

Museum Scholarship and Material Culture Certificate Program Reflection Paper

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My experience in the Museum Scholarship and Material Culture Certificate program has familiarized me with scholarly writings about the museum scholarship field and inspired me to take on independent research projects. Introduction to Museum Scholarship with Mary Alexander enhanced my prior understanding the history of museums and introduced me to exhibition strategies. I learned about museums as cultural heritage institutions. I am quite grateful that the Museum Scholarship and Material Culture Committee decided to include Digitization and Legacy Holdings as a material culture course because that course satisfied by Library Science program requirements as well as my career interests in enhancing access to archival records. The most challenging course in the sequence was the Museum Research Seminar with Dr. Mary Sies, and that course prepared me to design my practicum with Preservation Maryland and Hornbake Library.

My academic program is History and Library Science, with respective concentrations in Modern Europe and Archives and Digital Curation. I appreciated the opportunity to take interdisciplinary courses outside my field and especially the opportunity to engage in dialogue with master's students from a variety of disciplines. In both the introductory course and the research seminar, I interacted with both master's and doctoral students in programs ranging from Physics to American Studies and Ethnomusicology. These students are not all in my other classes and I directly benefited from their input and experience. I valued their perspectives and incorporated their feedback during group assignments in the introductory course and while revising a scholarly research paper in the research seminar. For example, in the introductory course I was in a group that selecting present about the history of history museums. My group developed a creative activity for a class presentation based on virtual history exhibits and lesson plans available online through both a national and local history museum. That project not only

broadened my understanding of history museums, but also forced me to think critically about what resources national and local history museums make available online.

The introductory course also expanded my horizons about the museum field in the Washington, DC region. Professor Alexander programmed several site visits, including the National Museum of Maryland History, Clara Barton Missing Soldiers' Office in Chinatown, and the College Park Aviation Museum. We also visited on-campus exhibits, including the University of Maryland Art Gallery and the Alice in Wonderland temporary exhibit at Hornbake Library. These field trips were essential to my understanding of the museum field because during each trip we discussed scholarship pertinent to each site. The weekly readings built upon each other and our class discussions continually returned to the question of how we defined a museum. As an archives student interested in working in museum archives, I found working with peers in a related field intellectually stimulating. Professor Alexander also invited a variety of guest speakers who enhanced our discussions. For the week the class was assigned to read Randi Korn's *Intentionality*, Professor Alexander invited Korn to speak with us and share her methods of analyzing a museum's mission statement.

In addition to a paper about the history of museums, I also produced a paper about living history. Professor Alexander randomly assigned significant historical figures in the museum field to students. My final paper was part biography of James Deetz and part exploration of the field of living history. I would not have chosen living history on my own as the topic of my research paper, but I am glad Professor Alexander encouraged me to think about living history in the context of history museums and historic sites. The assignment entailed both a research paper and a presentation that engaged my classmates in an educational exercise. For the presentation aspect of the assignment, I attempted to simulate living history by bringing objects from my own

personal life into the classroom and encouraged my classmates to construct meaning around those material items. The introductory course provided a broad understanding of the field of museum scholarship and material culture as a whole, and Professor Alexander's years of work in the field enriched the classroom experience.

In INST 728B Digitization and Legacy Holdings with Dr. Kenneth Heger in the College of Information Studies, I acquired a broad set of archival skills. The most important skill I acquired from that course was how to assign priorities for digitizing physical archival records. I developed a thorough work plan for a digitization project based on a combination of class assignments. One assignment entailed handling postcards depicting historic scenes in Germany and assigning descriptive metadata (tags) so that researchers would be able to easily locate archival records. The entire class handled postcards and experimented with a variety of scanners. Working directly with both the scanners and the physical records prepared me for developing a work plan for future digitization projects. Digitization is a well-established trend in archives and this course prepared me both to select candidates for digitization and to implement a work plan for making those physical records available online.

I also gained archival arrangement and description experience in the Digitization and Legacy Holdings course. Dr. Heger presented us with a selection of records from the National Archives from a consular office in Kiel. Although he digitized the records so that the course could access them, the records themselves represented material culture. I compared two sets of records and analyzed their physical arrangement. I evaluated which set of records were the best candidates for digitization and identified potential user groups for the archival records. The course provided hands-on experience with digitizing records that will directly translate into the professional archives field. Since the course was offered through my department, it lacked the

interdisciplinary nature of the introductory course and the research seminar. Despite the lack of interdisciplinary experience, however, I still acquired valuable skills and insights into expanding access to archival records and studied scholarship about institutional digitization. This broad background translates well into the Museum Scholarship and Material Culture sequence of courses.

The Museum Research Seminar with Dr. Sies, while challenging, definitely prepared me to design and carry out a research proposal. That seminar was the first time I had ever submitted a formal research proposal, in effect to a committee. Dr. Sies, Professor Alexander, and my peers all evaluated my proposal and I was able to revise it based on their careful scrutiny. I found that the research seminar as Professor Alexander designed leads directly into the Museum Scholarship and Material Culture practicum. What made the course challenging was not the fact that I completed an independent research project, but that I completed an independent research project directly alongside other course material. While conducting my research, I also submitted numerous assignments. I enjoyed the assigned readings, although keeping up with all of the readings while gathering sources for and revising my research paper proved a time management challenge. I believe the most valuable skill I acquired from the course was the ability to produce a formal research proposal. I used the guidelines from the research seminar when I submitted the proposal for my practicum.

