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**WESTCHESTER LAUNCHES NEW VIRTUAL ARCHIVES SITE
On-line historical exhibit gives public access to important documents**

Want to learn about local history? It doesn't have to mean visiting the library to check out a pile of books or traveling to a museum. In fact, with the recent unveiling of the Virtual Archives, you needn't go any farther than your own computer.

Westchester County's new on-line exhibit puts history at your fingertips – literally. One of the first ever sponsored by a government in New York State, the site gives the public immediate access to important historical documents. The pilot project that went up focuses on the Civil War in Westchester, but plans are to add future exhibits on other historical topics and eras.

Westchester County Executive Andrew Spano inaugurated the Virtual Archives Saturday during a symposium of local government officials, historians and educators at the Irvington Library. The exhibit is the beginning of a major initiative to serve educators as well as the general public with easier access to local history, he said.

“This website has a tremendous amount of potential – for anyone interested in history. The original intent was to create an exciting, interactive learning environment for social studies teachers who want to bring lessons to life for their students, but anyone will be able to access these treasures from their own computers,” said Spano, himself a former history teacher. “It's just amazing that a collection of historical documents could be turned into a virtual exhibit that tells such a story.”

The website offers the best examples of public and private records relating to the Civil War era that have been drawn from the archives of Westchester County, the City of White Plains and the Town of Eastchester, as well as the library of the Westchester County Historical Society. The public's access to such records has been stymied because of limited hours at local archives and smaller historical societies and, in the case of some smaller governments, by the lack of formal archives programs. Now the documents will be available at any time.

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Visit the site, www.westchesterarchives.com, and you'll find government records, newspaper articles, pictures, diaries and letters that show what life was like in Westchester during the Civil War. Click through the anti-Lincoln campaigns as portrayed in the local newspapers, articles about the conscription acts and the ensuing rioting, and town resolutions opposing the draft. Learn about the bounties used to encourage enlistment, General Lee's surrender and Lincoln's assassination.

The site also uses letters and journals to relate the stories of local soldiers and the women who also helped aid the war effort, the lives of African Americans, Lincoln's involvement with Westchester, and the veteran experience following the war.

Spano noted that the project is unique in that it is a collaborative effort between the county, two municipalities and the Westchester County Historical Society. The county will support and maintain the site with its network and server systems. He noted that the site should help teachers meet state standards for social studies education.

Katie Hite, executive director of the Westchester County Historical Society, noted that Spano is a former history teacher and the creator of Westchester's nationally recognized Archives and Records Center.

"Andy Spano had the vision in 1985 to bring public and private archives together under one roof because it was the best way to serve the public's desire for information," she said. "The Virtual Archives is a logical extension of his commitment to excellence in the presentation of history."

This initial project was made possible by a grant from the New York State Archives' Local Government Records Management Improvement Fund and the generosity of Westchester resident Dolly Maass, according to Patty Dohrenwend, director of the Westchester County Archives and Records Center. The Archives staff worked in conjunction with Julie Morrisett, the history writer/webmaster, to research the appropriate materials to be presented and then scanned over 1500 images and catalogued all the materials.

"Westchester's history is a microcosm of America. It is rich in the detail of people's lives, their aspirations and their struggles. Now its past can be made available through online presentation of its public and private documents – official minutes, census records, photographs, newspaper articles, wills, bond registers, military and voting records, diaries and journals," Dohrenwend said. "Possibilities for the growth of the Virtual Archives will only be limited by our imaginations."

Future projects may include issues such as the emerging role of women in government, Westchester as a leader in social services, the relationship of water to the county's suburban history, and parklands.