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Lehigh University  
Information Resources

# Special Collections *Flyer*

## Untangled Web

Untangling the textual history of a work that's been frequently reprinted is no small or speedy task. Ed Gallagher, professor of English at Lehigh, decided that this exercise would help his spring 1999 undergraduate Early American Literature class, "The Literature of Justification," learn something about the production and reception of American literature in the 19th century. He and the four students (Mike Ahearn, Steve Gourley, Gregg Hilzer, and Terry Su) in this small 300-level seminar chose Washington Irving's *A History of New York* as the subject of the exercise. And what better way to present the results than on "the web."

Students pursued several

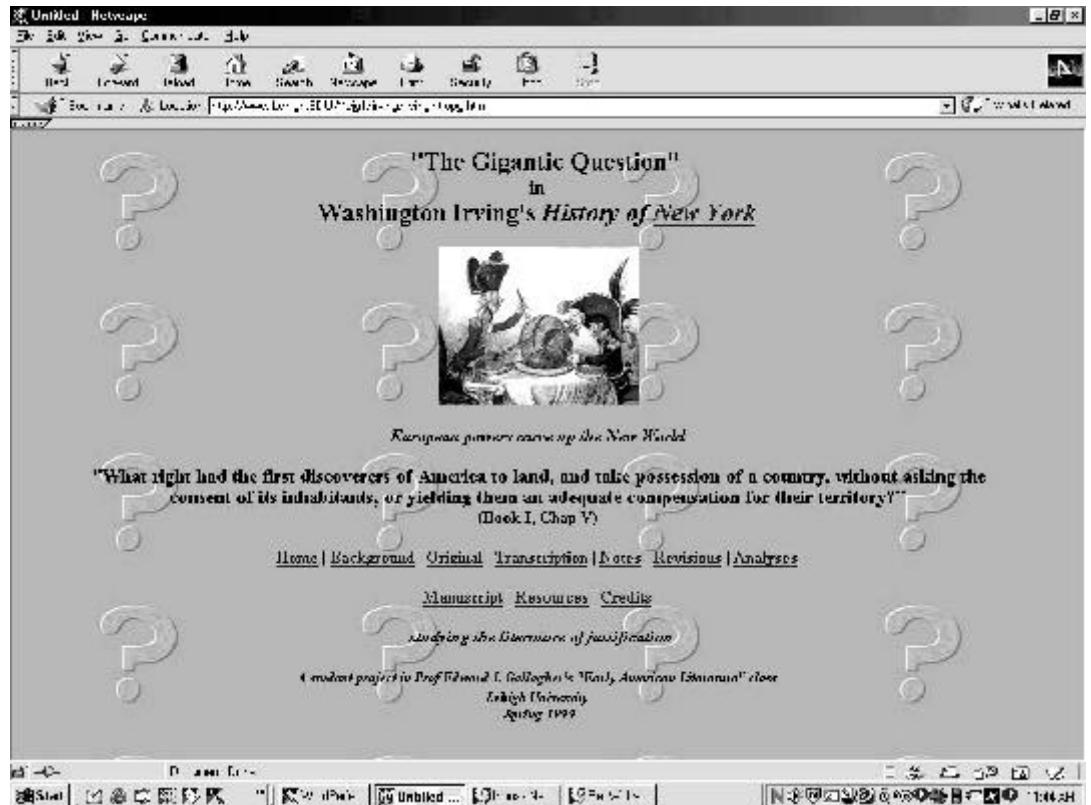
angles in their investigations. The first was a brief history of the work in question. *The History of New York* was published in 1809 in two volumes. It is not a straight history, but rather a satirical look at conventional history writing and its platitudes, told with the voice of Irving's now famous elderly Dutchman, Diedrich Knickerbocker.

However, the students focused on only a part of the text which fit the topic of the seminar: Irving's discussion of "The Gigantic Question," or the right of the early settlers of North America to take the land from its Native American inhabitants without invitation or just compensation.

Thus the web site includes the full text of this chapter, chapter five, along with notes, and of course links to other sites, as well as short analytical essays.

They also took advantage of a unique characteristic of Special Collections' copy of the first edition, which is a letter pasted inside the front cover from Irving to an unknown person, asking for aid in locating an apartment. The two students who worked on this project put a good deal of effort into transliterating Irving's often difficult handwriting.

