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# Certainty and Compromise: Finding My Way after Graduation

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## Up-and-Comers: News for Student Archivists

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### **Certainty and Compromise: Finding My Way after Graduation**

*By Mary Kate Kwasnik, Digital Humanities Producer,  
The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History*



*Digital Humanities Producer Mary Kate Kwasnik. Image courtesy of Peter Shea/Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History.*

I found myself in Wisconsin, somehow, in August of 2013. I arrived in Madison on a 93-degree day, my inherited Toyota weighed down with my prized possessions, my mind equally heavy with anxiety over starting graduate school the next week. As a born-and-bred New Englander living in New York City, I wasn't sure how to explain my choice of graduate school to other New Yorkers. I explained that I was ready for a change, another big move; ready to leave behind part-time work and on-the-side babysitting for a more robust career in libraries and archives. I wanted to live somewhere more affordable as a student, somewhere that I could really focus on my schoolwork. I also, frankly, did not want to take the GRE.

I spent the years between undergraduate and graduate school working as a museum educator at the New York Transit Museum (NYTM)—a job I loved, but it would never be full time. After completing a research project in the NYTM Archives, I realized I wanted to be an archivist. I loved working with students and teaching, but it was after a day of following the archivist through the cool, dark stacks that I knew I wanted to work with the *stuff*. If I could combine the two, I thought, that would be perfect. One year later, I was in Madison ready to start my archival education.

Starting graduate school felt daunting, but my cohort quickly fell into a rhythm. Work as much as possible, pack

enough food to keep you going all day, attend class in the evenings, cry yourself to sleep. These steps set the tone for my graduate school career. The culture at University of Wisconsin–Madison's School of Library and Information Studies (SLIS) is one of hustle and growth. Nearly every SLIS student has two to four part-time library jobs to both keep them somewhat financially afloat, and to fatten their resumes. The no-nonsense culture of racking up hands-on experience, showing up prepared for class, presenting at conferences, and participating in student organizations readies you for life in a remarkably competitive field.

By the time a student graduates from SLIS, his or her resume is filled with two years of professional work experience—something not all new graduates have. I spent my two years at SLIS working with both the visual materials curator and the director of programs and outreach at the Wisconsin Historical Society; as a reformatting assistant at the University of Wisconsin Digital Collections Center; and as an information desk librarian at MERIT Library, the education library on campus. In addition to my jobs, I was active in the UW–Madison Student Chapters of SAA and ALA; presented posters of my student work at the 2014 SAA Annual Meeting and the 2015 MAC Annual Meeting; and worked on service projects for the Oneida of Wisconsin tribal archives. As a noncompetitive person, being surrounded by exceptional classmates encouraged me to challenge myself more than I ever had before. Rather than wonder how everyone had so much energy, I decided to throw myself deep into my student experience like the rest of my peers.

By the middle of my second year at SLIS, I was fairly certain I wanted to move back to New York City after graduation. Although the field warns against being set on a certain location during your job hunt, it doesn't hurt if a major city is your dream location. I moved back to New York in June of 2015 and immediately tripled my daily job application quota—I applied to any job that I was remotely qualified for and some that I definitely wasn't. I feverishly applied for full-time jobs, part-time jobs, temporary jobs, and paid internships, remembering what I had learned at every job workshop at SLIS: "All it takes is the first job."

I tried to remind myself that the first job didn't have to be perfect, it just needed to be right for me.

Within a few weeks, I had an interview with the Girl Scouts of the USA (GSUSA) for a processing archivist position. The job, while only contracted for a month, seemed like a great opportunity. I accepted the position knowing it guaranteed a month of paid work, not to mention new professional experience and connections, as well as the flexibility to continue to interview for other jobs. My assigned project at GSUSA was to process and catalog *The Girl Scout Leader*, a magazine sent to troop leaders from the mid-1920s to the early 2000s. Working on this project was inspiring, and I loved knowing that I was making a unique women's history collection available to the public. *The Girl Scout Leader* gives users a glimpse into life as a girl or woman in the twentieth century—from instructions on how to can vegetables from a Victory Garden, to detailed drawings of uniform and badge updates. This collection focuses exclusively on the female experience, which isn't as prevalent in archives as it should be. By the end of my time at Girl Scouts, I was sorry to leave, but had accepted a full-time position at the Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History.

I stumbled on the posting for my job shortly after I accepted my contract at Girl Scouts. I almost didn't apply. As a brand new position, the "Digital Humanities Producer" description was a bit vague on responsibilities and duties, but sounded like interesting, unique work. I had taken a digital humanities course in my last semester at SLIS and was intrigued by an institution hiring someone specifically for digital humanities projects. Although I had never heard of Gilder Lehrman, I was fascinated to learn that the organization had been founded by two collectors in the 1990s who had decided to put their personal collections to philanthropic use. The resulting Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History and Gilder Lehrman Collection primarily support K–12 teachers and students through teacher training seminars, fellowships, awards, and a robust digital collection of richly interpreted archival materials. Although I had been told by numerous professionals in graduate school that I likely would not find a job that combined education with archives, this seemed to be it.

I accepted the position with no small degree of hesitancy—the team at Girl Scouts had just offered to extend my contract, and I had enjoyed my time there as a part of their team. As a new professional with two job options

in front of me, I was uncertain about the best route for my career. Should I stay at the job I enjoyed but that may never be permanent? Or should I take a chance on a brand new position and help develop a department? Ultimately, I knew I wanted to be an important member of an organization, and I believed I could find that at Gilder Lehrman. I accepted the spot at Gilder Lehrman, and said my goodbyes to the Girl Scouts.

I have been at Gilder Lehrman for just over a year and have learned an incredible amount. Although my position is not that of a traditional archivist, I love the varied nature of my role. As I had expected, I am responsible for design and implementation of digital time lines, exhibitions, maps, and study aids for teachers and students, but I am also responsible for a number of Gilder Lehrman public programming initiatives. I coordinate the Gilder Lehrman Traveling Exhibitions Program, which sends panel exhibitions to schools, libraries, and small museums around the country, and I also took on grants administration responsibilities this summer. Currently, we are working on an NEH grant with the Library of America that will provide public programming funds to libraries, museums, and universities to develop World War I programming and exhibitions. It has been incredible to be involved in all aspects of this grant, from evaluating applicants to building out the programming schedule. The most fun aspect has been developing a digital time line for the website, which incorporates major events from World War I, documents from the Gilder Lehrman collection, and excerpts from works of American authors who served in the war.

I love thinking how just over a year ago I was overwhelmed with the fear of not finding work in New York, but today I am employed at a unique organization that incorporates my interests in archives, education, and public programming. My advice to all soon-to-be or recent graduates would be to calm down—just a little bit—and know what you want. It is important to be flexible about at least one thing if you are sure about others. If you are set on a location, be flexible about the types of jobs you will apply for and accept. If you are set on a certain type of archives job, be flexible about location. Know the things that are important to you, and the things that you are willing to compromise on. The first job may not be perfect, but make sure it is the right job for you and what you want to be doing or where you want to be, and the rest will follow.