

The War of 1812 in 140 Characters or Less: “SuperCool or Super Un-tweet Worthy?”

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ABSTRACT

The bicentennial of the War of 1812 provided the Archives of Ontario (AO) with a unique opportunity to employ social media to reach new audiences while speaking to the value of the archival record. Over the course of a year, the AO posted the diary entries of Ely Playter, a farmer and officer of the Upper Canada militia on Twitter (@ElyPlayter1812). A dedicated observer and recorder of daily life, Playter left behind an eyewitness account of the war, thereby giving a real voice to its social, economic, political and personal impact. The Twitter feed provided its followers access to historical records on a daily basis and became a cornerstone of related institutional educational programming. This article includes analysis of the project’s methodology and provides insight into the challenges and opportunities of using social media to promote the importance of archives and primary source records.

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KEY WORDS

Twitter, Tweets, Social Media, Archival Records, Digital Preservation, Ethics, Local History Collections, Online Collections, Public History, Public Programs, Reference, Technology

The bicentennial of the War of 1812 provided the Archives of Ontario (AO) with a unique opportunity to investigate commemoration in a Web-based culture, employ social media to reach new audiences, and speak of the value of the archival record. In May 2012, the AO launched an initiative to broadcast the diary entries of Ely Playter, a farmer and officer of the Upper Canada militia. A dedicated observer and recorder of daily life, Playter left behind an astonishing eyewitness account of the war, thereby giving a real voice to its social, economic, political, and personal impact.

Intending to inform, entertain, and educate, the Ely Playter Twitter feed (@ElyPlayter1812)¹ resurrected the man and his observations, effectively acting as a venue that promoted the continued importance and use of primary source records. As a cornerstone of the AO's War of 1812 bicentennial programming, the Ely Playter Twitter feed played a leading role in connecting the public with this pivotal event in North American history.

Who Was Ely Playter?

Born in New Jersey in 1776, Ely Playter moved to Upper Canada in the 1790s, married, farmed, and raised his family in the colonial town of York, known today as Toronto. In 1824, he was elected to the Upper Canada House of Assembly and, by 1826, had returned to the United States, settling in Pekin, New York. During his lifetime, Playter would also run a tavern and become a Methodist lay preacher. Ely Playter died on August 29, 1858.

Between 1801 and 1853, Playter recorded his daily activities in a series of diaries. Chronological, consistently entered, and impressively legible, the diaries form the Ely Playter fonds (F 556) and were donated to the AO in 1954 by one of his descendants. The diaries discuss farming, family events, social activities, religion, and, most importantly, his experiences as a militia officer during the War of 1812, including a detailed eyewitness account of the Battle of York in 1813 and the town's subsequent occupation by American forces. After the war, the diaries recount Playter's political activities and his return to the United States.

Playter's diaries record a blend of the remarkable and the mundane. One day, he tends his garden and plants potatoes. The next, he drills troops and issues arms. The entries are often very detailed, offering descriptions of prominent citizens and recognizable locations. They are also vivid, engaging, and, at times, exciting, exhibiting a soap opera-like quality that is no doubt a direct result of Playter's habit of recording the day's events, no matter how small. As a rich vein of early nineteenth-century Canadian social history, the decision to post his diary entries to Twitter was a relatively easy one.

