**Washington Library**

**Center for Digital History**

**Projects**

**Updated 6/8/2022**

**Internal Projects:**

**1.**  **Digital Encyclopedia of George Washington**  
<https://www.mountvernon.org/library/digitalhistory/digital-encyclopedia/>

**Priority**: Mediumish

**Premise:** Patrons can explore the wide range of subjects related to George Washington’s world and the colonial and founding eras.

**Background:** The *DEGW* is one of the Washington Library’s original digital projects and features over 500 published entries. The backend is a custom-built module in BigTree, which limits our ability to modify it without advanced support.

Over the last two years, we have slowed the publication of new entries in favor of a) enhancing the underlying metadata and image captions b) implementing a more robust editorial system to publish more high-quality entries as opposed to just more entries c) correcting, archiving, and revising existing entries d) the production of *Intertwined*.

The *DEGW* is intended for an educated, general audience who is interested in Washington/Mount Vernon topics. It is often used in classrooms and is on occasion cited by professional scholars.

We often collaborate with college and university faculty to integrate the *DEGW* into the classroom, with students writing entries from a pool of topics provided by the CDH and edited in concert with their supervising professor. Recent partners include faculty at George Mason University and George Washington University.

I am in favor of maintaining a lower annual publishing rate in favor of publishing high-quality entries and managing our time wisely.

**Challenges:** The *DEGW* has never had a clear sense of direction, reflecting the broader tension in Mount Vernon’s identity as both George Washington’s home and a place where people can learn about Washington and his world. Should it be a place to learn about Washington when there are far superior digital encyclopedias out there? Should it focus on entries unique to Mount Vernon?

A secondary challenge is that the *DEGW* was often (and still is to some extent) used as a marketing tool to drive people to the rest of the Mount Vernon web presence. In times past, new entries were developed reactively and quickly to support some perceived need. As a result, more than a few entries do not have authors associated with them and were likely developed from research provided by Mary Thompson (former research historian at the library who will soon be back as a research fellow).

**Opportunities:** Determine a more precise focus for the *DEGW* and identify potential entries accordingly. Continue to archive out-of-date entries and commission replacements as necessary. Potentially embedding more visual elements in the entries (like podcasts and videos). Commissioning new entries as appropriate.

**2. Podcasts**

General Points: We use Anchor.fm to host and distribute our podcasts to various podcast apps and aggregators. We use Podpage.com as our podcast network website: [www.georgewashingtonpodcast.com](http://www.georgewashingtonpodcast.com)

**Priority:** Medium to High

Specific Shows:

*Conversations at the Washington Library* - <https://www.georgewashingtonpodcast.com/show/conversations/>

Premise: *Conversations at the Washington Library* is “the premier podcast about George Washington and his Early American world.”

*Conversations* began nearly a decade ago as an interview program between then Executive Director Doug Bradburn (now MV CEO) and Library research fellows and book talk guests, with 99% of interviews conducted in the Library’s studio. Joe Stoltz and Kevin Butterfield eventually hosted the program until I took over in June 2019.

The program features an interview-style format with guests, usually about a book or digital topic. In its present form, it includes a roughly 40-minute segment of conversation about a topic with a guest, followed by a second segment with four questions designed to learn more about the guest’s reading habits, research finds, and hopes for the future.

Each new episode gains roughly 500 plays in a seven-day period. This puts us at better than average for podcasts in general. Ideally, we release a new episode every two weeks. That has become harder to accomplish as of late given increased workloads in other areas.

My goal has been to emphasize the “Early American world” part of the podcast’s premise in part because previous iterations of the show were a) too provincial b) too clearly a marketing scheme. My policy has been to feature books about GW/Washingtons only when it is by a reputable historian from a reputable press. I select guests based on my own observations of the field, in consultation with press reps, recommendations from friends and colleagues, with the occasional instruction from above to feature a certain project.

We use Squadcast.fm to record with our guests. I have recorded remotely exclusively since the onset of the pandemic. We do have the capability to record in studio with our Rodecaster Pro (but we need to purchase new headphones and probably new mics – I use my own mics to record at the moment). The Rodecaster Pro is a highly mobile device, meaning that we could record on the road in certain circumstances.

We edit the audio files Adobe Audition. There is an excellent introductory tutorial for Audition in Lynda.com.

