New Faces in Swift – Professor Quincy Mills by James Cantres '08

Professor Quincy Mills T. Mills joins the History Department this fall on a tenure-track line. A native of Chicago, he comes to Vassar from the University of Chicago, where he recently completed his Ph.D. dissertation. He will be teaching two courses during the spring semester. History 267: African American History, 1865-Present will look at a variety of topics and themes in the African American experience since the Civil War, including Reconstruction, ideas of freedom and citizenship, migration, cultural politics, and black resistance and protest movements. His seminar, HIST 365: Race and the History of Jim Crow Segregation, will examine segregation as it applied to disfranchisement, labor and domesticity, urbanization, public space, education, housing, and segregation's lasting effects.

What brought you to Vassar? Before applying for this position, I was familiar with Vassar in name only. After visiting, I was excited about joining a supportive department and interested in the cutting edge work being done in History and Africana Studies. The engaging student body, particularly the Majors Committee, was also a draw. In addition, Cappy sent me an encouraging e-mail that we would be “in the same cohort.” How could I not come after receiving such an warm welcome from a new president who had yet to arrive!

Can you tell us about your dissertation? My dissertation examines the emergence of black-owned barber shops as public spaces between 1850 and 1970. Black barbers used entrepreneurship to achieve economic freedom and, in the process, they established one of the most democratic spaces in the black public sphere. I examine five generations of black barbers and the changing social and political dynamics of their barber shops by looking at the triangular relationship between barbers, patrons, and what I call "waiting publics." The barber shop is a window onto larger issues of the transformation of labor and entrepreneurship, masculinity, urban space, and the black public sphere.

How did your interest in history develop? You might be surprised to know that I majored in business administration as an undergraduate at the University of Illinois. I read African American history because I enjoyed it, but it wasn’t until I embarked on an independent research project with a history professor that I realized how exciting historical research could be. He convinced me that there was more to a career than high monetary return and that I could eventually make a significant contribution to the study of history. Were it not for her mentorship, I would probably be an insurance underwriter. Imagine that! My background has informed my research interests in African American business history.

Are there any noticeable differences between your experience teaching at Vassar and elsewhere? Since this is my first semester here the verdict is still out. But I must say, I’ve never had fall break, and I like it... a lot!
New Faces in Swift – Professor Paulina Bren by Becky Cantor '07

Paulina Bren is the latest addition to the Vassar History Department. Czech by birth, Professor Bren grew up in England and then lived throughout the United States, primarily in NYC. She graduated from Wesleyan University and then received her M.A. in East European Studies from University of Washington, Seattle, and her Ph.D. in Modern European History from New York University. She and her husband, Vassar English professor Zoltan Markus, are busy raising their two-year-old daughter Zsofi and teaching her to speak Czech, Hungarian, and English.

What are some of the courses you are planning to teach? This spring I’ll be teaching two sections of Readings in Modern European History. Next year I’ll be teaching two courses on Eastern Europe. For Fall 2007, I have a course planned that looks at the experience of everyday life of ordinary citizens in Eastern Europe (Czechoslovakia, Poland, and Hungary) during behind the Iron Curtain during the Cold War. We’ll pay attention not only to politics but to popular culture, sites of leisure, gender, etc. In Spring 2008, I’ll be moving back in time to the Habsburg Empire, looking at its rise and fall from 1740 to 1918. If you think that multiculturalism is a modern concept, then you should take a look at the Habsburg Empire, which spanned across much of Europe and incorporated a myriad of nationalities, ethnicities, and religions. But as Europe entered the age of nationalism, this functioning hodge-podge of different faiths and races and national identities began to tear at the seams. It's a fascinating story from which we can learn a lot today.

Can you describe your research and academic interests? Right now I’m finishing my book about late communism (that is, the 1970s and 1980s) in Czechoslovakia. It's a cultural history of the ways in which the communist state bargained with its citizens, and it is told through television. I explore what took place behind the scenes as well as in front of the cameras to draw a picture of the times that incorporates Communist Party elite, political dissidents, as well as ordinary citizens. I’ve also published a number of essays on this period of history, including the phenomenon of weekend cottage getaways during communism; gender, consumption, and socialist soap operas; Czech students during 1968 and their encounters with protesters in the West; and images and symbols of America in Eastern Europe.

