home during the pandemic required a shift in how librarians and students worked together. At Rutgers, the professional training offered by librarians to graduate students in the Master of Information (MI) program included preparation for reference, instruction, and special projects. In practice, those special projects had usually involved processing print gift collections, which had become inaccessible. This poster discusses the adaptation of an assignment originally crafted for a course into an ongoing, librarian-led digital project. The *Correspondence of the Rutgers College War Service Bureau* is a minimal documentary edition of correspondence sent to and from Rutgers alumni serving in World War I. The library's stake in this project was clear from the onset: transcription and TEI encoding make this collection of university records more accessible to the public. As the work unfolded, I learned that it satisfied other priorities as well, not least of which was an emerging sense of solidarity with these Rutgers men whose loneliness and urgency to communicate came through their letters despite implicit social codes that precluded frank assessments of their experiences.

Introduction



MORRIS B. JACKSON, Rutgers '19

RUTGERS '19—Morris B. Jackson, son of Will Walter Jackson (Columbia '92) and brother of George B. Jackson (Swarthmore '21), died October 27, 1918, while on furlough. He had enlisted in a Base Hospital

Fig 1. Jackson was one of several flu deaths.

Given that the course included a provision for a final project, I examined pathways for the students to continue work on their assigned alumnus through subsequent modules on geospatial and network analysis. As the letters include multiple dates, places, and correspondents, the letter metadata, encapsulated by a `correspDesc` element, may be reused to make maps and network graphs.

This course has yet to be taught. Fortunately, that teaching material found new life as an ongoing project for MI students seeking additional work-from-home hours during the pandemic. Stretching a two-week assignment into a more long-term editorial endeavor has exposed shortcomings of the original approach. As time went by, we made a series of see-sawing editorial and technical decisions that call to mind that fundamental question of minimal computing: "what do we need?"¹ That process of weighing labor invested against potential value to readers and editors has been revelatory.

Editorial and Technical Questions

1. An interest in trauma is what initially drew me to the collection. I decided to make it a more explicit focus by seeking ways to highlight attitudes towards physical and mental disability. How best to do so? Through the markup? Short biographies?
2. "Somewhere in France..." Officers censored their locations. Knowing their military unit and the date of writing usually helped to estimate their location, but it was time consuming to piece together, and led me to question my attachment to comprehensive letter metadata to produce maps.
3. Correspondents had little expectation of privacy and letters were frequently shared. Silvers, the bureau director, solicited family letters about soldiers to make copies for publication. Originals were returned. These copies are somewhat unreliable in that they frequently omit dates, correspondent names, locations, and introduced occasional scribal and translation errors. Signaling through the markup and the online presentation that we were working from a copy and not an original seemed critical.
4. Handling forms and mailers and modeling graphical items, like picture postcards, raise questions about how much of the artifact to represent through the markup and the online presentation.