**Challenges:** Ensuring topic diversity and guest diversity, publishing on a consistent schedule, promoting the program.

Monetizing the podcast is difficult for two reasons: 1) At present, we only qualify for basic host-read ads that provide us with $15 for every 1,000 plays. Not terrible, but not super exciting either. We would need to crack 5,000 weekly downloads to qualify for dynamically interested ads. 2) We are severely restricted in our ability to run ads by the institution because Mount Vernon positions itself as non-partisan. If we were to reach the 5K weekly download threshold, we would then have to forgo certain ad categories.

**Opportunities:**

Continue to find great guests and highlight important work; continue to innovate with format and sound design (although I would like to preserve both more or less for one more year before making any substantial changes); find money to run digital ad campaigns.

*Scripted Series Podcasts*

Although *Intertwined* is complete, we should begin thinking about what comes next. We should talk about this opportunity in greater detail, and we will need to consider:

1). Topic

2). Format

3). Limited series or multi-season (and how many episodes either way)

4). Securing funding for the audio production (if we decide that the project’s scale

beyond our labor capacity)

5). Secure funding for honoraria if needed/desired

6). Secure funding for marketing

7). Topic alignment with institutional proprieties

What we learned by doing *Intertwined* is that a series like it is really a 12-month, labor intensive project. It would have been longer had we not been able to draw on existing material from *Lives Bound Together*. We contracted out an audio engineer in part because we had to focus on doing the interviews and writing the scripts, and I was not skilled enough yet to take on the work yet, but I am now able to do that work. Figuring out the answers to points 1-3 above will determine if we need to worry about point 4.

**3.** **Harrison H. Dodge Transcript Project**

**Premise:** To transcribe and index the letter books of Harrison H. Dodge, superintendent of Mount Vernon from 1885 to 1937. Dodge's letter books contain letterpress and handwritten copies of outgoing correspondence. These were bound into 36 volumes in 1968-1969. The majority of these letters are to the Regent (the chair of the Mount Vernon Ladies' Association) and some take the form of a monthly report.

**Priority:** Low

**Background:** The Dodge Project was spun up as a COVID response measure in early 2020 to provide continued employment for frontline interpretative staff who were no longer able to offer guided tours of the mansion. Following the return to (somewhat) normal operations, the project has continued, with three volunteers carrying on the work. We have two volunteers who are transcribing and crosschecking each other’s work, and a third volunteer performing a second pass.

We use [FromthePage.com](http://www.fromthepage.com/) to facilitate the transcription process. It is light weight, allows for the ingest of digital imagines directly from our digital collections, and the export of transcriptions back into our repository.

The project is set to private setting (I will add you after you’ve created an account with FTP) to keep it manageable for us. Given the size of our team, we are not able to oversee a full scale, publicly accessible crowdsource transcription project.

There are 285 document sets consisting of 5,688 pages (with more document sets to be added when appropriate). Most of these documents have had at least some transcription, with many transcriptions complete.

Our goal to complete the transcriptions and perform at least one pass over them, give them a proper descriptive header, and export the transcriptions back into our digital collections.

**Challenges:** FTP does not permit the export of individual documents or document sets to our repository – it is all or nothing, so there are incomplete transcripts currently in our repository.

**Opportunities:** Besides their utility as a research collection, the Dodge transcriptions may one day lend themselves well to a proper documentary editing project, and derivative projects.

**4. Colonial Music Institute – Early American Music Database**

**Premise:** The Early American Music Database is an effort to create a Drupal-based site to contain and display approximately 13,000 records of 18th-century tunes. We are developing it in partnership with the Institute for Thomas Paine Studies at Iona College, with whom we have established an internship program in public history. The initial goal is to create a site that will allow researchers to access information about the tune records, along with some limited interpretation. A long-term goal is to build a fully fleshed out site that contains the research files as described below.

**Priority:** To Discuss

**Background:** In 2019, David and Ginger Hildebrand gifted their Colonial Music Institute to Mount Vernon. You can read more about the Institute here: <https://www.mountvernon.org/library/digitalhistory/colonial-music-institute/>

As part of the gift, they transferred an unpublished database created by one of their collaborators, (the now late) Bob Keller, which contains the research of his late wife Kate Van Winkle Keller. Kate sourced copies of early American tunes from many different archives and libraries, compiling copious research notes about each collection and procuring images of these tunes in some form. Bob created an HTML-based database to hold the material. It works very well, but it is not something presentable to the wider public. They were also reluctant to allow us to offer the PDF files of the research material and images to a wider audience, believing the materials to fall under a Fair Use license as opposed to a Creative Common License.

