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Search Committee
Charles Phelps Taft Research Center
University of Cincinnati
Cincinnati, OH 45221

Dear Members of the Search Committee,

I am writing to express a strong interest in the 2025–27 Taft Postdoctoral Fellowship at the University of Cincinnati. As a historian of science, communication, empire, and political economy, my research bridges Atlantic and early American history using interdisciplinary methods drawn from historical geography, sociology, and environmental cultural studies. Currently serving as a Postdoctoral Teaching Fellow at the University of Missouri, I earned my Ph.D. in 2024 and recently honored with the university's Distinguished Dissertation Award in the Humanities. With a record of public scholarship, digital humanities engagement, and inclusive pedagogy, I am eager to contribute to the Taft Center's vibrant intellectual community and build the foundation for a tenure-track career focused on environmental and transatlantic humanities.

My monograph project, *Natures of Exchange: Communicating Natural Knowledge, Commerce, and Empire in John Bartram's Early America*, explores how an American botanist leveraged commercial exchange, in the process, challenging imperial hierarchies in science. Centering on Bartram's subscription service, the study examines how scientific labor, often obscured in traditional patronage systems, was reframed through emergent market logics. Drawing on archival research, GIS mapping, thematic coding, and social network analysis, I trace how knowledge circulated and accrued both material and epistemic value across transatlantic networks. This project contributes to growing scholarship on the political economy of science, colonial knowledge systems, and the commodification of nature while reframing the origins of American intellectual independence through scientific and commercial exchange.

The Taft Center's 2025–26 theme, "Period," aligns closely with my research interests. My work interrogates the periodization of knowledge, how empires, collectors, and naturalists codified and categorized knowledge through distinct frameworks. Bartram's networks, which relied on Indigenous ecological knowledge, enslaved labor, and seasonally structured trade, expose the contested temporalities embedded in early American science. I am currently finalizing my book proposal, during the fellowship, I plan to finalize my manuscript writing and complete a chapter-based article "Making the Market of Natural Knowledge" (draft version as writing sample) and design a new undergraduate seminar *Ecologies of Knowledge*. through the lens of time, labor, and environment. Drawing from case studies across the Atlantic world, students will examine how

scientific knowledge systems emerged from entangled networks of Indigenous expertise, enslaved labor, settler extraction, and ecological exchange.

My broader teaching and research trajectory examine environmental and technological change within imperial and capitalist systems. I draw from training in museum studies, GIS, and digital humanities to analyze how ecological knowledge production intersected with Enlightenment commercial and extractive practices. The University of Cincinnati's strengths in environmental humanities, Atlantic world studies, and interdisciplinary inquiry, particularly within the Departments of History, Geography, and Africana Studies, offer a strong institutional home for this work. I am especially interested in future collaborations with UC faculty working in environmental and trans-imperial contexts.

My teaching philosophy emphasizes experiential learning, public-facing research, and critical skill-building. At the University of Missouri and McKendree University, I have designed and taught courses such as *Nature's Nation: Disease, Disaster, and Ecology* and *Between the Borderlands: Science, Trade, and Culture*. These courses integrate digital tools, like story mapping, archival research, and interdisciplinary readings to help students visualize and contextualize processes. As a specialist in special education with two years of master's level teaching coursework, I center inclusive, project-based pedagogy across modalities and learner levels, from first-generation undergraduates to dual-credit high school students in Illinois' College Now program. My goal is to mentor students through accessible, collaborative assignments that model the historian's craft in diverse forms.

Outside the classroom, my work bridges scholarship and community. As project lead for *Madison Historical*, I trained student researchers and curated over 70 digital oral histories and archival collections. At the Campbell House Museum, I developed an online exhibit connecting 19th-century interior design to botanical aesthetics and consumption. At the U.S. National Archives and Records Administration, I supported mixed-media digitization, restoration and preservation. In my current role as Social Media Editor for *The Journal of the Early Republic* and *The Panorama*, I lead public-facing digital initiatives that highlight emerging scholarship and expand access to historical research to a public audience.

The Taft Fellowship represents a crucial next step in my academic career. It would offer the time and intellectual community to complete *Natures of Exchange* as a first book, deepen my interdisciplinary teaching portfolio, and contribute to collaborative programming around the theme of temporality and knowledge production. The opportunity to work closely with Taft faculty, serve on the Thematic Programming Committee, and participate in public engagement initiatives aligns with my long-term commitment to bridging academic and civic life.

Enclosed are my curriculum vitae, research abstract, and writing sample. Letters of recommendation will be sent under separate cover. I sincerely appreciate your time and consideration and would be honored to join the Taft Research Center as a Postdoctoral Fellow.

Sincerely,
Shannan Catherine Mason, Ph.D.