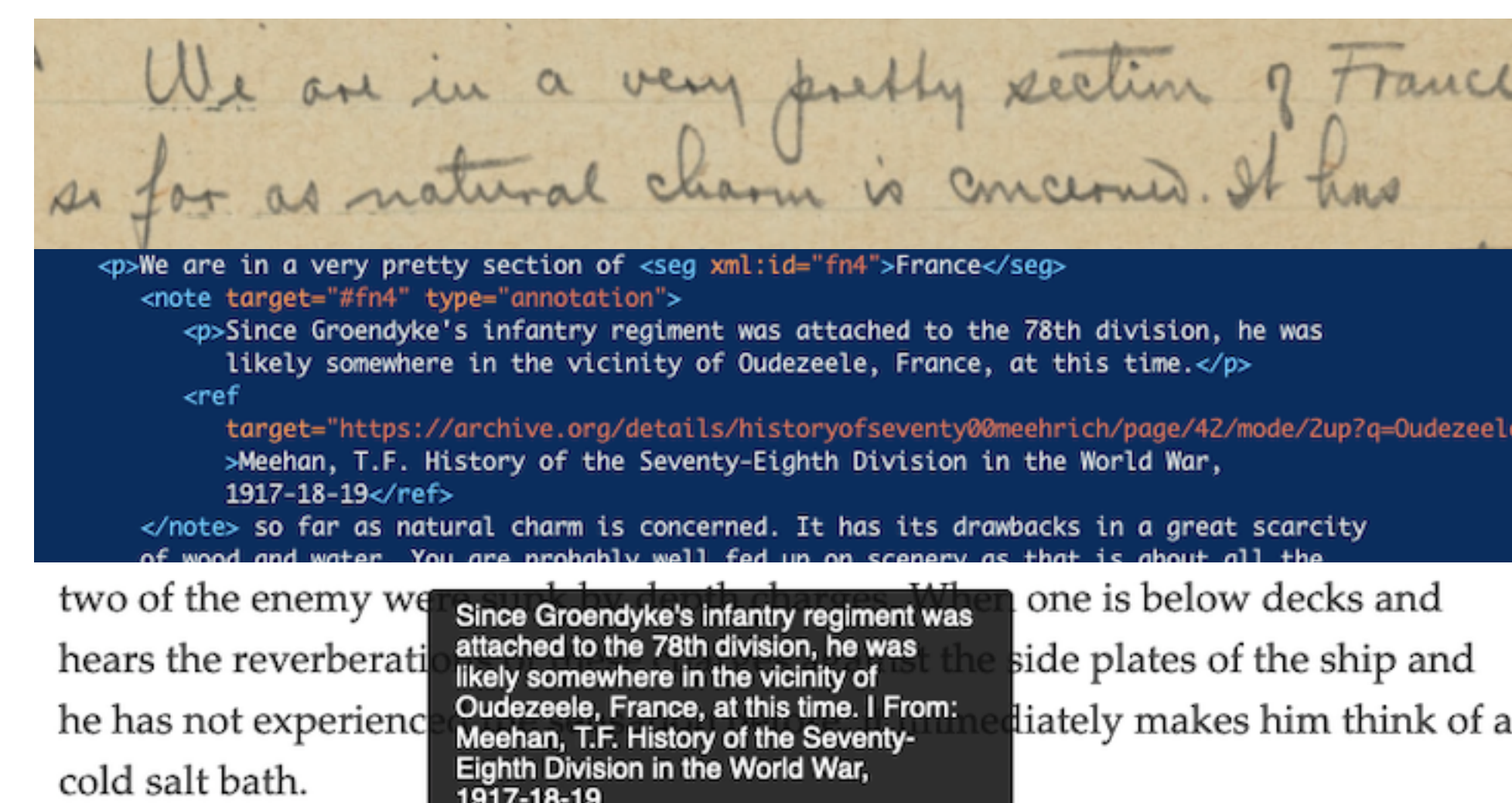


Fig2. The encoding and display of an editorial tooltip estimating Lieut. Groendyke's location.

Progress

Despite the signal difference of wartime vs. peacetime, the correspondents' experiences had contemporary resonance.

- Many expressed loneliness and isolation, although usually indirectly, through repeated requests for news of Rutgers men near them.
- A hierarchy of griefs emerged. A war death was heroic. A flu death was much harder to assimilate, "suggest[ing] bodily vulnerability and weakness, not a masculine power struggle or a larger political goal."² Those afflicted with shell shock, or PTSD, received mostly disparagement.
- Correspondents had no real sense of when it would end. Dread and uncertainty were common, at least until a turning point came in Aug-Sep 1918.

Progress (cont.)

Discussion with student encoders further revealed:

- The project helped better contextualize the connections between technical skill and LIS/archival work.
- Students valued the in-depth look at the letters from both librarian/archivist and patron/researcher perspectives.

