Sweet Briar College Researcher Awarded NEH Grant to Develop Database

Project will trace African-American communities pre- and post-Civil War

Sweet Briar, VA (Vocus) June 22, 2010 -- Lynn Rainville, a research anthropologist and historian at Sweet Briar College, has been awarded a grant of $24,963 by the National Endowment for the Humanities to develop a model for researching African-American families from antebellum to post-bellum times.

The project, titled “African-American Families Database: Community Formation in Albemarle County, Virginia, 1850-1880,” has two primary goals. The first is to allow historians and researchers to track the formation and growth of African-American communities. The second is to help African Americans find their ancestors.

The grant will fund the design of a searchable database, beginning with a pilot study to gather test data. Rainville and her collaborators will collect data on generations of families within Albemarle County, Va., neighborhoods who are descendants of slaves from two plantations. Limiting the data will allow Rainville to refine data entry and search queries before proceeding with data from tens of thousands of individuals.

To populate the database, Rainville is working with Central Virginia History Researchers, a group of local historians whose members have diverse skills and decades of experience researching Virginia county history. One outcome Rainville hopes to realize from the project is a process to streamline this type of research and provide guidelines for researchers in any community tracing slave families.

Tracing African-American family lineage is complicated because many enslaved individuals lacked surnames, the most common resource used in searching for people, Rainville said. Finding and telling the stories of individual slaves has always been difficult for that reason, but years of painstaking research by historians have resulted in detailed studies of specific enslaved communities. Tying the information together is the next logical step.

“Now that the groundwork has been laid by several decades’ worth of plantation studies, it would be valuable to be able to discuss regional trends and compare and contrast the experiences of enslaved individuals on different plantations,” Rainville argued in the NEH grant proposal.

“When multiple archival records are made available about an individual’s residence, marriage, property acquisition, church membership, and commercial transactions, new connections and interpretations can be made about black communities in the South.”

Historians such as the Central Virginia History Researchers are experts at mining local records, Rainville said. While much is written about groups of people, CVHR members have figured out how to flesh out the lives of individuals within those groups — the Americans we know the least about. But their work often isn’t published.

The database will make their discoveries accessible to other historians, genealogists and descendants. Under the grant, Rainville is putting together a group of developers who will collaborate on a database design modeled on
the pilot data. The designers are local professionals affiliated with digital humanities centers or independent companies — experts whose technical services ordinarily wouldn’t be available to groups such as the CVHR.

Rainville’s most important role is to bring the designers and researchers together, to create a mechanism through which anyone can use the trove of information uncovered by local historians.

“That’s what’s so exciting about [the project],” she said. “If you could somehow magically publish their work, you would have dozens of new books and new insights into enslaved communities.”

The grant was awarded under the NEH’s Digital Humanities Start-up Program. It also has been designated a “We the People” project, an NEH initiative that supports teaching, studying and promoting the understanding of American history and culture and advancing knowledge of the principles that define America.

For details about the project and the methods used by the researchers to develop the database, visit www.centralvirginiahistory.org

Sweet Briar College is a nationally recognized all-women’s liberal arts college near Lynchburg, Va. Information is available at www.sbc.edu.

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