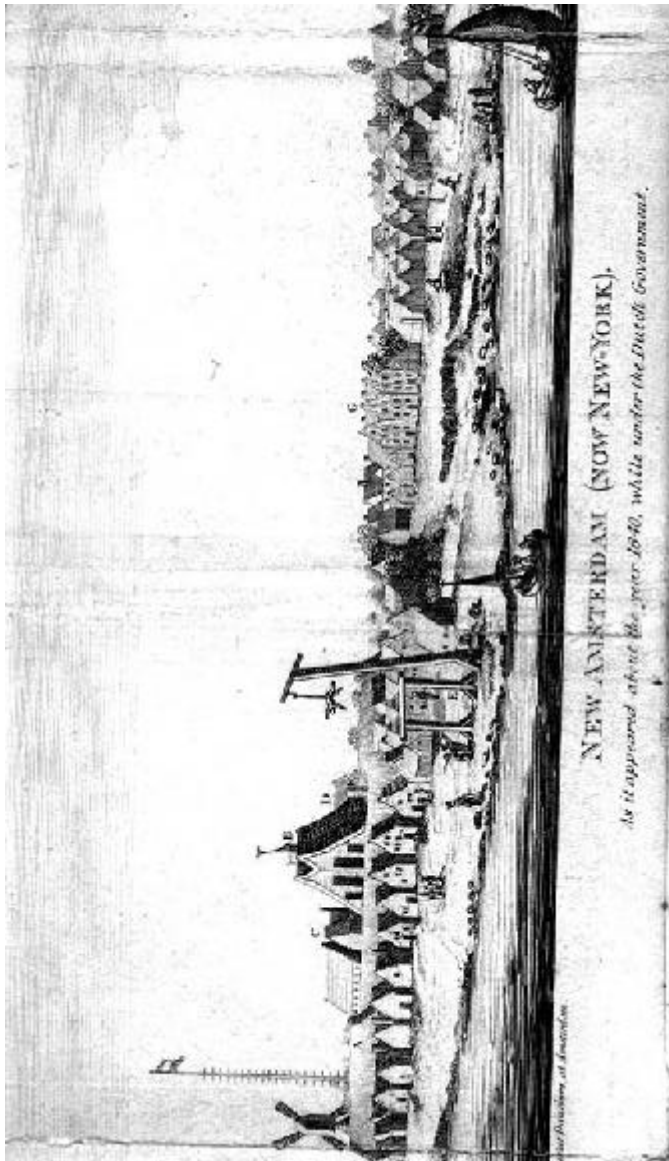
The students have also been careful to reproduce the original text along with their transcriptions. This is



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relatively easy to do with a three-page letter, but a bit more complicated in the case of about forty pages of typeset text.

By the time the second edition came out in 1812, (the last edition in Irving's lifetime was in 1848), the



NEW AMSTERDAM (NOW NEW YORK).  
As it appeared about the year 1640, while under the Dutch Government.

A HISTORY  
OF  
NEW YORK,

FROM THE BEGINNING OF THE WORLD TO THE  
END OF THE DUTCH DYNASTY.

CONTAINING

Among many Surprising and Curious Matters, the Unutterable  
Ponderings of WALTER THE DOUBTER, the Disastrous  
Projects of WILLIAM THE TESTY, and the Chivalric  
Achievements of PETER THE HEADSTRONG, the three  
Dutch Governors of New AMSTERDAM; being the only  
Authentic History of the Times that ever hath been, or ever  
will be Published.

BY DIEDRICH KNICKERBOCKER.

*De waarheid die in duister lag,  
Dit komt met klaarheid aan den dag.*

IN TWO VOLUMES.

VOL. I.

PUBLISHED BY INSKIP & BRADFORD, NEW YORK;  
BRADFORD & INSKIP, PHILADELPHIA; WM. M'IL-  
HENNEY, BOSTON; COALE & THOMAS, BALTIMORE;  
AND MORFORD, WILLINGTON, & CO. CHARLESTON.

1809.

hand of the author can be seen in the revisions in the text. In chapter five they are relatively minor, though not without textual interest. For example, the phrase “without asking the consent of the inhabitants” in 1809, became in 1812 “without first gaining the consent of its inhabitants,” a much stronger phrase. Sometimes it was only a matter of smoothing and simplifying the style. “Titus and a host of wise men,” became “Titus and many wise men,” a change which would please a modern editor as well.

Prof. Gallagher had several goals for this project, which he described in a web page which is now linked to the students’ page. One was to provide the students with both a collaborative and “authentic” research project, i.e. one in which they could work together to do real research on original documents. Another was to explore ways of using the new technology to communicate the results of traditional scholarship. A third goal was to learn to identify what the public

would want to know as the result of such research.

“We spent some time in Special Collections just looking around for an appropriate text to work with,” Gallagher said. “The students enjoyed using the special collections reading room. They felt like real scholars,” he said.

Those interested are invited to look at the site at

[www.Lehigh.EDU/~ejg1/irving/irvingintropg.htm](http://www.Lehigh.EDU/~ejg1/irving/irvingintropg.htm)

– P.A.M.

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*Special Collections materials are available for research and consultation without restriction. For further information contact Philip A. Metzger, Curator of Special Collections, or Marie Boltz, Special Collections Assistant. Reading room hours are Monday through Friday, 1 p.m. to 5 p.m. or by appointment. Telephone: (610) 758-4506; fax (610) 758-6091 (new); e-mail: [inspc@lehigh.edu](mailto:inspc@lehigh.edu)*