The research seminar was organized around the themes of monumental and everyday museums. The course discussed concepts of heritage and community, including critical social justice. Like the introductory course, the research seminar explored the museum as an institution of cultural heritage. We considered how museums operate in different communities and how museums reached a variety of audiences. The course had the opportunity to visit the National

Museum of African American History and Culture during its Grand Opening and report on one specific aspect of the museum as well as associated festival activities. The course required attending local events associated with the Lakeland Community Heritage Project. The class also visited the Greenbelt Museum and the Baltimore Indian Community Center and Museum. These experiences enabled me to experience museums and heritage events firsthand, and I submitted written evaluations of those experiences.

The culmination of my coursework in the Museum Scholarship and Material Culture Program is the practicum project. I designed the practicum project based upon my career and research interests. I am primarily interested in increasing and enhancing access to archival records, so I designed a practicum project that focused on archival outreach. The task of promoting awareness of the Preservation Maryland Archives housed at the University of Maryland Special Collections and University Archives proved a delicate balance. The collection is designated “unprocessed,” meaning only a brief abstract of the collection is available online and researchers must contact the curator for an inventory of the collection. While I reported regularly to Elizabeth Novara since she is the onsite curator of the collection unit that houses the Preservation Maryland Archive, I also periodically reported to Meagan Baco, the Director of Communications at Preservation Maryland. Baco periodically checked in with me and I was able to ask her questions about Preservation Maryland. Meagan Baco and the Executive Director, Nicholas Redding, both visited the archive first to design the practicum and then to observe my progress.

I submitted blog posts to both the Special Collections and University Archives and the Preservation Maryland blog. Novara offered comments on my first blog and I submitted it to a staff person in Outreach for posting to the SCUA Wordpress blog site. The post was also shared

through the Hornbake Library Facebook and Twitter. Meanwhile, when I submitted my post to Meagan Baco, she decided to rewrite it from a different perspective and post the rewritten version to the blog. As Communications Director she has total authority over the blog and I understand that the intention was to announce my project. However, I was startled that a cultural heritage organization would give no warning about removing authorship from something a student had written. For my next post, I asked Baco directly if I could submit a post in the first person. She thanked me for my understanding of her policies and agreed. I also submitted a similar post in the first person to the SCUA blog. Aside from the brief misunderstanding, writing blog posts one of the most enjoyable aspects of outreach.

When I selected materials for an exhibit case highlighting Preservation Maryland records in Maryland Room, I once again found that the most enjoyable aspect of the project was writing. The Maryland Room is the reading room of Special Collections and University Archives located in Hornbake Library. The Maryland Room regularly has mini-exhibits featuring specific collections. For the month of April, I showcased documents I thought represented Preservation Maryland's history as documented in their archives. Selecting these documents proved challenging because the exhibit case afforded only a limited amount of space, and my knowledge of Preservation Maryland was derived from my research between the months of February and March. In writing my exhibit text, I greatly benefited from Nicholas Redding's insights and suggestions as to what historical trends and figures I might choose to highlight from the archives. I learned that donors with an ongoing positive relationship with the archives can be a valuable resource in archival interpretation. I thoroughly enjoyed writing a brief history of Preservation Maryland and discussing captions with Elizabeth Novara

In preparation for the Open House, I selected approximately forty items for temporary display in the Maryland Room highlighting the history of Preservation Maryland. Instead of writing exhibit text, I delivered prepared remarks and circulated around the room discussing the documents with visitors. While I found the Open House itself enjoyable, the process of laying out documents and returning them to their proper locations was much more stressful than arranging the display case. Visitors in their excitement had shuffled papers around so that certain documents appeared to be missing. Once I had located all of the documents, I then returned each individual item to its respective archival box. This tedious process of retrieving boxes and inserting folders occupied me for two workdays. I know archival outreach is not always glamorous, but I certainly learned a valuable lesson about the difference between open houses and exhibits. I felt rushed to return all of the items from the open house to their proper locations, but since the temporary exhibit stayed up for one month, I felt no such immediate pressure.

Two of my other products, the series arrangement and the processing plan, relied heavily upon existing documentation of the collection. Each accession now has an inventory, and after working directly with the records, I suggested a basic pattern of organization. The future processing plan entails building upon both the inventory and the suggested series arrangement. I also produced a historical note to the collection, which is a description of the context of the records' creation as well as an organizational history. This historical note will be part of a future finding aid, which is a resource identifies and contextualizes the collection for researchers. The existing documentation consists of Excel spreadsheets with a folder-level description, organized by box, of the entire collection. I believe the process of promoting the Preservation Maryland Archives is still ongoing, and upon further reflection if I had no further obligations I would volunteer myself to continue processing the unprocessed collection. Despite some stress, I

enjoyed working with both Special Collections and Preservation Maryland and I gained valuable experience promoting a compelling archival collection.

The Museum Scholarship and Material Culture Certificate program complemented my dual-master's program in History and Library Science. I gained valuable professional skills in each sequential course and each course expanded my knowledge of museum scholarship. In the introductory course, I learned about the scholarship of living history sites and history museums, which I then applied during discussions in the research seminar. The seminar provided me with valuable analytical skills, especially in proposing and designing an independent research project. I definitely relied upon those skills during my practicum, which along with the material culture elective course provided professional and scholarly insights into a career in archives. I would recommend the certificate for additional graduate students interested in cultural heritage, regardless of their degree programs.