The Robert Penn Warren Center for the Humanities

In 1989, Vanderbilt’s Robert Penn Warren Center for the Humanities was awarded a $480,000 Challenge Grant from the NEH to assist in establishing a permanent endowment for the program. The grant had to be matched 4:1 with funds from the private sector, which helped leverage an additional $1.9 million. This award signifies the nationally recognized achievements of the center and helps to ensure its long-term future. The center facilitates interdisciplinary research in the humanities and social sciences by hosting annual faculty fellows, including one visiting faculty member from outside the university. It also has an annual graduate fellowship program. The center often collaborates with partners from across the campus and Nashville to provide opportunities for humanistic excellence.

Supporting a digital archive of slave societies

The Slave Societies Digital Archive, directed by Gertrude Conaway Vanderbilt Professor of History Jane Landers and hosted at Vanderbilt University, preserves endangered ecclesiastical and secular documents related to Africans and African-descended peoples in slave societies. This Digital Archive currently holds 600,000 unique images, dating from the 16th to the 20th centuries, and documents the history of between 6 and 8 million individuals. They are the most extensive serial records for the history of Africans in the Atlantic World and also include valuable information on the indigenous, European, and Asian populations who lived alongside them.

The original archive infrastructure could no longer support the archive’s data. With NEH support, the records were converted into a standardized format and transferred to a system that promotes sharing. The Slave Societies Digital Archive hosts a conference to exchange new findings with scholars and workshops to share digital preservation expertise with institutions that have limited cyberinfrastructure.

Syriaca.org preserves endangered cultures

NEH funding has allowed David A. Michelson, assistant professor of the history of Christianity, to collect and preserve essential historical information about the Syriac minorities of the Middle East. Syriac is a dialect of Aramaic, which was once a primary language of trade and culture in the Middle East and is still used by minority communities in the region. Historical documents surviving in Syriac are vital for understanding the history of Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and other religions. As the general editor of the Syriaca.org, Michelson oversees the publication of the Syriac Gazetteer, an online geographical dictionary to document the memory of Syriac churches, monuments, and other places now threatened by civil war. The Syriac Gazetteer is the first of several NEH-funded reference works published by Syriaca.org. Michelson and colleagues received an NEH Preservation and Access Grant to support this valuable project.

Geospatial tools to map colonial Peru

Steve Wernke, associate professor of anthropology, received an NEH Digital Humanities grant to prototype two resources for collecting and analyzing geospatial data related to the Spanish colonization of Peru. Researchers studying ancient cultural transformation face challenges due to fragmentary and patchy information. In the Andean region, where no written record exists prior to 1532, understanding social transformation is challenging. Spatial tools can aid in reconstructing history. With this grant, Wernke and colleagues are developing two geospatial aids: 1) a crowdsourced, linked open online gazetteer - a geographical atlas, and 2) a geospatial database and interface for producing thematic and analytic maps. These tools will be used to produce the most comprehensive settlement map of colonial Peru to date and serve as a model for spatially integrating fragmentary historical information.

For more information, please contact Vanderbilt’s Office of Federal Relations:
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