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April 30th, 2014, 8:12 pm

UMW students build museum exhibit

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BY LINDLEY ESTES / THE FREE LANCE-STAR

During the spring semester, the University of Mary Washington’s museum exhibition course’s classroom was a downtown Fredericksburg historic site.

The students congregated at the home of their school’s namesake, the Mary Washington House, to create an exhibit called “Nobly Has That Little Band Worked,” based on the effort to preserve the site.

They researched the history of how the home—built in the 1750s and purchased in the 1770s by George Washington for his mother—was preserved and designed the exhibit, built it by hand and installed it on the porch of the house.

Sam Crystal, a senior historic preservation major, took the class to get real hands-on experience.

“There’s really no other way to get a holistic view of exhibit planning like this,” Crystal said.

The exhibit is the first of its scale at Mary Washington House, where space constraints make large-scale displays difficult.

Crystal said learning about early preservationists added another layer of interest to the project for him and his 13 classmates.

“It’s cool to learn about early preservation groups,” he said. “It was early on, but they still cared about history. It’s humbling to see their work.”

Among those early preservationists was Isobel Lamont Stewart Bryan, the first president of the Association for the Preservation of Virginia Antiquities. After hearing in 1890 that Mary Washington’s home in Fredericksburg was slated to be dismantled and shipped to the Columbian Exhibition in Chicago, Bryan and other early Virginia preservationists raised \$4,000 to buy the house and turn it into a museum.

Mary Beth Roland, manager of Mary Washington House, said without such efforts, it would be easy to forget Fredericksburg’s Colonial history and focus solely on its Civil War sites.

She and Anne Darron, administrator for the Washington Heritage Museums, called the students “professionals” and said they hope to work with UMW classes again.

They have a small staff and limited resources, so being able to tap into the students’ creativity and need for hands-on learning opportunities helped them get the exhibit done before next year’s 125th anniversary of the saving of the house.

The exhibit is presented on ladders made by the students, which blend in with the outdoors and the garden it overlooks.

“I never would have come up with the ladder idea, but it works so perfectly,” Roland said.

The students uncovered previously forgotten facts about the museum’s past.

George A. Ball, one of the founders of the jar company that bears his name, believed himself to be a descendant of Mary Washington and donated \$5,000 to the museum in the 1920s when it fell on hard times.

He also donated money to other Fredericksburg sites, despite not visiting the city beforehand.

Roland said uncovering facts like these caused her and Darron to begin creating an archive of documents the Mary Washington House owns.

Darron, who was one of the early graduates of the preservation program, said she “can’t believe how much [the department] has grown” since she received her degree in 1983.

Cristina Turdean, who leads the class, said the department’s history studies is the largest minor UMW offers. With about 65 students in the program now, Turdean said the hands-on approach makes it appealing.

“They learn practical skills,” she said. “They see how the process works in the real world.”

She said students in the class told her they learned how to be flexible on a job site and how to solve problems.

Crystal said he is taking his newfound knowledge to Israel, where he has received a fellowship with the Israeli Antiquities Authority.

“There was no better way to learn,” he said.

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WANT TO GO?

WHAT: “Nobly Has That Little Band Worked”

WHERE: Mary Washington House, 1200 Charles St.

WHEN: Begins today

MORE INFORMATION: washingtonheritagemuseums.org, facebook.com/MWHEXhibit

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