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Preservica enables the Hagley Museum and Library – a leading American business history repository – to capture and preserve digital documents.

Introduction

Situated on 235 acres along the banks of the Brandywine River in Wilmington, Delaware, the Hagley Museum and Library is a nonprofit organization that collects, preserves, and interprets the unfolding history of American enterprise. Occupying the site of the gunpowder works founded by E. I. du Pont in 1802, Hagley started its collections with the du Pont family and company papers. The library has since expanded its collecting mission to include the business records of well over a thousand companies. Its collections include individuals’ papers and companies’ records ranging from eighteenth-century merchants to modern telecommunications giants and illustrate the impact business systems have on society. Today, it is one of the leading business history libraries dedicated to furthering the study of business and technology in America.

Business Situation

Hagley’s archives include a vast collection of manuscript documents, personal papers, visual items and printed volumes. In 2008, the library started a digital collections department to begin converting its printed materials to digital format. “The impetus behind this was manifold,” explained Dr. Erik Rau, Hagley’s Director of Library Services. “One aspect of digitizing some of our existing collections was to provide us with a form of outreach to scholars and researchers who can’t make it on site. We’re not in the middle of a major metropolitan area and thus not easy to get to. Therefore, we wanted to make our materials as accessible as we possibly could. In addition,” Dr. Rau continued, “it was very much our intent from the beginning that, since we collect in the area of business history, if we wanted to document how businesses make decisions after circa 1995, we were going to have to start collecting these records in digital format to remain relevant to historical research going forward.”



Business Challenge

As a highly regarded independent research organization, Hagley's investment in its digital program would ensure researchers from around the world access to its collections. "We select collections for high research value," Dr. Rau noted. "Although many libraries now make content available on line, one thing that sets us and other independent research libraries apart is that so much of our collections are one of a kind and not available anywhere else. These collections are very valuable for doing all manner of historical research. So by making these unique records available digitally, we're able to reach people anywhere in the world that has an internet connection."

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Along with the increasing volume of converted digital records, new, born-digital files began arriving at Hagley – starting with collections from dot-com-era Silicon Valley start-up companies – and the library expects this collection to grow. Finding the best solution for storing and preserving these files was essential and would also help encourage both existing and potential depositors to bring new digital collections to Hagley. Safety, security and protecting the data against obsolescence were very important in any solution. But just as important for the library's outreach, was the ability to easily accommodate the many different unforeseen reasons future researchers might have to search these archives. Being able to include key metadata on actively preserved documents could enable unique searches in ways that are not possible with paper, or simply stored digital records.

Solution

To address the issues of storage and ease of search access to these valuable records, Dr. Rau and his team set about exploring available solutions. The first company they looked at offered an open source solution that was very much an off-the-shelf, one-size-fits-all approach with very little support. Then in early 2012, while looking for solutions at a conference, a conversation with a Preservica representative revealed that the company had created a digital storage solution specifically for the small to medium size repository market that would be a good fit for Hagley.

As Dr. Rau described it, "Preservica's Cloud Edition fitted our budget, and their offer of support made a difference to us in that it was being backed by a company that had over decades of experience in digital preservation. That really weighed heavily in their favor," he emphasized. "That's why we got Preservica."

Once the decision was made in September 2012, getting Preservica up and running at Hagley was a fast and efficient process. Tessella provided onsite help to train the curators for digital collections on the various functions of Preservica and assist with uploading documents and conducting test migrations. Preservica's production-ready solution was operational at Hagley within two weeks.



Benefits Going Forward

As Dr. Rau observed, people outside the world of library operations have a tendency to underestimate the complexity and costs associated with digital preservation and see it as a cheap and easy alternative to preserving physical documents. Paper-based collections will continue to be an important source of information. Beyond preserving digital surrogates of selected parts of such collections, libraries like Hagley that collect research materials must also contend with born-digital items. Preservica's cloud-based service provides the wherewithal to migrate and convert digital documents to newer formats over time – a labor-intensive process that requires a structured approach. Indeed, without Preservica, for Hagley itself to keep its digital collections updated and readable into the future would require substantial infrastructure and effort.

The benefits of adopting Preservica have also expanded opportunities for Hagley to move ahead with further development for managing its digital collections. Although many of its digitized historical documents are accessible now, a number of the newer business collections aren't accessible for some time. These collections are from companies still active in terms of decisions being made and projects being undertaken and often are still under ownership of the company. Release of records from these collections for research is subject to an embargo period of 25 years from the date of creation.

These embargoed records currently reside in Preservica's high availability digital storage capability hosted on Amazon's S3 service. This works well for those records available now, but the embargo has underscored the need for a two-tiered solution that would allow all documents to reside most of the time in Amazon's Glacier service, a less costly "cold storage," and then migrate to more expensive online storage when the need arises for conversions, etc. Hagley and Preservica are discussing potential steps toward developing such a solution.

Adopting Preservica also supported Hagley's strategy to increase the comfort level of depositors in giving the library their born-digital documents. As Dr. Rau pointed out, "there's still some thinking out there that digital documents are different than paper documents in terms of their legal value and what happens if they should get in the wrong hands. For that reason, some of the organizations who have their collections on deposit here are reticent to share access to their electronic documents with us beyond the made-for-consumption ones available on the website. So, by demonstrating the safety, security and preservation capability we have with Preservica, we are very well positioned now to build trust with our depositors and also extend that to other organizations who might be thinking of preserving their collections for posterity and for historical research."

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