

4-2000

Untangled Web

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Recommended Citation

Metzger, Philip A., "Untangled Web" (2000). *Flyer: A Special Collections Newsletter*. 13.
<http://preserve.lehigh.edu/special-collections-publications-flyer/13>

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No. 13 • April 2000

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

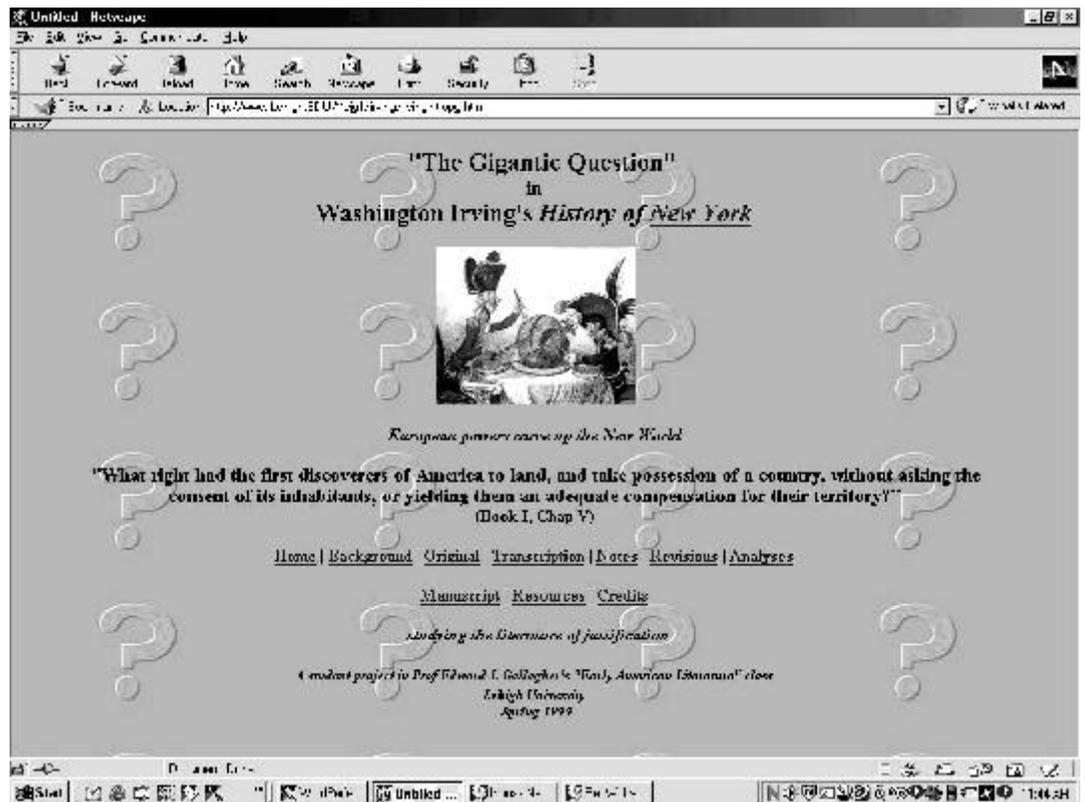
angles in their investigations. The first was a brief history of the work in question. *The History of New York* was published in 1809 in two volumes. It is not a straight history, but rather a satirical look at conventional history writing and its platitudes, told with the voice of Irving's now famous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