How has your personal history affected your historical interests and how you understand history? I was born in Czechoslovakia but left for England when I was a toddler. I am essentially writing about the decades that I would have lived through if my family had stayed. Still, my interest in Eastern Europe and particularly the late communist period has less to do with self-discovery and more to do with academic curiosity. When I was doing an M.A. degree in East European Studies, I realized that none of my professors could tell me much about what happened after 1968. To this day, very little has been written about late communism despite a growing interest.

What are your interests outside of history and academics? Before I went to graduate school, I was an aspiring novelist. I worked as a cashier in a liquor store in Cambridge, MA, by day, and wrote by night. I was only 24 when I finished the novel, and had the fortune to get signed up with a big agent. But to cut a long story short, I got sucked in by academia, and history in particular, and put the novel away in a drawer. I might still return to fiction writing one day but for now history satisfies the storyteller in me.

Confronting the Past, Transforming the Future: Freedom Schooner Amistad and the Hudson Valley Freedom Tour by Kristina Poznan '08
This fall Poughkeepsie became a "way-station" on the path to liberty! Freedom Schooner Amistad, a reconstruction of the historic 19th-century vessel, visited Waryas Park on October 12-14 and 19-20. The Amistad became the centerpiece of a dramatic episode in antislavery history in 1839. A group of West Africans were abducted in their homeland and brought to Cuba, then placed on Amistad to be transferred to sugar plantations. They revolted, seized the ship, and sailed northward, seeking to sail toward Africa, until they were taken into U.S. custody near Long Island. Fifty-three captives eventually won their freedom, in a court case that riveted the nation and built support for the fledging antislavery cause. Many Vassar students, faculty, and staff, and over 1,700 visitors from the Dutchess County area were able to share its lessons of freedom, justice, and perseverance.

Amistad's Poughkeepsie visit was the first public initiative of the Mid-Hudson Antislavery History Project, a group formed last year to research and interpret local histories of slavery and abolition, and place them in the context of subsequent struggles for racial and social justice. Although MHAHP is a relatively new organization it rose to the challenge of planning a major event on only a few months notice. "We could not pass up the opportunity to participate in the schooner's first Hudson River Freedom Tour," said Professor Rebecca Edwards, chair of the History Department and co-founder of MHAHP. "The wonderful array of events planned in conjunction with the Amistad's visit testified to area residents' enthusiasm over the Freedom Tour and keen interest in this critical aspect of our past."

The Vassar College community's support and enthusiasm for the project were indeed great. The College was the principle sponsor of the visit's educational component, with support from the Offices of the President, Dean of the Faculty, Field Work, and Religious & Spiritual Life; Department of History and Programs in Africana Studies, American Culture, and Women's Studies; and students organizations including the ALANA Center and VSA. Student volunteers assisted dockside during the schooner's visit, and quartets of students from the Vassar choir performed antebellum antislavery music. Many students seized the opportunity to come down to Waryas Park and see a piece of history.

The spirit of collaboration that the Amistad project fostered among local organizations was incredible. Middle school students from Poughkeepsie Day School, Catharine St. Community Center, and Mill Street Loft sailed across the Hudson, learning about diversity and the Amistad story together. Vassar students do not get the opportunity to take field trips with local elementary school students often. Planning meetings for the schooner's visit involved local scholars, teachers, musicians, businesspeople, ministers, and political and community leaders. As they joined in with the project they were fascinated to learn that the Underground Railroad had stops in the county, and that prominent abolitionists like Sojourner Truth and members of the Tappan family were area residents. Furthermore, they found out that there was a lot they could learn from each other and accomplish by working together in the struggle for social justice.

The greatest accomplishment of the Amistad project was not bringing the schooner to Poughkeepsie's port for a few days but in forging new relationships, both among local groups and with Amistad America. MHAHP hopes to bring the schooner back to Poughkeepsie for a much longer visit in 2009!

Clark Travel Fellowship: Exploring Eisenhower in Abilene
by Kelly Peterman ’07
The week of August 7 through August 11 2006 I traveled to the Eisenhower Presidential Library in Abilene, Kansas, to gather primary sources for my
senior thesis on how the Eisenhower Administration chose to confront the Arab nationalism movement in the Middle East. My purpose at the Presidential archives was to find a wide range of documents from different voices within the government. I worked to find sources that point to the differences of opinion within the Eisenhower administration, in order to tease out the decision making process within the foreign policy bureaucracy. I gathered sources specifically documenting the evolution of U.S. Cold War policy in the region, finding documents that would help me analyze how the administration dealt with the revolution in Egypt in 1952, the Suez Crisis in 1956, and the nationalist revolution in Iraq in 1958. I was specifically focusing on documents that revealed the divergent opinions on how to handle these momentous developments, notably the policy debate regarding the formation of the Baghdad Pact in 1955 and declaration of the Eisenhower Doctrine in 1957 and the lead-up to the decision to send Marines to Lebanon in 1958.