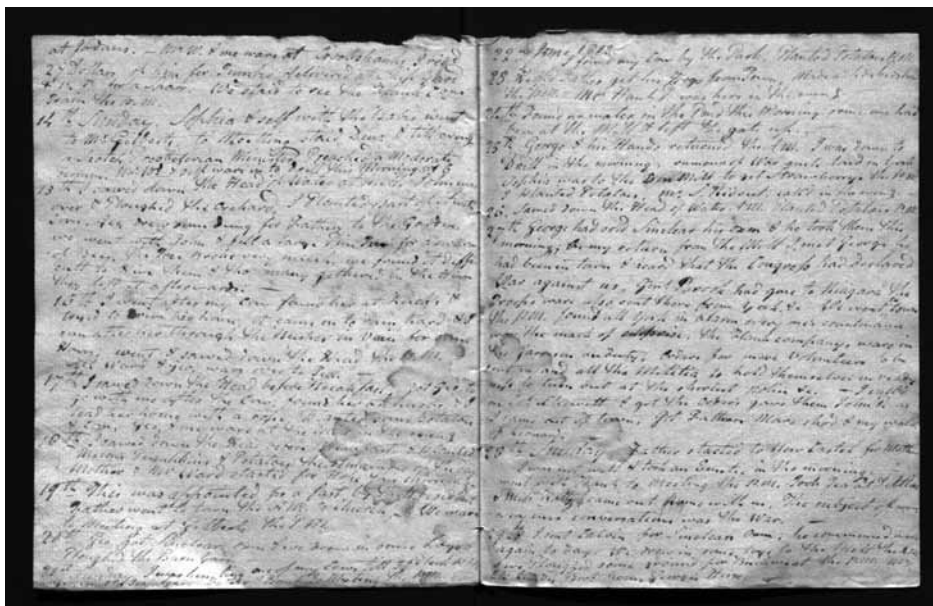


FIGURE 1. This is a page from the Ely Playter diary, July 1811–October 1812. Ely Playter fonds, F 556-0-0-7, B299740, Archives of Ontario.

The Inspiration

While searching for ways to commemorate the War of 1812 and promote our collections to new audiences, we turned to social media. The success of the AO's institutional Twitter feed (@ArchivesOntario)² led to the idea of tweeting from the point of view of a historic figure, thereby providing a real voice to the events and outcomes of the war. Using Twitter could allow us to create a dialogue between a historical observer and a modern audience, thereby cultivating interaction between the past and the present.

The Twitter feed was also partially inspired by the events of the 2011 Arab Spring, in which journalists and citizens used social media prominently to transmit on-the-ground reporting of the various conflicts. We thought that if we could locate eyewitness reports of the War of 1812 in our collection, we could draw parallels with the war reporting of today and how, historically, ordinary citizens have faced extraordinary circumstances.

Our initial idea was to create multiple Twitter feeds to document the war from as many perspectives as existed in our collection (e.g., militiamen, farmers, women, pacifists, First Nations). We targeted a number of collections for closer examination but found that almost all lacked sufficient content to sustain a single narrative. We also discussed the idea of creating composite Twitter feeds but decided that the words of one individual would provide better continuity

and impact. In this regard, we were fortunate that the Playter diaries presented themselves as Twitter-ready.

We fully expected to encounter Twitter feeds dedicated to commemorating the War of 1812 but were surprised (and happy) to find that none were taking a similar approach. Some presented historical sources in much the same chronological manner, but none were using primary source materials. Instead, the feeds we found were using secondary sources such as newspapers. Our approach was therefore unique; Playter's observations offered an emotional, candid, and personal account of the war in contrast to the edited, official historical record.

Why Twitter?

Tweets are succinct and immediate, feeding society's current appetite for constant information flow. Seeing how Twitter has developed as a recognized news source made us wonder what it would have been like to tweet the events of the War of 1812. Today's immediacy did not exist then. News of the signing of the peace treaty in 1814 and its ratification by the U.S. Senate did not reach New Orleans in time to prevent the final major engagement of the war, which took place on January 8, 1815. The Battle of New Orleans is now considered one of the greatest American land victories of the war. In the modern age, such an information delay would never occur. The opportunity to take a modern approach to the reporting of a historic conflict was enticing, both as a tool for commemoration and as an occasion to cultivate new archival users—those who were more likely to check their Twitter feeds than to walk through our front doors.

Using Twitter would provide us with a viable means of reaching younger audiences. One of the primary goals of this project was to include it in our educational programming. Playter's Twitter feed was an integral part of our on-site workshop, "Tweeting the War of 1812,"³ which was created for students in grades 7 through 10 and invited them to create comic book pages for one or more of Playter's tweets. The Twitter feed was also central to our online resource kit, "Tweeting the Past,"⁴ which was created for grade 7 teachers and intended as a means of inviting students to learn about the War of 1812 by following the feed. Our intention was that students would find Playter's story interesting and invigorating, thereby helping to promote the importance of the archival record and, by extension, archives themselves.

The project offered many platform-specific curatorial challenges. Should the diary entries be posted verbatim or should we edit them for the sake of the linguistic leanings of a modern audience? Should we interact with our Twitter followers (in the guise of Ely Playter) and respond to any direct questions, or should we remain silent and forgo any potential misrepresentation? Finally, would a tweet maintain the historical authenticity for which an archives strives?

