From Classroom to Gallery: George Washington and His World

OBJECTIONS

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Students in Professor Denver Brunsman’s fall 2019 advanced undergraduate history class, “George Washington and His World,” had the unique opportunity to transform their course into an exhibition. Working closely with Jackie Streker, assistant curator of the Albert H. Small Washingtoniana Collection, 17 students selected two objects each for the exhibition. Their challenge: to demonstrate the symbiotic relationship between George Washington and three places dear to his heart: Mount Vernon, Alexandria, and “the Federal City” (early Washington, D.C.).

This course is a model of the “engaged liberal arts” philosophy promoted by GW’s Columbian College of Arts and Sciences. Each student wrote an entry for the Digital Encyclopedia of George Washington, published online by George Washington’s Mount Vernon, and presented his or her final research at a D.C. Mondays program hosted by the museum.

This was the first year Brunsman’s students curated an exhibition, and they navigated the challenges all museum professionals face. Brunsman and Streker helped the students master the art of writing 70-word interpretive labels. Every word counted as never before—their labels will be read by the public and shape how each object is understood.

The objects in the exhibition range from images of George Washington to early maps and illustrations of Mount Vernon, Alexandria, and Washington, D.C. A handful of objects highlight how the institution of slavery shaped George Washington and his home region. Together, the pieces reveal a side of Washington’s legacy that scholars often neglect: his local, rather than his national, impact. As Brunsman stresses, Washington was a “homebody” in spirit even though the demands of founding the nation often kept him from home.

Brunsman and Streker enlisted the help of three graduate students to assist in exhibition development. Mary Lesher and Rachel Poe, students in the university’s museum studies program, and Courtland Ingraham, a master’s student in history, each mentored a team of undergraduates working on objects connected to one of Washington’s three places. As a result of this teamwork, the class infused a collaborative energy into two pursuits (curating and academic research) that can often feel solitary.

The product of this collaborative enterprise will be on display when the exhibition George Washington and His World opens in February 2020.