

# Historypin

Historypin is a simple web-based mapping tool designed to facilitate crowdsourced citizen histories and community-driven archiving projects. It was born from a 2011 partnership between Google and Shift Design, a UK-based nonprofit organization. Shift's goal in launching Historypin was to facilitate "volunteer

led community projects... [to] increase local social capital and reduce social isolation."<sup>1</sup> Since then, Historypin has grown to accommodate over 400,000 individual photographs, sound clips, and videos, uploaded and georeferenced by 2,000+ cultural heritage institutions and 60,000+ individual contributors.

The result is a highly interactive multimedia map of the world and its audiovisual historical documents. Users may visually browse the media connected to a particular geographic location, narrowing results by timespan if desired—or users may instead browse the curated collections created by individuals or institutions, allowing in-depth research into a particular information source or historical event.

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## Example Applications

Historypin's "[Projects](#)" page features mapmaking ventures large and small, institutional or amateur; some of these projects have been further aggregated into thematic collections, as in [First World War Centenary](#), the collection highlighting geospatial histories of World War I in the wake of the war's recent centennial.

Historypin flourishes as a vehicle for community archive projects, in which amateurs are solicited to share their photographs, videos, and oral histories pertaining to a given theme within a geographic area. Examples include [California Pride](#), a crowdsourced multimedia history of the LGBTQ community throughout California, and [Sourdough and Rye](#), a similar history aimed at capturing the Jewish history of the San Francisco Bay area.

## Digital Humanities Potential

Historypin is designed specifically for the aggregation of crowdsourced archives and community histories. Its simple and amateur-friendly interface welcomes participation by community members of all skill levels and backgrounds. Furthermore, it offers low-stakes, entry-level participation options for users who may be daunted to think of themselves as managing "historical documents"—highlighted projects include celebrations of grandparents, sporting events, first cars, all of which gather interesting archival ephemera without forcing the contributors to imbue their materials with weighty historical import. It would be suitable for digital history projects in a K-12 classroom as well as in a tertiary academic setting.

Many of the most successful Historypin projects highlight marginalized histories—LGBTQ populations, immigrant groups, and ethnic or racial minorities. Historypin's welcoming interface and inherent pluralism make it a strong choice for the creation of hidden histories, and for filling in the silences and oversights present in traditional archives. It would be an excellent tool for archival outreach to the community at large, and for outreach to minority populations in particular.

While most current Historypin projects have a Western focus, there is little reason for this to present an ongoing limitation. Provided that a community can provide appropriate forms of media and furnish metadata and textual explanations for the materials, Historypin should function as well outside of Western contexts as within it. It is not, however, suitable for projects which need to require alternate theories of space and time that cannot be accommodated by a basic Google Maps interface.

Historypin projects are meant to be browsed spatially, with only modest timeline manipulation enabled; this makes it unsuitable for data processing, but ideal for wayfaring and exploration. Intermedia complexities can be conveyed only through textual explanations and spatial juxtapositions between materials; pinned media are *aggregated* more than they are *layered*, and the tool's tolerance for ambiguity (whether spatial or conceptual) is fairly low.

## Advantages

**Name:** Historypin

**Governing Body:** ShiftDesign UK (nonprofit organization / NGO)

**Price:** free

**Difficulty Level:** 1 (Beginner)

**Best Disciplinary Fit:**

- community archives
- social history
- gender, sexuality, or ethnic studies
- diaspora studies
- peace and conflict studies

**Website:** <http://www.historypin.org>

Historypin has a highly user-friendly interface, as well as an exhaustive FAQ which covers not only how to operate the tool, but how to digitize physical photographs and integrate one's Historypin account with social media. Its user-friendliness makes it an ideal candidate for crowdsourced community projects in the digital humanities, as it can be used easily by laypeople, including children and the elderly. This capacity is augmented by its emphasis on plural authorship, and on the fact that users are allowed to add free-text commentary to the materials they upload in addition to more standardized metadata. Historypin allows individuals to tell their own spatial histories through their personal archives, while at the same time welcoming scholarly leadership on collection-building and thematic aggregation.

## Drawbacks

Historypin's layering of historical and archival materials in one centralized location is among its primary selling points, but it also represents a possible weakness of the tool. Digital humanities researchers using Historypin must rely on an outside institution's data stability, funding consistency, and ownership continuity, rather than exerting full institutional control over their data. Although this has never transpired for Historypin, free and nonprofit mapping tools have historically changed governing institutions with some frequency, and with such governing changes can come alterations to terms of use or even the introduction of a pay component. Historypin's governance, data stability, and funding appears to have been consistent since 2011, but some researchers may be hesitant to host all their georeferencing of cultural artifacts in one place, especially as data cannot be exported.

Another limitation is the fact that the timeline manipulation function only goes back to 1840. This is due to Historypin's primary emphasis on photography, audio, and video over textual documents. Digitized archival materials from earlier than 1840 are not currently accommodated by the timeline function.

Finally, Historypin's narrow focus on post-1840 archival materials limits its cross-disciplinary applications. One can envision a similar interface providing cultural and geographic context for museum objects, whether artistic or historical, but Historypin itself is not welcoming to such materials.

## External Links

- [Historypin](#)
- [ShiftDesign: About Historypin](#)
- [Historypin FAQ](#)
- [Historypin Projects](#)