Twitter Use by Archives

The AO is certainly not the first archival institution to employ Twitter as a means of connecting with its users. However, academic literature on the subject of the use of Twitter by archives is relatively sparse. Adam Crymble's "An Analysis of Twitter and Facebook Use by the Archival Community" examined fifty-five institutional Twitter accounts over a period of thirty-three days and found that overwhelmingly, the primary motivation behind using Twitter was the promotion of archival holdings, services, or events.⁵

Sean Heyliger, Juli McLoone, and Nikki Lynn Thomas's "Making Connections: A Survey of Special Collections' Social Media Outreach" discovered that Twitter was predominantly used to post event announcements as well as digitized items and collections. Tellingly, 82 percent of respondent repositories identified Twitter as a positive tool for increasing awareness of collections and highlighting materials.⁶ While our goals were similar, we looked to move beyond the archives and allow Ely Playter to speak for himself.

In her article, "What Is the Meaning of Archives 2.0?," Kate Theimer also identified the value of Web 2.0 applications such as Twitter as tools for attracting archival users, sharing collections, and interacting with audiences. In her opinion, archivists should use technology to actively engage their users and advocate for their profession, rather than play the passive (and more traditional) role of gatekeeper and/or information custodian.⁷

Lastly, Andrea Medina-Smith's case study, "Going Where the Users Are: The Jewish Women's Archive and Its Use of Twitter," highlighted challenges to Twitter use by archives, namely, that in terms of outreach goals, the platform is by no means a panacea, simultaneously connecting, resonating, and invigorating intended audiences. Instead, it is one of many assets archives can use to interact with users and promote awareness.⁸ As our analysis will show later in this article, our project supported this finding well.

The existing literature highlights *why* archives are using Twitter and *how* archives are using Twitter, but there is little discussion or analysis on specifics such as what types of archival records have been posted to Twitter (e.g., diaries, photographs, letters) or what the reception of these initiatives has been. An overview of Twitter-specific archival projects would have helped shape the framework and strategic goals of the Ely Playter Twitter feed, as well as provided food for thought in relation to the challenges of sharing primary source records through this specific social media outlet.

How We Did It

We entered into the project with one calendar year in mind, but did not schedule one year of tweets at the outset. The project itself ran from May 2012 to June 2013. We transcribed, created tweets, and met roughly once a month to review content and schedule the tweets for posting on @ElyPlayter1812 using Hootsuite to facilitate posting.⁹ In addition, we digitized the diaries and posted images of the diary pages at the appropriate time to connect our audience with the primary source from which the tweets were taken. The digitized images were useful in responding to reference inquiries related to Ely Playter.

When he wrote, Playter recorded an entry in his diary nearly every day. However, gaps in the diaries appear, sometimes for many months at a time. For example, there are no entries from October 1812 to April 1813. This meant it would be very difficult to post each entry on its two-hundred-year anniversary date. We decided that we wanted the bulk of his war-related tweets to occur during the school year (September to June) to tie in with our educational programming. Launching the Twitter feed in May 2012 gave us a few months in which we could select from Playter's pre-1812 diaries and provide our followers with background on his life in Upper Canada. Similarly, we allowed for a period of two weeks at the end of the project to tweet about significant events in his life after the war. It should come as no surprise that the project's final tweet was the announcement of Playter's death.

Although many of Playter's diary entries were brief, not all fell within Twitter's 140 character limit. This meant that we had to be creative in presenting them to our audience. In some cases, we edited diary entries for brevity; in others, we decided to create multiple tweets for a given day to present the entry in its entirety. We also decided to remain silent and not answer any direct questions, thus maintaining the authenticity of the project as a venue for sharing a singular voice from the past.

Generally, we aimed for an average of one to three daily tweets from @ElyPlayter1812; however, this proved to be somewhat of a challenge during key periods in the history of the War of 1812 when his diary entries became more fulsome. Playter's entries for the Battle of York (April 27, 1813) and the American occupation in the days thereafter were several thousand words in length. Noting that his accounts were incredibly detailed and probably represented the single best source of the days' events, we decided that we would tweet more rather than less to capture as much of their essence as possible, even if that meant tweeting fifteen times in a day.

Occasionally, we tweeted a historical interjection to provide context for our followers. As a group, we decided when it would be appropriate to add information to the tweets and included it as an editor's note (e.g., "Ed. Note: War is



FIGURE 2. This is a screenshot of the Ely Player Twitter account.

declared on 18 June 1812”). These were clearly indicated and kept to a minimum. We aimed to present the diaries without editorializing to allow Player to speak for himself.

