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Savannah as a History Classroom: An Interview with Lydia Moreton, the Curator of Collections for the Coastal Heritage Society

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“Savannah as a History Classroom”

An Interview with Lydia Moreton, the Curator of Collections for the Coastal Heritage Society

Editorial introduction

Lydia Moreton, the Curator of Collections for the Coastal Heritage Society, is an Armstrong graduate, who earned her Masters in Public History in 1999. During the fall semester of 2016 she began her first adventure in teaching, spearheading a museums study class for both graduate and undergraduate students. During this time, she agreed to be interviewed for our journal. A range of topics were discussed, from how she hoped her students would benefit from her class to her current job and the many responsibilities that come with it. What follows are excerpts from this discussion, the first taking place on a park bench in Chippewa Square on September 27, 2016 and the second, a month later, just outside City Hall on October 27, 2016).

Ms. Moreton has many responsibilities as a Curator of Collections. As she explained, “I manage the artifact collections for the Savannah History Museum, Georgia State Railroad Museum, Pin Point Heritage Museum and Old Fort Jackson. On occasion I also write exhibit labels and participate in planning meetings for exhibits and for building renovations that would affect objects or collections in any way; strategic planning, budget meetings, generally anything that affects collections.” Ms. Moreton wears many hats. Depending on the day, she may be donning her curator’s cap, disaster planning cap, or

even her exterminator's cap, as dealing with pests is a major part of the job. Being responsible for the collections of four individual sites is impressive and further proves just how demanding Ms. Moreton's job can be. "One day you're [dealing with] HVAC systems and the next day, exhibit labels. Then the next day you're talking to a conservator about a textile that you need to care for, and so it can be a little bit crazy."

Ms. Moreton spoke fondly of her time at Armstrong and of the History Department: "A lot of my classes were hands-on and allowed me to get out to the community to meet other professionals working in the field. When I first came [to Armstrong] I did classes at Seabrook Village down in Midway, and then I had internships at the Owens-Thomas house, the Telfair, the Savannah History Museum and Lebanon plantation. [Armstrong] really used Savannah as a classroom." She later noted that "the whole city was like our museum playground." She continued, "The professors are really willing to work with you, and be there with you, and take you everywhere. Dr. Fertig and I went to Charleston on numerous occasions for research and to look at museums. Working with her at the Savannah History Museum on collection work and putting exhibits together was really helpful to me, [as was] being taken under their wing and being included in that family feeling at the history department."

Returning to Armstrong after seventeen years, this time as an instructor, seemed rather easy for Ms. Moreton. "In many ways it feels like I've never left. When I came back, and came into the office, even though it was in a different building, it still had that same feel. So still after all these years they're cultivating that family feel. I like how they're now

trying to have classes taught by people working in the field. I think that's a really good idea.” So it seems, according to Ms. Moreton, that the overall atmosphere of Armstrong has not changed much since 1999. She kept reiterating her point about the familial nature of the History Department and of museum work in general.

Museum workers in Savannah are a close knit community and networking within this community provides many opportunities for budding historians. Ms. Moreton took full advantage of the opportunities to learn and network that Armstrong provided her with and she hoped to provide her students with these same advantages. “I wanted each person to get what they felt they needed out of this class, to achieve what they felt they needed to create their own career path. So I wanted it to be as practical a class as possible, and I didn't want to try to duplicate what another professor would be able to teach better than I would. Other professors teach the museums study classes and do a lot with theory. So I thought I would try to do more of a field school type class. I think, sometimes, that [those classes] are the more useful ones when trying to get a job, although the theory is still equally important. [This class] is a reflection of my job. It's sort of the view from my chair in my office, and it's a little bit of everything. That's kind of what Museum work is all about, especially if you're a small or midsize Museum.”

Ms. Moreton was incredibly focused on tailoring her class to her student’s needs. She frequently helped her students find resources for their personal collections and had on multiple occasions offered to set students up to meet with other professionals in the field. She asked herself, “What else do [my students] want? Do they want me to help them

locate things for their own resource books or do they want to meet other people that are working in the field? Do they want to have some potential internships lined up, maybe not even for next semester but for the semester after that? Those are usually the things that lead to jobs.” It was clear that Ms. Morton was invested in her students. When asked if she intended to keep in contact with them she quickly replied, “Yes. I would like that. [The students] are really making this class for me, because I was terrified to do this. Dr. Fertig and Dr. Hendricks had a lot of faith in me, so I really appreciate that from them, and Armstrong has been good to me, but I have to say that [my students] have been the best part of this. The hard work and interest shown by them helps me put more into it. And that's the thing I really like about this field, you get out of it what you put into it. It's fun to work with everybody.”

At the end of our second interview, right before walking in to City Hall to meet her class, Ms. Moreton made some closing remarks on her teaching. “I'd like to get input from the students on how better to shape the class. I'm all about team effort and constructive criticism. I want to know how [the students] see it from [their] point of view. I would like to sit down in our classroom in Hawes Hall and ask ‘If we did this again, what would you guys want [this class] to be for the next group of students?’ That's how I structured this class. I based it on what I thought I needed when I first started as a newbie in the field. So it would be interesting to see [what the students think]. It's what we do after exhibits or any kind of project. [We say to ourselves], okay we like this, but what can we do to be better next time; how do we improve it? I like that process.” Regardless on what she may change, or if she decides to even teach at Armstrong again, in exposing her class to the

wide range of opportunities available in the museum community, Ms. Moreton has certainly made an impact on her students.

(Interviewed by Ethan Marshall)

About the author

Ethan Marshall is a senior majoring in history at Armstrong. After graduating he hopes to achieve a Master degree in History or Foreign Affairs. Ethan is primarily interested in the study of imperialism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and the effects it has had on the modern world.

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