

Mason Students Make History with Website in More Ways Than One

By Buzz McClain

The historians spent months poring through boxes of yellowed files and black and white photos, patiently listened to hours of interviews recorded on audiocassettes, and watched vintage videos and films of events from days gone by.

They selected, organized, tagged, and illustrated the plethora of material and wrote detailed, footnoted essays about George Mason University's early days, including social unrest and radical faculty members, the naming of the school and choosing the school colors and mascots, and the behind-the-scenes politics that went into creating a modern university.

The result is the digital exhibition [George Mason University: A History](#), an elaborate, endlessly branching story of the history of George Mason University, beginning in 1949 and ending . . . not at all.

And the researchers? Not the cadre of veteran historians working full time in the archives as you might think, given the comprehensive and professional nature of the scholarly portal.

In fact, and surprisingly, there were only two researchers on the final phase of the project, a sophomore and a junior; the portal's designer is a master's candidate. Together, from the time they were hired last winter to the portal's launch in August, they



Mason undergraduates Andrew Weisberg and Jessica Campbell look at historical documents in the Special Collections & Archives Reading Room. Photo by Alexis Glenn.

helped compile a history of the university in 300 digital items and 65 historical essays on people, places, events, and traditions that tell the story of the school's founding to the present day.

"The range of documents was really neat. It was fascinating to go back to the '70s and see things like the facilities planning records," says Jessica Campbell, a junior history major. "When you look at master plans you see the vision for the future as it emerged over time. It's hard to believe at one point there was an argument against residence halls, and now they're fighting for more."

"When you know the politics of how the university came to be, to know the story behind it, it makes it all more interesting," says Andrew Weisberg, a sophomore government and international politics major.

Campbell and Weisberg spent at least 15 hours a week on the project in Mason's Special Collections & Archives, on the



Mason historian Bob Vay led the effort to create a scholarly portal showing Mason's history. Photo by Alexis Glenn.

second floor of the Fenwick Library. They, and web developer Parimala Gollapudi, a graduate student in information systems, were hired by Robert Vay, Mason’s digital collections archivist, and Joanna Lee, its digital repository services librarian. Vay had been collecting material and sketching out the proposed portal for years; Lee supervised Gollapudi on the construction of the portal.

The amateur historians worked at their homes during the winter holiday break—Campbell in Pennsylvania and Weisberg in New York—taking with them copies of files and recordings of oral histories. Vay says that dedication, as well as their academic skills, was key to their being hired.

Dozens applied from the ad posted on HireMason, he says, “and a half dozen were interviewed, and they were all really good.” Campbell’s experience guiding campus tours as a Mason Ambassador (since her freshman year) gave her an advantage as she clearly enjoys telling Mason’s history. Weisberg had great writing skills, experience working for his congressman back home, and an enormous amount of enthusiasm.



Mason student historians Jessica Campbell and Andrew Weisberg with some of their favorite images from Mason’s past. Photo by Alexis Glenn.

The experience on *George Mason University: A History* helped Weisberg with his research and organizational skills, he says, adding that his advisors at the Honors College are interested in his work on the portal. “After this experience, I’m seriously considering a double major in history now,” he says.

Campbell and Weisberg, both part of the Honors College, enjoyed unlimited access to the otherwise off limits archives at Fenwick Library, including the vault where assorted vintage odds and ends are stored.

“There were a couple of artifacts that surprised me,” Weisberg says. “It was interesting to look at the university’s yearbooks from the 1960s, when the university was known as George Mason College, and see how much the name of the basketball team changed over time. I also remember being surprised at discovering a box full of memorabilia with the George Mason College logo.”

“It’s hard to choose a few highlights because we learned so much,” says Campbell. “I think one of my favorite stories to write was a biography of [former president Alan Merten], especially with his retiring shortly afterward and leaving such an impact on the Mason community.”

One of the most challenging pieces she wrote was about the Arlington Campus. “It didn’t seem as though any history of it had been compiled, so I sorted through a lot of documents to try to piece together the story. While it was difficult, I really enjoyed it—it was almost like a mystery, and I got to act as the detective and read some really interesting material in the process.”

Both Campbell and Weisberg say they miss the work now that their contribution is completed. But is it finished? “To us it looks finished from where it started,” says Campbell, “but I don’t think it will ever be finished.”

Mason History, Mason Tools

Campbell and Weisberg were building on material begun by now-graduated Mason students Ryan Montgomery, Alexandra Parker, and Alex Malizia who got the project started on initial funding in early 2011. The initial sponsor was the [Osher Lifelong Learning Institute](#) whose \$1,500 gift was matched by the University Libraries.

Later in 2011, Mason’s [Auxiliary Enterprise Management Council](#) provided a \$20,000 award to continue the project; the researchers and developer were paid for their work.

Not only is the portal effective, *George Mason University: A History* is a rarity for university histories. Vay points out that most universities tell their origin stories in a linear style, like a page from a history book. *George Mason University: A History's* sophisticated branching, heavily tagged subjects, and multimedia approach is uncommon, and it's made possible by a content management system called Omeka.

Omeka was created by Mason's [Roy Rosenzweig Center for History and New Media](#) (CHNM) as a free online exhibit tool for archiving events and artifacts.

To read more stories about Mason, check out the university's [News](#) site.