The sources I found were varied in their voice and origin. Ranging from CIA intelligence analysis documents to the reports of area specialists in the State Department and analysts on the ground at U.S. embassies, to the more ideologically-guided policy papers of the President and his advisors, specifically Secretary of State John Foster Dulles, I found what I think is a good representative collection of the different points of view competing for dominance over U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East. The documents are complex and intriguing, revealing how the U.S. government at times simply fell back on its Cold War assumptions—such as the belief that anyone who did not side with the Western powers was necessarily a Communist—and at times revealed surprising nuance (especially compared to the voices coming from allies like Britain) in its analysis of the multiple forces at play in the region, Western, Soviet, nationalist and neutralist alike. My research at the Eisenhower Library yielded more than 600 pages of documents from every branch of the government, and has formed an excellent base of primary sources for my thesis research. Some of these documents only recently have been declassified and quite a few were not included in the Foreign Relations of the United States publications, so hopefully a successful synthesis of some of these less-common sources will shed new light on an important and under-analyzed period in the history of American foreign relations.

Clark Travel Fellowship: Researching Janvier and Haiti in Hamilton Heights by Julian Gantt ’07

This summer I conducted research on a specific individual - Louis Joseph Janvier. Janvier was an eminent, if today largely unknown, turn-of-the-century Haitian statesman, doctor, and novelist. He was born in Port-au-Prince in 1855 to a prosperous Protestant family and at the age of twenty-two left his beloved homeland to complete his medical studies in France. The cultural and intellectual life of France during the early years of the Third Republic nurtured the young Janvier and he published a number of articles in the leading avant-garde journals of the day. As he matured, Janvier, along with other expatriate Haitian scholars of his generation, began to challenge the racist and colonial order which constituted the metropolitan milieu of the Third Republic. Janvier took up his pen innumerable times to defend what he identified as the black race and to extol its ability for rational progress as symbolized by his patrie, Haiti. I am particularly interested in how Janvier created these critiques: what types of knowledges did he deploy to fashion them? Where were they situated? How were nation, race, and empire connected?

To begin wrestling with these questions I moved to Hamilton Heights, a tree-lined neighborhood in west Harlem where the Caribbean-born Alexander Hamilton built his mansion in 1802. I lived a short distance from the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, one of the research libraries in the New York Public Library system. The Schomburg Center has one of the best collections of Haitiana in North America and, importantly for my research, holds the correspondence of Haitian’s diplomatic representatives, stretching from the earliest days of the nation through the United States occupation. With the help of the skilled librarians at the Schomburg, I sifted through diplomatic papers, written in Janvier’s own hand, from the 1890s through the beginning of the twentieth century when he was the chargé d’affectes at the Haitian Legation in London. I also had access to nearly all of Janvier’s published works and even discovered a few articles that he wrote for Haitian newspapers that I have never seen referenced elsewhere. Beyond the Schomburg, I made extensive use of the Humanities
Library in Midtown to track down articles that Janvier published in French periodicals of his day which did not specifically focus on issues of race.

I plan to develop this research into a thesis to be completed in 2007 which will use Janvier as a means of exploring Haiti’s unique and complex position as an independent and black nation-state in the nineteenth-century context of expanding colonial empires throughout Africa and the Caribbean. There are very few scholarly works which deal critically with the period of Haitian history between the Revolution and Haiti’s “second independence” from U.S. occupation in 1934, as most historians write off the latter half of the nineteenth century as a period of “decline”. I hope to challenge this dismissal by using the work of postcolonial scholars such as Homi K. Bhabha, Dipesh Chakrabarty, Partha Chatterjee, Paul Gilroy, Edouard Glissant, Achille Mbembe, David Scott, and Michel-Rolph Trouillot.

