

“Probing Virginia’s Past: Online Probate Record Database, 1740-1810”

Center for History and New Media, George Mason University, and Gunston Hall Plantation
Interim Report, July 2006, Grant # VFH-06-19

Description of the Project

The Center for History and New Media (CHNM) at George Mason University (GMU), together with Gunston Hall Plantation (GHP), received a grant of \$9,950 from the Virginia Foundation for the Humanities to create an online searchable database of more than 300 Tidewater region probate records dating from 1740 to 1810. These records serve as a vital source of information for family history, women’s history, genealogy, material culture, and local history and they are one of the richest sources of information about slaves. Our efforts to convert transcribed data that GHP gathered in the 1990s into a user-friendly, free website will provide easy access to these otherwise difficult to access records. The website will provide users with: the ability to search and browse the probate inventories in the database, historical context and a guide to interpreting probate records from humanities scholars, and teaching strategies and lesson plans prepared by experienced teachers.

Progress

To date we have made substantial progress in achieving the goals of the project, which is summarized below. We have made one small technical modification to enhance usability. We initially planned to present transcriptions of the probate inventories in HTML format, but have decided to present them to viewers as PDFs in order to maintain the important meanings conveyed with layout and format that do not translate successfully into HTML. This change affects only presentation, and does not impact the functionality of the site.

Technical Components

- Members of our technical staff have designed and built the back-end database that will power the site, and have successfully migrated the data from the old technology to the new, open-source database. We made a special effort to preserve the existing data while making a database that will be readily adaptable for other institutions that might like to use the infrastructure we developed in their own probate inventory projects. We have also developed the code necessary to connect the database with the user interface.
- Our designer for the project has created an elegant website design and user-friendly interface for accessing the information in the site.
- To date we have digitized more than two-thirds of the microfilm and created web-usable images that will present the original records to users. We have optimized the transcriptions of all the probate inventories for web presentation.

Educational Materials

- Teachers have written draft lesson plans and will finalize them in August.
- We conducted interviews with Drs. Smith and Zagarri to be used in the multi-media guides to interpreting probate inventories, and the audio editing is nearly complete. Image research for these guides is nearly complete as well. When these are complete, we will begin production.

Publicity

We have developed a publicity plan and are in the process of designing postcards and advertisements for this effort. We anticipate launching the site publicly in the fall with conference presentations at the National Council for Social Studies and the Virginia Social Studies Educators meetings. We will present to Virginia social studies coordinators at the spring meeting of the Virginia Consortium for Social Studies Specialists and College Educators. We will also distribute information on the project to teachers from ten school districts in Northern Virginia through Teaching American history projects. We will follow these with targeted postcard mailings and advertisements in history education journals.