

Digital Project Review: Digital Forsyth (<http://www.digitalforsyth.org>)

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Content

Digital Forsyth is primarily a photo project, featuring material held by the Forsyth County Public Library, Wake Forest University, and Winston-Salem State University. It is an ongoing project funded through an Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) grant, and attempts to include photographs from a broad array of locations within Winston-Salem and Forsyth County.

The selection, digitization, and cataloging policies are documented on the site (<http://www.digitalforsyth.org/about/process.php>). Selection criteria include uniqueness, relevance to the contributing institution, and copyright or other restrictions. Images are scanned at 600 dpi, while negatives, slides, and smaller objects are scanned at 2400 dpi. There is no manipulation other than rotation, alignment, and cropping, and margins are included to verify that the entire image has been scanned. Images are stored as uncompressed TIFF files and are converted to JPEG format for access during the cataloging process.

In addition to the photographs, there are several text-based exhibits on such subjects as the 100th anniversary of Forsyth County in 1849, and aspects of the histories of the contributing institutions and R.J. Reynolds Tobacco Co. These are fairly brief essays and are also accompanied by photos from the collection. There are also means for users to submit their own stories, and even photos (via a photo pool established at flickr.com).

Design and User Interface

The site is driven using PHP and (probably) MySQL. Both the search and browse functions result in a page with ten thumbnail images that can be clicked to produce a larger display image with a short caption beneath. These access/display images can in turn be clicked on to access a larger version of the image (600 pixels on the long edge) and a detailed record of the image, created using

a qualified version of Dublin Core. One problem with the interface, particularly given the fact that much of the site's audience may be older and less technically inclined, is that there is no instructive text making it clear that the thumbnails and the smaller access image initially displayed can be clicked to reveal more detail. Another issue is that the access images are watermarked with a Digital Forsyth logo which, though understated, may still obscure some details; this was particularly noticeable when there were handwritten notes in the margin of the photos. All in all, though, the design is clean, appealing, and clutter-free (while not nearly as sparse as some similar projects), loads fast, and is relatively intuitive, with board category links on top, and specific informational links (FAQ, contact, etc.) at the bottom.

Description and Metadata

As mentioned before, descriptive text uses Dublin Core. There is also something resembling a "tag cloud" at the bottom of each record display, showing similar photos, although it is not exactly clear how these tags are generated and how similarities are determined. There is also a search engine that can be limited by category (which does not seem to be part of the displayed record-level Dublin Core data), collection (this actually refers only to the contributing institution), and date.

Rights Management

The site is offered under a Creative Commons license, which permits non-commercial redistribution and use of the work, as long as attribution is provided and no alterations or derivative works are done. There is a centralized form attached to each image that can be used to request a copy of any image, and reproduction costs are considerably lower than at other comparable sites, with prints costing between three and seven dollars, and scans costing two dollars per image. Each institution handles requests for commercial use permissions and contact information is provided on the site.

Conclusion

Digital Forsyth is an attractive and appealing site, and seems generally intuitive and well designed for its audience, despite some interface issues (watermarking, lack of instructive text). Its intellectual property control is also friendlier than most digital history sites to non-commercial users and researchers.