The Evalyn Clark Memorial Travel was established in 2002 by Vassar alumnae to honor the memory of their mentor and friend Evalyn Clark, a distinguished historian who taught in the Vassar History Department from 1939 until her retirement three decades later. Open to sophomore, junior, and senior History majors, the Fellowship's purpose is to offer grants ranging from $500 to $2,500 that will support travel, both domestic and international, for students to conduct archival or other forms of historical research. Reports by previous Evalyn Clark Fellows are posted on the History Department website at http://history.vassar.edu/fellowship. Questions? Contact the Clark Fellowship Committee chair, Professor James Merrell, at merrell@vassar.edu.

Lessons from Abroad: A History Major in Spain by Seth Tannenbaum '08

What, you might wonder, is a Vassar history major who is planning on writing his thesis on American history doing in Spain? It is a pretty good question - and one I have asked myself several times since I arrived in Spain in the middle of August. Before I give my best shot at an explanation I ought to explain a little bit about what I am doing here. I am studying in Madrid through the Vassar-Wesleyan Madrid program. I take my classes (all of which are in Spanish) at a Spanish public university just south of the Madrid city limits, but I live within the city limits of Madrid with a sixty year-old couple who have no children. All that, though interesting (or not!), has nothing to do with why a history major with a profound interest in American history is spending a semester studying abroad in Spain and not taking any classes about America or its past. Studying abroad in Spain has provided me a number of tools with which to view the world that I could not gain at Vassar, but most importantly it has allowed me to view history from, what is for me, a new and different perspective.
To start, studying in Spain has forced me to speak another language almost constantly. The only negative aspect of speaking almost exclusively in Spanish is that my English has become surprisingly rusty. I hear myself speak and know full well that my sentence structure and word choice is poor and I cannot seem to do anything about it. I can only imagine how poor my written English skills are, so pardon the bad writing and please keep reading. When I tell the Spaniards that I mainly study American history I am often reminded how “short” American history is and therefore how it should not take very long to study. I suppose in a certain sense the Spaniards are correct—there are written primary sources in Spain that date back far before the first written primary sources in America. What has become clear to me is that it is possibly to study huge spans of Spanish History almost entirely without consulting anthropological research or archeological discoveries, whereas if a historian is interested in American history before the sixteenth century, archeology and anthropology are essential study tools. This is not to say that studying Spanish history before the sixteenth century does not involve its own challenges, like translating from Latin or Arabic or a host of other languages.

The traded cultural dominance that marks the first fifteen hundred years of Spanish history in the Common Era—from Christians, Romans and Visigoths, to Muslims, Almoravids, Almorhads and Marinids, back to Christians with the kingdoms of Castilla and Aragon—is markedly different than the succession of cultural dominance in America and serves to demonstrate that there are a great many ways to create thriving and powerful empires. Interestingly enough there are also a number of ways to name periods of the Middle Ages. In Spain historians use a system that is almost literally the reverse of the one I learned from Ms. Bisaha. Here the Low Middle Ages are the “Alta Edad Media” and the High Middle ages are the “Baja Edad Media”—though the “Baja Edad Media” extends past 1350. The history itself, however, only seems to differ in its perspective.

Since the history I am studying here is solely Spanish, there is a much larger emphasis on the “successes” in Spanish history than the Spanish “failures” we study in America such as the defeat of the Spanish Armada, the loss of the Spanish colonies in North and South America, and the Spanish-American War. The emphasis on Spanish “successes” has shown me that understanding the perspective from which history is studied is absolutely imperative in order to truly understand history. The exhausting study of the Spanish Civil War—which is still being conducted today by historians, filmmakers, and authors in Spain and elsewhere—has highlighted for me the fact that the American people have had over 225 years of democratic representation. As a historian and certainly as an American I may have taken this fact for granted.

Studying in Spain has permitted me to look at history in a new light, and I hope I will be less likely to take for granted the common everyday historical facts such as the existence of an enduring democracy and the accompanying freedom to study, analyze and interpret history as any historian sees fit.

Lessons from Abroad: Barcelona, Belgrade, Budapest, and Everything in Between by Ross Weingarten ’07

Drinking tea in a Turkish bazaar, riding a camel around the great pyramids, and taking an overnight train through Belgrade are not experiences that I had had when I went abroad. When I decided to study in London, I knew that I would have great opportunities to travel and see parts of Europe that I had never seen, but I had no idea that so much of the world would be at my fingertips. My traveling started when one weekend early in the semester, my friends and I decided that tomorrow would be a good day to go to Barcelona. The next weekend it was Paris, and the one after that, Amsterdam. My love for traveling grew exponentially during my time abroad, and I knew that I had to end my semester with a bang.