We developed a page on the AO’s website to introduce the project, provide a curatorial statement, and link to the archival description for the Ely Player fonds. We also provided links to information on educational programming related to the project. The Twitter feed was promoted in an opportunistic manner, largely via email and word of mouth. In addition, we conducted a podcast interview for Canada’s History,¹⁰ wrote articles about the project for Canadian archival listservs and for publication,¹¹ and presented the project at the annual conferences of the Archives Association of Ontario and the National Council on Public History.

Measuring the Success of the Ely Player Twitter Feed

It is difficult to gauge the overall efficacy of the project and to determine precisely how people interacted with the Twitter feed. With limited statistics available to us, much of our analysis of the project’s success is based on simple observation and through email conversations with users. Some posted their

thoughts directly to @ElyPlayter1812. “SuperCool or super un-tweet worthy?” was a particularly memorable comment. Others mentioned how the Twitter feed brought Playter “back to life” and was an example of how “Twitter can be used to its fullest.” At the project’s completion, we had 408 registered followers, but were unsure how many additional followers may have simply bookmarked the page and visited it regularly.

The Ely Playter Twitter feed attracted numerous followers who seem to have created Twitter accounts for the sole purpose of following it, thus confirming the public’s interest in a project of this nature. Our institutional Twitter feed has over two thousand followers, but the Ely Playter Twitter feed appeared to attract a set of followers distinct from those, perhaps as a result of its specific subject matter. People interacted with Ely Playter as we hoped. His tweets were retweeted and followers seemed to tweet about him. Even after the last tweet, we are still attracting new followers.

The project was successful in its goal of cultivating new users for the Archives of Ontario. It attracted a broad range of individuals and groups including government employees, heritage organizations, archives and museums, local politicians, genealogists, academics, students, corporations, associations, 1812 enthusiasts, and private citizens. It attracted followers from across Canada, the United States and, to a lesser extent, Europe and Australia. One of our most devoted followers (based on the number of retweets) was from New York City. Followers were, in effect, accessing, using, and sharing archival records on a daily basis, without coming close to our reading room in Toronto, Ontario.

The Twitter feed was also an integral part of our educational programming. We timed the release of the War of 1812–related tweets to correlate with the school year, so that teachers could make use of our resources when teaching about the war. During the 2013 calendar year, our workshop, “Tweeting the War of 1812,” constituted 20 percent of our on-site programming. This special programming also complemented five other War of 1812 resource kits designed for grades 7 and 12 that are currently available on the AO’s website,¹² including the “Tweeting the War” resource kit. In total, the Playter Twitter feed reached over twelve hundred students through educational programs in the 2012–2013 school year. Our on-site programming was offered until June 2014.

Anecdotally, the Ely Playter Twitter feed was also used by some university professors as part of their studies. One went so far as to offer that “students will probably follow [it] more than they will any textbook.” The Canada’s History education resources page included the “Tweeting the Past” lesson as well.¹³

Lessons Learned

We wanted to bring the past into the present through the medium of Twitter and, in doing so, made curatorial choices, some of which may have affected the outcome of the project. We chose intensity over immediacy and decided to contain the project within a calendar year and therefore compressed several years of Ely Playter's life into one. We could have tweeted on the anniversary day for each diary entry, but the project would have then become a multiyear project and the Twitter feed would have contained significant gaps. Choosing to tweet for one year allowed us to create a complete narrative arc, even if it meant we were out of sync with key anniversary dates.

In promoting the project, we adopted an "if you build it, they will come" approach and decided to let the Twitter feed find its own followers. Links to the Twitter feed were also posted frequently on the AO's institutional Twitter feed; however, we could have actively sought out partners ahead of time to coordinate 1812 initiatives. Furthermore, we could have actively tweeted at our 1812 partners and done more to push the conversation, at the risk of compromising the integrity and authority of @ElyPlayter1812.

In terms of our educational programming, the project team discovered some challenges and limitations, many of which we did not anticipate. For example, we were under the impression that educators would be excited to have these materials available to them; however, our decision to focus on a diverse audience meant that the Twitter feed may not have proven as useful to teachers as we hoped. The Twitter concept was a valuable asset to our on-site educational programming, but if we really wanted teachers in classrooms to embrace the project, we might have been more successful if we had picked a subset of tweets and timed them according to a specific teacher's needs. Since our intended audience was more widespread, the timing of our tweets was not necessarily in sync with the needs of educators.