In the spring of 2020, we began working to build the Drupal-based site in concert with the students at Iona College. For reasons I will go into separately, this has been a slow-walked project that we have used primarily to support our internship program with Iona.

However, the project has been embraced enthusiastically by Iona College, both by the ITPS and by musicologists on the faculty, especially the latter, who are excited about the possibility of transforming the music into text-searchable data, performing some of the music, and using it in research.

This September, Iona College will host a conference entitled “Crafting Narratives of Empire,” which will feature a short performance inspired by some of the pieces in the collection during the opening session. I am to introduce the performance and talk a little bit about our collaboration.

**Challenges:** Finding the funding and labor resources (and political will) to complete the project.

**Opportunities:** The creation of a unique resource for the study of music in early America; continued pedagogical engagement with Iona College; derivative CDH projects.

**5. Database of Enslaved People**

**Premise:** A complete as possible accounting of the lives of the people enslaved at Mount Vernon derived from manuscript sources.

**Priority**: Reasonably High

**Background:** Around 2014, as work began on what would become the museum exhibit *Lives Bound Together*, concurrent work began on the construction of a database that would record the lives of the enslaved community at Mount Vernon. Searching through correspondence, account books, ledgers, and other documents, a team led by Molly Kerr built a database that would eventually encompass 34,000 spreadsheet rows detailing the experiences of over 1,000 people. Each line is tied to an event (e.g. “Neptune fell ill today;” “Doll was sent to the fields”) in a person’s life. The original database was constructed in Microsoft Access, with plans to migrate it to a MySql database in collaboration with the Roy Rosenzweig Center for History and New Media at George Mason University, but those plans fell through in part due to lack of funding.

A portion of the database was put online so that it could be part of a kiosk in *Lives Bound Together*. You can see it here: <https://www.mountvernon.org/george-washington/slavery/slavery-database/>

Like the *DEGW*, a custom-built module was created in BigTree for the database. However, the dataset uploaded is, as I have always been given to understand but not expressly told how, incomplete, but at this point that is neither here nor there.

Importantly, the dataset only accounts for people enslaved by the Washingtons during their lifetimes. It does not really account for people on either side of their lives, meaning that we have opportunities to augment and expand the original dataset.

Last year, we were approached by the team at Enslaved.org about incorporating Mount Vernon’s dataset into their project. The dataset would be published along with an explanatory article. We also began working with Dr. Scott Casper of the American Antiquarian Society, and author of *Sarah Johnson’s Mount Vernon*, who is preparing a dataset based on his past research that will carry the story of the enslaved community into the 19th century. Similarly, Dr. Cassandra Good is collecting data on the people enslaved by the Custis family.

Six weeks ago, the Enslaved.org team reached out again, noting that they are putting in for an NEH grant that would allow them to make block grants to partner institutions whose datasets need refining. The block grant would be about $4,000, which would allow us to hire out some help to complete the work. I signed on board to the idea during Kevin’s leave. We should hear in December if the grant was successful.

Here is the text of the abstract that describes the needed work:

“The database requires extensive upgrades to prepare it for incorporation into Enslaved.org. As it was constructed in an era before the availability of many open-access sites like *Founders Online*, many of the citations point to sources behind paywalls like *The Papers of George Washington*,published on the University of Virginia Press’s Rotunda Digital Imprint. Moreover, the individuals recorded in the database require new unique identifiers that reflect best practices in database design. Presently, individuals are defined by “UniqueName” (for example, “Abram A,” “Abram B,” “Abram C.”) This practice has led to some confusion, especially as some of the enslaved at Mount Vernon had or eventually claimed surnames, which are not presently reflected in the database. Finally, since the completion of the initial project, newly discovered and digitized sources containing evidence of people enslaved at Mount Vernon have become available. Moreover, the compilation of additional data sets by scholars such as Dr. Scott Casper will allow us to expand the database’s holdings and its value to researchers and the descendent community. These materials must be incorporated into the database. Importantly, these new datasets extend the story of enslavement at Mount Vernon beyond the lives of George and Martha Washington by documenting enslaved people there prior to the Washingtons’ ownership of the plantation as well as after their deaths. Both periods are significantly understudied and call for further investigation.”