This is not to say that I didn’t fall in love with London, as well. It was a magnificent city, one unlike any other. When people ask me what I love about London, I tell them that it is that every day while there, I did something different. Whether it was seeing a different park, finding a hidden art gallery, or simply walking the streets of a new neighborhood, literally every day in London brought something new and exciting to the forefront. I think there are very few cities in the world that can offer these opportunities.
But back to traveling. After my exams, my friends and I decided that we would no longer go to the “normal” European destinations. We weren’t quite sure what this meant, but the next day we bought tickets for Istanbul. A few days later, we were climbing the minaret of the Blue Mosque, looking at ancient underground Roman ruins, and bargaining with the vendors in the Grand Bazaar. After Istanbul we went to Cairo, a city where you can see a man riding a camel stopped at a street light next to a Mercedes sedan. And trust me, you have never lived until you have gotten on the back of a camel. Cairo is a curious mix of east and west, modernization and tradition. But there is no question that I want to return. Finally came Greece, and then a train ride through the former Soviet Bloc to Budapest. All we had to eat was loaf of bread and a piece of feta cheese that we picked up in Athens, but we survived.

I made it back to London safely but sadly, as my insatiable thirst to travel had only begun to be quenched. Studying abroad was a fantastic experience; I came to know and love London, met great new people, and studied in a difference and exciting environment. But it was the amazing traveling opportunities that I will remember for the rest of my life. And if you want great tea, I’ll tell you exactly where in Istanbul to find it.

**First Year Students Take a Dig Into Local History**

by Misho Ishikawa ’10

As an aspiring history major I was extremely excited to see the “Hudson Valley History” option as a Back-to-School Conference (BSC)—where incoming freshman would be given the opportunity of exploring an excavation site of a 200-year-old African-American community in nearby Hyde Park.

The Saturday morning of the BSC close to fifteen freshmen boarded onto a bus and rode to Hyde Park, where we would be meeting out guide for the day, Professor Christopher Linder of Bard College. Professor Linder is the Director of the Bard Archaeology Field School, a Visiting Assistant Professor of Anthropology, and the Archaeologist-in-Residence at Bard. He is also in charge of leading the excavation of the site we were about to visit. As Professor Linder boarded the bus, there was a universal hush as all were eager to hear what such an expert had to say. Linder’s account of the Guinea Community—the site we were about to see—though soft-spoken, was engaging; the entire group hung on his every word. It seemed as if the entire group was eager to see history come alive at the excavation site.

The Guinea Community was based just outside the property of the Bard family, and in fact was established as the Bards sold of small plots of land to freed African-Americans. The work of the archaeologists involved in the excavation shows that there was a series of establishments along a rough road called Freedonia Lane. The lots of several families and individuals have been uncovered. One of the most prominent—and best preserved—sites of the project is the plot of land and house remains that was once owned by a Primus, “Prime”, Martin—leader of the Guinea Community. Based on local records, it seems that Primus worked on the Bard farm and was a well-respected member of not only the Guinea Community but also the larger community as a whole. The Martin family house is well preserved; it seems that a fire is what drove away its inhabitants but fallen pieces of the roof put out the fire and preserved many of the owners’ possessions. Professor Linder gave us a tour of the foundation of the Martin home, and as we walked through part of the site one could almost envision the house as it must have stood 200 years before.
After we left the Guinea site we traveled to the St. James Episcopal Church in Hyde Park to look at historic gravestones and view a slide show that Professor Linder had put together on the Guinea Community site. The slides incorporated pictures of uncovered artifacts, old Dutchess County census data, property deeds, tax assessment rolls that include real and personal property, court cases, church records, diaries, and newspaper accounts. Slightly overwhelmed with the onslaught of information we had just received, we thanked Professor Linder and quietly boarded the bus back to Vassar. As we took our seats talk quickly turned to what we had just learned and whispered phrases such as, “that was so cool,” whizzed around the bus. It was truly fascinating to be able to physically see such an interesting piece of local history. I still don’t think that I will become an archaeologist, but it certainly was exciting to explore history through archaeology for a day.

2006-2007 Majors Committee
Department Intern: Becky Cantor ’07
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