

Tufts University Museum Studies Program Alumni Newsletter – Fall 2019

Conversation with a Tufts Museum Studies Student and Alumna about their experience at the Royall House

In May 2019, the Royall House and Slave Quarters (RHSQ) awarded **Uella Rodriquez**, current History and Museum Studies Master's student, and **A. Sheree Brown**, M.A. in History and Museum Studies (G'03), the Cummings Collection Fellowships to complete a comprehensive assessment of their collection. Under the guidance of Marya Van't Hul, their project, which was generously funded by a grant from the Cummings Foundation, has been to complete and digitize an inventory of the RHSQ's collection, reconcile the museum's archival records, and photo-document their holdings. Sheree and Uella wanted to share their experience with our Museum Studies community.

Sheree: Although the story of the RHSQ occupies an important place in the history of the Revolutionary era, the majority of people that I mention this project to admit being familiar with the house and park, but having no idea who lived in the house or that there were slave quarters right in Medford Square. They are even more surprised when I tell them that the Royall's 500-acre plantation stretched from Medford Square to Davis Square. For that reason, I thought it would be interesting for Uella and I to field some questions that had come from friends about our project as well as questions we had for each other.

What did you know about RHSQ before you started?

Uella: I was lucky in that I had gotten the chance to visit RHSQ a couple times before I started (it was actually one of the first museums I visited when I moved to the Boston area for graduate school), so I was aware of the historical significance of the site.



Sheree Brown

Sheree: My family is from Medford, and my cousin actually lived a few blocks from the RHSQ, but I had no idea that it was a mansion with slave quarters. I would walk by both and just thought the mansion was a pretty house with a nice park. I had heard of the Royalls before in the context of their plantations in Antigua, I just did not realize the Medford Royalls were the same family until RHSQ President Peter Gittleman mentioned it to me. I had definitely heard of Belinda Sutton's petition for a pension after she gained her freedom, and was familiar with colonial-era black abolitionists in Massachusetts like Prince Hall. Again, though, I had no idea Belinda Sutton had been enslaved on the Royall's Medford property.



Uella Rodriguez

What have been some of the challenges you've faced during this process?

Uella: The temperature! During the summer season the house can get stifling hot, which makes the process much less enjoyable after a couple hours. But in all seriousness, the biggest challenge has probably been consolidating previously conducted partial inventories with what we've been identifying in the house. We have been having to contend with older numbering systems and ambiguous object descriptions, which really forces us to think on our feet.

Sheree: I totally agree about the temperature! Because we can't open the windows and there is limited access to electricity in the house, we really are at the mercy of the elements sometimes. I remember there was a day in May when it was cold and rainy outside, so inside the house we were bone-damp with frozen fingers, and

could hardly see with the feeble natural light from the windows. And, then of course when it's hot outside, the air inside the house is super hot and thick with dust. I mentioned that to Dr. Tiya Miles when she came to give her lecture for "Giving Voice" and we reflected on what those conditions would have been like for those forced to labor in the house, who could not just leave like we could.

What are some of the surprises you've encountered while working?

Uella: The biggest surprise was definitely the time when I found a dead bat in a kitchen clay jar. We had been lucky up to that point, we had not come across any rodents or serious infestations of pests. So coming across the bat was quite startling to say the least!

Sheree: The bat was really gross and it was melted from the summer heat. That did give us a jolt! Honestly, I think the sheer number of spiders that can exist in one place has been quite the surprise. The diversity of the collection has been surprising as well--like that in the same day we cataloged tea cups, old-timey lice combs, bullet molds, and cannon balls is really interesting.

Do you have any highlights/lowlights you'd like to share?

Uella: This project is really like a treasure hunt on a major scale. We've found some really interesting objects in some of the most unsuspecting locations. My favorite so far was a cannon ball that we happened to find while inventorying the contents of one of the dining room cabinets. As far as lowlights go, I'd say the dead bat, the heat, and the cobwebs were the worst parts.

Sheree: I love that we find objects in the inventory simply labeled "mystery" and we get to guess what that might mean. We definitely find objects that are confounding, but also speak to how wealthy the Royalls were and what types of luxury items a family like them would have, for example the presses in the kitchen used to create decorative patterns in butter.

What do you want to make sure other people know about RHSQ?

Uella: If your knowledge of early American history was anything like mine before I first visited RHSQ, you probably don't realize how far reaching and how fundamental the system of slavery was on everyday life in the North. The history of slavery in America goes beyond conversations of North vs. South, or even black vs. white. RHSQ challenges traditional perspectives of the early American way of life and slavery, highlighting how connected its story is to local, national, and international histories.

Sheree: I think in addition to the gravity of the story the RHSQ tells, I would hope other historical organizations would mark the way RHSQ has made a commitment to telling the most complete story it can about not only the Royalls, but the enslaved people who lived and worked on the property. I was really impressed that "Slave Quarters" was intentionally made a part of the RHSQ name because I have worked with historical houses that downplayed or omitted slavery entirely from the stories they told, even when archival records made it very apparent enslaved people lived and worked in those houses. When you do that you lose public trust and honesty, credibility.

What was the most satisfying use of experience of knowledge gained from museum studies classes or during previous museum work?

Sheree: When I was at Tufts, I worked on an IMLS-funded cataloging project for the Childrens' Museum. My task was to sit in cold storage and inventory their doll collection. I learned more than I thought it was possible to know about dolls. When we started working on some dolls in the RHSQ collection and all of my doll knowledge (like how to find the maker's mark, identify materials, and various terminology) flooded back, I was like yes! It was deeply satisfying.

Uella: In general I'm always excited to be able to use and challenge my photography skills in a project. We've had to overcome a few challenges while photographing objects (good lighting can be difficult to manage in a house with little to no outlets!), but I think we finally have a system that I am satisfied with.

We've talked about it a bit before, but I'd love to hear more about your personal experiences and connections as an African American that you've had as you gone through this process, and if/how it has impacted the way you work. I think your thoughts on this are really meaningful and relevant.

Sheree: Good question! For me, the project has been really rewarding, but also emotionally trying at times. The work we are doing will help RHSQ to fulfill its public service and civic engagement mission, so that part of our project makes me feel great. Being in the physical space where enslaved people were forced to labor hurts my heart honestly, but I try to look at the ways our work will help contribute to telling their story. As Dr. Miles mentioned in her talk for "Giving Voice," there is the feeling that our ancestors do inhabit historical places. I think it would be remiss of us to just think of the mansion house as a pretty house with a park without thinking of the enslaved labor required to make the Royall's lavish lifestyle possible. The house and slavery are inextricably connected, and it makes me nervous to think that would get lost in the need for usable pasts and palatable origin stories. That we are still navigating the issues of race, citizenship, and freedom that were on the minds of white colonists, indigenous people, and enslaved and free people of African descent during the Revolutionary era should be ever-present for us. I am so happy that RHSQ has been very intentional about re-centering the narratives that it presents to visitors and that we get to be part of this process.