



## Musings

by Scott H. Harris, Executive Director, University of Mary Washington Museums

The theme of the recent annual conference of the Virginia Association of Museums in the city of Lynchburg was “Engage. Develop. Give Back.” These active verbs simultaneously challenge and empower museums to be vibrant and, it may be hoped, trusted parts of their communities. We live in a time when faith in established institutions such as government, the media, and service organizations, to name but a few, may be called into question for a variety of reasons—political strife, cultural tensions, economic uncertainty, etc. How do museums fare in this roiled environment?

A [recent article](#) by Colleen Dilenschneider, Chief Market Engagement Officer at IMPACTS Research & Development, provides some answers to this question. Ms. Dilenschneider extracted data from the [National Awareness, Attitudes, and](#)

[Usage Study](#), which analyzes visitor-serving organizations using data from over 108,000 respondents. The findings show that museums of all types are “highly credible sources of information,” ranking higher than nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), state and federal agencies, and daily newspapers. Art and history museums were cited by 78.2% and 78%, respectively, of respondents as being credible. With credibility comes trust, as similar percentages of respondents indicated their perception of museums as trustworthy institutions. Ms. Dilenschneider’s article further documents that museums are perceived as less political than NGOs, governments, and newspapers, and are increasingly seen as forums for community engagement.

The study also found that respondents feel “museums should recommend actions for their missions.” This is not presented as a call for lobbying, but rather as advocacy for mission-relevant issues. “Consider that recommending action is not the same as ‘being political.’ Recommending things like cutting down on single use plastics (as a zoo or aquarium may advise) or contributing funding for art programs (as an art museum may recommend), may not be seen as necessarily ‘political’ to people, but rather as an organization walking its talk in terms of supporting its mission.”

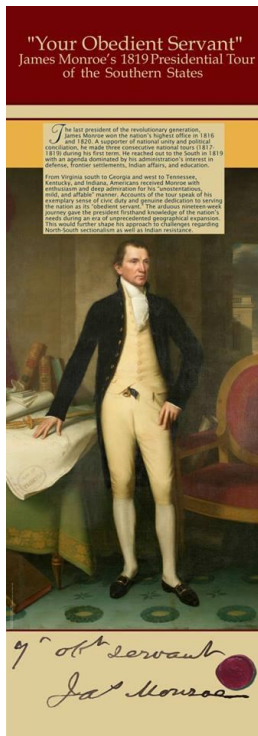
A [2018 blog post](#) from the American Association for State and Local History also describes survey data showing trust in museums. In a sampling of 1,000 persons, “81% of respondents ranked history museums and historic sites as ‘absolutely’ or ‘somewhat’ trustworthy—making them more trustworthy than history textbooks and nonfiction, high school history teachers, and the internet as sources of history information.”

What are the implications of opinions such as these for the University of Mary Washington Museums? Fundamentally, I believe that public trust of museums is a precious resource that should be safeguarded through clear mission statements, sound operating policies and procedures, and rigorous standards of ethical behavior by staff members. Gari Melchers Home and Studio, the James Monroe Museum, and the Papers of James Monroe encompass all of these elements, both as individual institutions and as components of UMW. Evidence of the public’s high regard for University Museums is found in visitor survey data, Trip Advisory ratings, and frequent positive in-person comments from our visitors.

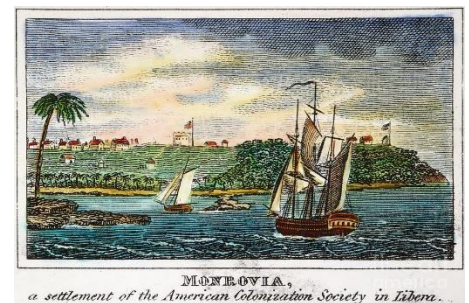
Maintenance of high standards and relevance to our audiences is not a passive exercise for University Museums. Staff training, through attendance at professional conferences and workshops as well as in-house activities, keeps us current on best professional practices and points the way to new opportunities to engage the public. Innovative programs seek to expand our impact both onsite and through outreach efforts. A few recent examples illustrate what University Museums are doing in this regard:



- Gari Melchers Home and Studio has introduced a new educational activity, *Picturing New Connections: An Art Program for People with Memory Loss and Their Caregivers* in conjunction with the Alzheimer's Association. The first iteration of this engaging program on March 7 was a great success, and additional sessions are being planned. A longstanding GMHS program is the Beeping Egg Hunt, an opportunity for visually impaired and blind children, along with their families, to participate in an accessible audible egg hunt. Sighted siblings can also participate by wearing a blindfold. This free event will run from 2:00 to 4:00 PM on April 14.



- The James Monroe Museum staff took part in a day-long training session on Ethical Interpretation of Slavery on March 12. Facilitated by Shawn Halifax, Cultural History Interpretation Coordinator at McLeod Plantation Historic Site in South Carolina, the comprehensive seminar examined techniques for interpreting this difficult subject to diverse audiences using resources on learning styles, active listening, and multicultural perspectives.



- *Your Obedient Servant: James Monroe's 1819 Tour of the Southern States*, a travelling exhibit created by UMW historic preservation students and sponsored by the James Monroe Museum and the Papers of James Monroe, is currently touring venues throughout states visited by Monroe 200 years ago. Major themes of the exhibit include westward expansion, Indian affairs, and education (including Monroe's prescient advocacy of educational opportunities for women).

These efforts and others by University Museums to broaden our engagement with the public are ongoing. Stay tuned for further installments!

Scott Harris