Seward Family Digital Archive project tops $1 million in grant money

October 1, 2014

The Seward Family Digital Archive, a digital humanities project that fuses object-based learning and community-engaged teaching, has received more than $1 million in external grant funding to date. The latest grant comes from the Robert David Lion Gardiner Foundation for $129,700 to be paid out over ten years.

The project, a collaboration between the University’s Department of History, the River Campus Libraries’ department of Rare Books, Special Collections, and Preservation, and the Digital Scholarship Lab, brings together students in the humanities and computer science, residents of retirement communities, and retired volunteers from the greater Rochester area to help transcribe the thousands of Seward family letters, all written in Victorian-era cursive handwriting.

"Citizen archivist" is how Thomas Slaughter, the project’s principal investigator and the University’s Arthur R. Miller Professor of History, describes his team of students and retirees who transcribe, annotate, and tag personal letters of President Abraham Lincoln’s Secretary of State, William H. Seward, his wife, Frances Willard Seward, their immediate and extended family members, and friends from about 1825 to 1875.

Watch a video about the Seward Family Archive Project—spanning the generations, one letter at a time

According to Slaughter the new funding will be used to expand the project’s geographical reach, while enhancing teaching and learning opportunities for students and volunteers.

"The generous new grant from the Gardiner Foundation will enable students to travel and support additional volunteers beyond the 20 now working with us, to enhance this community-engaged collaboration, and to increase the productivity of the project while maintaining the high standards for documentary editing set by the National Historical Publications and Records Commission, which supports the volunteer arm of the project through December 2018," says Slaughter.

Besides continuing the collaboration with volunteers from the Highland’s at Pittsford retirement community, the Peerfield Recreation’s DEAR program, and retired University staff and librarians, the effort will soon include another off-campus site for volunteers in Brockport where it’s working alongside Seward’s students. In addition, a student videographer will be trained to make short films about how to collaborate on public history projects.

"The addition of a videographer under the Gardiner Foundation grant will allow us to visualize our training and project standards available on our website for others to start audio-histories collaborations between college students and volunteers," Slaughter says.
The archive project was launched and has been sustained over the last five years through the support of the Fred L. Emerson Foundation, which helped secure additional grants from the National Historical Publications and Records Commission (NHPRC), and most recently the Gardner Foundation.

Seward, who lived from 1801 to 1873, was a trial attorney, a New York state senator (1831–1838), governor of New York (1838–1842), U.S. senator (1846–1860), and secretary of state (1861–1869). He was the frontrunner for the Republican nomination for president in 1860, only to be sidelined in favor of someone more moderate in his support of abolition, Abraham Lincoln.

Seward is arguably best remembered for his decision to purchase Alaska—at the time, called “Seward’s Folly.” He was also attached in the assassination plot that killed Lincoln.

The collection of papers, both professional and personal, includes 230 linear feet of materials, 150,000 items, and 375,000 pages.

“The Seward Family Papers are among the largest and most widely used of our manuscript holdings,” says Jessica Lather-Koldeman, assistant dean and the Joseph N. Lumbert and Harold B. Schreiber Director of Rare Books, Special Collections, and Preservation (RBSCP). “We are very pleased to be the stewards of this vast, complex, and important collection, and to work collaboratively on making these materials available to the world in both traditional and innovative ways.”

RBSCP has been the repository of the Seward papers since 1951.

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Sandra Kresge

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