Similarly, we discovered that Twitter itself has some inherent limitations. For example, it may best be suited to mobile devices, yet not everyone owns one or is comfortable with using one. Also, not everyone interested in the project was interested in Twitter. They may have marked the page as a favorite and checked it daily, but we had no way of knowing. We tweeted daily, sometimes three or four times, which could have led to some "tweet-ennui." Finally, the content did not lend itself to the true interaction intended by Twitter. How do you speak to someone who has been dead for two hundred years?

In the end, we had to accept that the subject matter itself may not have been to everyone's liking or understanding. Ely Playter, life in early Upper Canada, and the War of 1812 simply do not have the mass appeal of other Twitter subjects. Impressively, the Real Time World War II Twitter feed (@RealTimeWWII)

has over 296,000 followers.¹⁴ However, from an institutional perspective, the project was a success. It promoted the AO and its collection to a number of new audiences. The challenge for us will be to maintain that interest now that this particular project has come to an end. Does starting a new Twitter project (for example, the First World War) mean starting from scratch, or can we build on the base of followers already in place as we continue to explore ways of using social media?

Conclusion

Using social media to share archival records may not replace visiting an archives, but tweeting the diaries of Ely Playter was a worthwhile experiment and one that enjoyed a certain degree of success. Numerous Twitter feeds were dedicated to the War of 1812, but none tweeted from the unique perspective of a war participant and an actual eyewitness. The Twitter feed was intended to provide access to original and authentic historical records in a new and original way and, by extension, promote the importance of archives and primary source records. We ultimately wanted to incite, entice, and invoke the historical imagination as well as explore commemoration in a Web-based culture. We believe we were successful in meeting our objectives.

We intended to start a conversation with the past and we did. Still, the project raises a number of questions for archival institutions concerning the use of social media for sharing archival records. Most important, despite the success of the project in achieving most of its goals, the question remains whether we managed to impress upon our followers the important role that archives play in preserving the voices of the past.

NOTES

¹ Ely Playter, Twitter feed, <https://twitter.com/ElyPlayter1812>.

² Archives of Ontario, Twitter feed, www.twitter.com/ArchivesOntario.

³ Ontario Ministry of Government and Consumer Services, Archives of Ontario, "Tweeting the War of 1812, Grades 7–10," http://www.archives.gov.on.ca/en/education/workshops_tweeting.aspx.

⁴ Archives of Ontario, http://www.archives.gov.on.ca/en/education/pdf/Gr7_1812_Tweeting.pdf.

⁵ Adam Crymble, "An Analysis of Twitter and Facebook Use by the Archival Community," *Archivaria* 70 (2010): 125–51.

⁶ Sean Heyliger, Juli McLoone, and Nikki Lynn Thomas, "Making Connections: A Survey of Special Collections' Social Media Outreach," *The American Archivist* 76, no. 2 (2013): 374–414.

⁷ Kate Theimer, "What Is the Meaning of Archives 2.0?," *The American Archivist* 74 (Spring/Summer 2011): 58–68.

⁸ Andrea Medina-Smith, "Going Where the Users Are: The Jewish Women's Archive and Its Use of Twitter," in *A Different Kind of Web: New Connections between Archives and Our Users*, ed. Kate Theimer (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2011): 65–73.

⁹ Hootsuite, <https://hootsuite.com/>.

¹⁰ “@ElyPlayter1812,” Canada’s History, <http://www.canadashistory.ca/Education/Your-Resources/Articles/@ElyPlayter1812.aspx>.

¹¹ “When Toronto Was Under Attack,” SpacingToronto, <http://spacing.ca/toronto/2012/06/16/war-of-1812-when-toronto-was-under-attack/>.

¹² Ontario Ministry of Government and Consumer Services, Archives of Ontario, “Online Lesson Plans from the Archives of Ontario Organized by Theme,” http://www.archives.gov.on.ca/en/education/lesson_plans_themes.aspx#1812.

¹³ “Classroom Resources,” Canada’s History, <http://www.canadashistory.ca/Education/Your-Resources.aspx>.

¹⁴ WW2 Tweets from 1942, Twitter feed, <https://twitter.com/RealTimeWWII>.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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