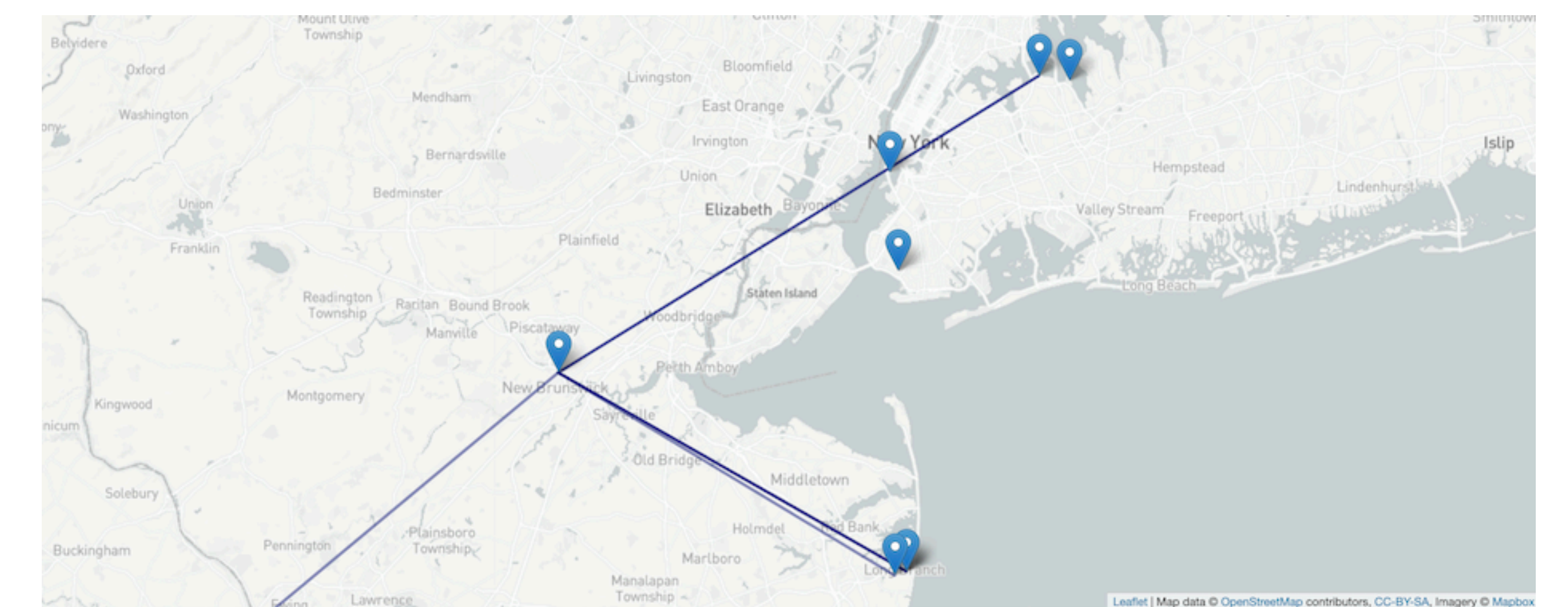


Fig 3. A map of correspondents' locations and places mentioned in Cubberley's file.

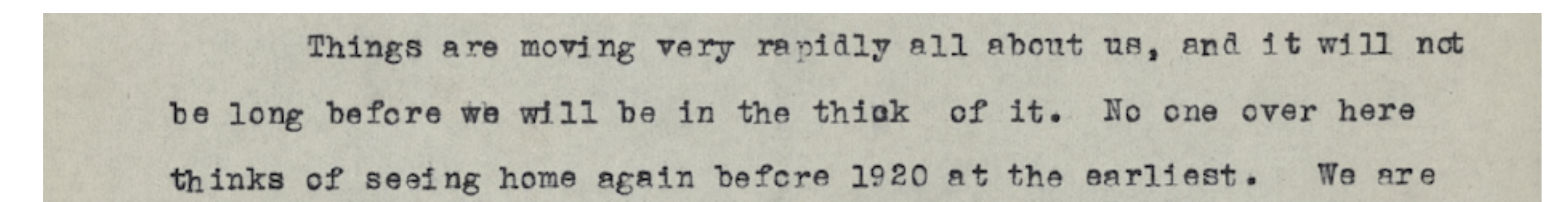


Fig 4. Sergeant Boes' Nov 1917 estimate of when the war would end.

Future Work

- Purpose of hypotheses annotation layer was unclear at first (incl. with the Ed theme for Jekyll), but it is proving invaluable to the editorial team for highlighting and annotating items to correct, to research further, or to mention in a biographical note. This idea may get repurposed in an eventual pedagogical assignment.
- Short biographical descriptions of the alumni are needed to better contextualize the letter anthologies. These must be composed with care for gaps in information, as little is known about correspondents. Joyce Kilmer is the only well known alumnus.
- A project-wide personography and placeography to keep internal consistency and to avoid duplication of effort.
- Selective use of correspondence maps, only where the geographical information provides useful context for the letters.

References

1. Alex Gil, "The User, the Learner and the Machines We Make," Minimal Computing (blog), May 21, 2015, <http://go-dh.github.io/mincomp/thoughts/2015/05/21/user-vs-learner/>.
2. Elizabeth Outka, "Grievability, COVID-19, and the Modernists' Pandemic," *Modernism/Modernity* Print Plus 5, no. 1 (May 21, 2020), <https://modernismmodernity.org/forums/posts/outka-grievability-covid>.



Link to edition