

Newsroom

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Georgia Southern University

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Georgia Southern fall 2017 graduate develops free database management system

DECEMBER 7, 2017



Nathan Flanders, a Fall 2017 graduate, stands with a diorama he created of Camp Lawton, a prisoner of war camp in Millen, Georgia. The diorama is on permanent display at the Georgia Southern Museum.

With an undergraduate degree in information technology and years of professional IT experience under his belt, Nathan Flanders ('12) made the decision to return to school to pursue a master's degree in public history, a subject for which he's always had an interest.

He never thought he'd combine them both into a project, but after learning about digital history, which brings the two fields together, he knew he'd found the perfect fit. Flanders began working with the Portal Heritage Society (PHS) in Portal, Georgia, shortly after enrolling in graduate school as part of his master's thesis project.

"They showed me their attempts to catalog, and they were using a table in Microsoft Word," he said. "It was not an efficient way to catalog. I thought it was a shame they didn't have access to a database management system, and that's when the light bulb went off. I realized I could write one that would work as well as an expensive market version for what a small historical society would need," Flanders said.

Combining these skills led him to create from scratch a web application that acts as an easy-to-use database and artifact catalog management system that can be used by museums or more specifically, historical societies.

"A lot of drawbacks that most local historical societies face is they work with volunteer labor, and usually those are retirees who may not have up-to-date technical experience," he said. "So I wanted to design something as easy or easier to use as any online form or shopping checkout form."

Flanders spent the next two years doing just that, and helped the PHS catalog items from an untouched 1950s drugstore.

"The drugstore was locked up in 1950 after the owner came down with the flu, and he passed away before he could reopen it," Flanders said. "It was locked up until the heir of the family came back to Portal in the 1980s, and they immediately turned it over to Portal Heritage Society."

This led to many interesting finds, including a couple of vials of Polio vaccinations and a soda fountain, complete with a mirror and stained-glass lamp, he said.

"Like most similar stores in the 1950s, this drugstore didn't just carry medication, it was a bit of a general store," Flanders said. "So right next to, say, a foot powder for people, you would find row upon row of lice powder for chickens. Medications for people and farm animals were on the same shelf."

He is excited about this project because it will provide much needed and free software for the PHS to continue cataloging all the items in the drugstore, but it will also be beneficial to other historical societies and museums in the state. Flanders plans to offer a download of the management system through the Georgia Southern Department of History website.

"What I am most proud of is that I was able to make a piece of software that will perform heavy lifting for these small historical societies, but keep it simple enough not to scare anyone who might be intimidated by a more complicated market software," Flanders said.

Michael Van Wagenen, Ph.D., associate professor and public history coordinator in the Department of History, said Flanders' skillset and completion of this project will only help further his success.

"Digital history may be the next wave in our discipline, and Nathan has positioned himself strategically to make full use of that," said Van Wagenen. "We are all very excited to see where this takes him professionally."

While working on this project with the PHS, Flanders was getting even more hands-on experience by working at the Georgia Southern Museum where he learned about collections management, museum curation and even worked on a diorama of Camp Lawton for the Museum that went on permanent display.

Georgia Southern employee, veteran to receive master's degree this fall

DECEMBER 7, 2017



Todd Tinker, a Georgia Southern employee and fall 2017 graduate, stands on a bunker in Bagram, Afghanistan. Tinker deployed while working for Georgia Southern.

Todd Tinker has had many journeys in his life, and his latest journey of obtaining his master's degree is coming to fruition after nearly five years.

The Statesboro native will graduate on Friday, Dec. 8, with a Master's of Applied Engineering with a concentration in information technology, an accomplishment for which he took his time to achieve and enjoy.

"I started this degree in spring 2012, so I've been at it for a while," he said. "From the start, I decided not to set timetables on graduation. I would take a class some semesters, but not every semester, and not once did I take two classes in the same semester."

But before he began pursuing his master's at Georgia Southern, Tinker had a nine-year journey in the U.S. Army Reserves, during which he deployed to both Iraq and Afghanistan supporting Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom. He said his time as a non-commissioned officer (NCO) in the military helped him develop an appreciation for educators, which in turn helped his academic career.

"Serving in the military as an NCO, you are often tasked with conducting some type of training. Whether its leading PT that week, or giving classes to junior soldiers, you are often in front of a class," he said. "Having that experience definitely made me appreciate the amount of work and preparation required of educators. I make it a point to give them my undivided attention, sit in the front of the classroom, turn off my cell phone and participate in the class discussions. I have no doubt that doing this helped me along the way."

In addition to learning about information technology at Georgia Southern, Tinker has also found a home working in the University's Information Technology Services division. Although there was an 18-month gap from the time he was hired to when he started due to deployment, Tinker has worked with the division for 11 years. He currently works as a customer service manager in the Center for Academic Technology Support.

"[When offered the job], I was honest about the fact I had already received orders to mobilize, but fortunately, the hiring manager at the time still offered me the position," he said. "On paper my official start date at Georgia Southern is March 1, 2006, but I actually didn't start working until Sept. 1, 2007. I'm thankful for what Georgia Southern did for me during this time and feel as a University, we do a great job of supporting our veterans."

"I really enjoy my job, and every day presents a new challenge," he said. "I get to work with a range of different technologies that the colleges utilize and no day is the same."

And working in this division, he said, allowed him to get to know the faculty in the Allen E. Paulson College of Engineering and Technology faculty before he started his degree program.

"There are some great professors in this College who are dedicated to shaping young adults into contributing members of society. One professor in particular who is dedicated to this mission is Dr. Chris Kadlec [associate professor of information technology]," Tinker said.

"I consider Chris a mentor, friend and colleague. He has a great rapport with the students, and genuinely cares about their education and well-being. Chris had a major influence on my successful graduation, and I really appreciate all he has done for me and other IT majors here at Georgia Southern."

With his appreciation for educators, and his desire to learn and grow in his field, Tinker said he's glad he was able to set his own pace while earning his master's.

"As a traditional undergraduate student at Mars Hill College in Asheville, North Carolina, I honestly did not retain much of what I learned in classes, semester to semester," Tinker said. "Taking five classes a term was just too much information at once: information overload. By setting my own pace of one class per semester [at Georgia Southern], I could focus on that class and was able to absorb what was being taught."

Tinker added he couldn't have completed this journey without the support of his wife Shaana, also a Georgia Southern graduate, and two children, Crewe and Chaney. And while he'll spend his day with his family, he doesn't really plan to celebrate his accomplishment, per se, but will reward himself with more learning.

"I have no plans on celebrating this accomplishment other than having the satisfaction of completing a milestone that I set out to do long ago," he said. "However, I do think I'll reward myself by taking some classes that I'm interested in, but never got a chance to take before. Some classes that come to mind are astronomy, group piano and anything to do with American war history."

And when asked if he had any plans for his degree?

"I plan to frame it and put it up on my wall so everyone can see it," he said with a laugh.