Civil War Photo Sleuth Leverages Crowdsourcing and AI to Revolutionize Historical Identification

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The Civil War Photo Sleuth, a groundbreaking digital archive and crowdsourcing project, has emerged as a leading resource for identifying and contextualizing historical photographs. Originally developed in 2018 by Kurt Luther, Associate Professor of Computer Science, and his Ph.D. advisee Vikram Mohanty, with initial funding from a National Science Foundation grant, the platform has experienced significant growth since its launch at the National Archives.

Fueling this expansion has been the enthusiastic participation of a dedicated community of Civil War history enthusiasts and collectors. What began with approximately 600 registered users has now grown to over 20,000 individuals who actively contribute to the archive.

"Our site now hosts over 60,000 photos, the majority of them identified, making it possibly the largest source of digitized Civil War portraits in existence," stated Professor Luther.

The Civil War Photo Sleuth was co-founded by Luther and Mohanty alongside journalist Ron Coddington, owner of Military Images Magazine. To date, the project has successfully identified previously unknown or misidentified photographs for prestigious institutions including the Library of Congress, National Archives, National Portrait Gallery, American Civil War Museum, and the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library. Mr. Coddington highlights the unique dedication of Civil War photo collectors as a key driver of the project's success.

"The one thing that distinguishes Civil War photo collectors is they are crazy research people," said Mr.

Coddington. "They want to know every identity. They want to know every detail about the service. They want to know everything that's on the uniform. They want to know it all."

As the platform has evolved, its capabilities have been enhanced through the integration of artificial intelligence (AI) alongside human expertise. A crucial aspect of the project's success is the verification process facilitated by its growing community. Users can now propose identifications, and other members can vote on the accuracy of these suggestions, providing supporting evidence for their assessments.

The site also features a new AI-powered tool called BackTrace. This innovative feature utilizes computer vision to identify the painted backdrops commonly found in 19th-century photographs. By recognizing specific backdrops, researchers can often narrow down a photo's origin to a particular studio and photographer, uncovering valuable new information.

"When a researcher gets stuck trying to identify a soldier photo, discovering the photographer provides a fresh lead to suggest new connections to certain locations or military units," explained Professor Luther.

In its next phase of development, Civil War Photo Sleuth incorporated last summer as The Photo Sleuth Foundation, a Virginia-based nonprofit organization. Founded by Luther, Coddington, and Mohanty, this new structure will support the continued expansion of historical research, preservation, and educational initiatives.

"The model is a great fit for our mission of rediscovering the lost names and stories of people in historical photos through community and technology," said Professor Luther.

Through the establishment of the nonprofit, Professor Luther aims to extend this successful model to other historical periods. However, the project's continued success will depend on the ongoing participation and engagement of individuals and organizations interested in forming collaborative communities for historical research and knowledge sharing.

"Once you identify the photograph, you're able to tell the story," noted Mr. Coddington. "What did they do in a particular moment that could have been a turning point in U.S. history? Or, on a smaller scale, how did they touch a particular narrative that's part of our culture?"

The increasing number of identified photographs contributes to a richer and more detailed understanding of history.

"We're eager to partner with anyone who has historical photos they would like to share or learn about, from public and private organizations like galleries, libraries, archives, and museums, to individuals with a shoebox of old family photos in their attic or basement," concluded Professor Luther. "Each photo is a piece of the puzzle, and we're excited to continue our work helping to restore names to the faces of history."