

As I was planning my ENGL 36500: Digital Humanities course for Fall semester 2020, I wanted to give students a chance to participate in the creation of an original webtext. One of the key components of digital humanities is collaboration, so I knew that a semester-long class project would be the best option to give students real experience in developing a digital archive. Our class project, which we built in Omeka, is *Dear Friend: Letters from Elizabeth Ott to Alton Easton*. The site collects the series of letters Ott wrote to her fiancé Easton when he was away fighting the Mexican-American war between 1847-1848. Ott was a schoolteacher at The Lindenwood School for Girls (as the campus was known at that time) and also boarded with Mary Easton Sibley (Alton's sister) and George Sibley, the founders of Lindenwood College.

During Fall semester 2020, students transcribed and annotated each of the nine letters that had been digitized from the originals, which are in the Rufus Easton Papers at the Missouri Historical Society. As a class, we made decisions about how to organize the papers and contributed to writing copy for various pages of the webtext.

One challenge of this project was the lack of available materials on Elizabeth Ott herself. Her letters bring her to life but very little else is known. Elizabeth (also called Eliza) went on to marry Easton when he returned from war, becoming Elizabeth Ott Easton in 1849. They had three children: Alby (1850), Archibald (1851), and Alton Jr. (1853). She died at the age of 41 on October 16, 1859 and is buried at Bellefontaine Cemetery. Unfortunately, no pictures of Ott remain.

Ott's letters are chatty and gossipy, giving readers insight into life in St. Charles in 1847. Ott seemed to know everyone in town and busied herself with social events as well as work. Each letter, written like a diary, recounts her interactions with those around her, as well as reveals her insecurities and loneliness as a 29-year-old, independent woman in the 19th century. Her letters paint a picture of a working woman at a time when women had few employment options. She refers to her family's financial struggles in these letters and may have taken this teaching job far away from her parents and siblings in New York due to financial pressures. While her life experience might have been very different from the comfortable finances of the Eastons and Sibleys she lives with, she makes herself a vital part of the family and community; these letters are full of her close friendships she forged. These letters richly illustrate the daily lives and gossip of Ott and her friends in St. Charles in 1847. In many ways, her letters are unexpectedly relatable to life in 2021.

I would like to thank Paul Huffman for the access to these documents and the Missouri Historical Society for their digitization work. The webtext is available here:

<https://engl365.omeka.net/>