For a variety of reasons, I am no longer keen to build a standalone database as I once was. I believe our goal should be to prepare the dataset for inclusion into Enslaved.org, and encourage our research partners to contribute complementary datasets. We would encourage patrons to use that resource to access our data.

**Challenges:** Securing the funding and time that would allow us to complete this work.

**Opportunities:** Creating new teaching and research opportunities centered on the lives of Mount Vernon’s enslaved community from the early 18th through the mid-19th centuries.

**Collaborative Projects:**

**1. ARGO –** You’re up to speed on this one.

**2. Descendants Oral History Project**

**Premise:** The oral history project is a collaborative effort between The League of the Descendants of the Enslaved at Mount Vernon and the Library to record and preserve approximately 45 interviews with the descendants community. The League will retain ownership of the files and place access copies on long-term loan at the Library for research purposes.

**Priority:** High, but a light lift for the CDH

**Background:** In March 2022, the CDH and MVLA Archivist Rebecca Baird was asked to collaborate with the League on its oral history project. The CDH is providing access and training to StreamYard, where the interviews are recorded, and Baird is helping to identify archival material that might be incorporated into the interviews themselves. Most of the interviews are 1:1, except for four members who will be interviewed by a panel composed of the League’s education committee.

We have completed thirteen interviews to date. I have trained three members of the League to act as producers, so we don’t necessarily need to be present during the actual recordings, although I am “on call” in case a problem arises. Besides training, my role has been to schedule the recordings in StreamYard, build PowerPoints and load them into StreamYard, download the completed files, and assign interns the task of correcting the AI-generated transcript.

The interviews on are pause for a moment and we expect them to resume in the coming weeks.

**Challenges:** Minimal

**Opportunities:** Strengthen the Library’s/Mount Vernon’s collaborative relationship with the League, provide access to new research materials, potential derivative projects.

**3. George Washington Commemorations Project**

**Premise:** The commemorations project is a collaborative initiative between the CDH and Dr. Phil Levy of the University of South Florida to build a crowdsource tool to collect information about Washington commemorations (see definitions [here](https://www.mountvernon.org/library/digitalhistory/george-washington-commemorations-project/about-commemorations/)) across the globe. To simplify the process, we built the collection form and database using Google Forms and Spreadsheets.

**Background:** Not much to add to the above, other than the crowdsource tool is complete and waiting for wider deployment. We did have our interns test it last summer to make sure it works, and it does. I will also note that we began developing the project right when the national conversation about statutes and memorials kicked into high-gear in the summer of 2020, so we held off advertising the project then. It may be worth-while doing so now.

**Challenges:** The political climate; normal challenges associated with running a crowdsource project; the lack of a clear research endgame (which is not our responsibility).

**Opportunities:** The creation of a dataset that will inform new scholarship and possible new derivative digital projects; engagement with the broader public; pedagogical tool for teachers and faculty.

**4. Papers of Bushrod Washington**

**Premise:** The Papers project is a joint effort with the Papers of George Washington Project at the University of Virginia to build the frontend of the new Bushrod Washington digital documentary edition website.

**Priority**: Immediate (After publishing the final episode of Season 6 of *Conversations* this week, I have to turn to this project)

**Background:** The Papers project features over 1,000 documents (primarily correspondence with some legal briefs and Supreme Court opinions) by Bushrod Washington. Bushrod was GW’s legal heir and served as an Associate Justice on the Supreme Court. The Papers team and the Center for Digital Editing at UVA has completed building the backend of a Drupal site to hold the documents. We are working with them to build the frontend and search interface for the project.

**Challenges:** Time management and commitment (Drupal requires sustained engagement); deadlines (the idea is to have a site completed by sometime in September)

**Opportunities:** Besides new research on BW, law in the early US, and working more closely with the Washington Papers team, the potential to write for the site.

**Potential Projects:**

**1. Digitization of the Papers of Baron de Vioménil and the Marquis de Chastellux.**

Please see the draft grant application for more details on this project.

**2. George Washington National Masonic Memorial**

In 2023, we may have the opportunity to partner with the Masons on a digital exhibit that will include material within, and left out of, Mark Tabbert’s book, *A Deserving Brother: George Washington and Freemasonry*. We would bid out the web development to a third-party vendor using funding supplied by the Masons.