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Ledvort '13 Delved Into the Past to Uncover Her Future Path

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When Elissa Ledvort '13 began her internship at the David Davis Mansion State Historic Site in the spring of 2011, she expected to spend her semester conducting tours and learning more about the Victorian mansion's prosperous inhabitants. But the mansion staff had another idea in mind for the English-Literature major: help create a scholarly, searchable database containing the transcripts of hundreds of letters written to and by the David Davis family.

Davis was a Lincoln confidante who helped engineer Lincoln's nomination to the presidency in 1860 and served as his campaign manager. Davis was later named to the U.S. Supreme Court. The Victorian-style mansion was designed to be a residence for Davis' wife, Sarah, who desired to stay in Bloomington rather than move to Washington, D.C. Deeded to the state of Illinois by the judge's descendants in 1960, the house is operated by the Illinois Historic Preservation Agency as a state historic site.



Elissa Ledvort '13

In 2004, mansion volunteer Patricia Schley began researching, collecting and transcribing copies of the Davis family correspondence. After beginning with a collection of microfilmed letters from the Williams College archives, Schley traveled to different cities throughout the U.S. to find additional letters and learn more about numerous Davis family relatives, according to Ledvort.



David Davis (photo from the David Davis Mansion)

"Pat Schley started working on that as a volunteer and it became this real passion of hers, sort of like a treasure hunt," Ledvort said. For the past nine years, Schley's project has been funded by the Illinois Historic Preservation Agency and by the David Davis Mansion Foundation, a private, nonprofit corporation that supports the work of the state-owned historic site.

Though Schley had transcribed the letters, the David Davis Mansion needed a way to digitize the transcripts and make them accessible to the public. Ledvort was tasked with figuring out how to do that, and writing a grant to make it possible.

"We were looking for funding to buy scanning equipment so we could scan the already completed transcriptions ourselves," Ledvort said. "We also needed a searchable digital platform to make them accessible to researchers."

But amongst the numerous digital platforms, Ledvort was not sure which would best suit the project. Drawing on her Illinois Wesleyan resources, Ledvort enlisted the help of Meg Miner, University Archivist, Special Collections Librarian and associate professor.

After a meeting with Ledvort and the mansion's site manager, Miner suggested the CARLI Digital Collections: a repository for digital content created by over 140 member libraries, including Illinois Wesleyan. Because of Ledvort's research and initiative, the David Davis Mansion and its foundation collaborated with The Ames Library in establishing the David and Sarah Davis Family Correspondence, a searchable digital database.

Ledvort was assigned with the initial task of reading all the transcripts. As she began to appreciate their unique historical importance, the transcripts provided both inspiration and motivation to move the project forward.

"It was surreal to read the letters at the site where they were written, and to physically look at what Sarah was describing," Ledvort said.

"The letters are an invaluable resource to those researching any aspect of the 19th century. David and Sarah were separated for most of the year while he was riding the Illinois court circuits, so their letters were extremely detailed about their respective experiences," she said. "David would write very candidly about political figures and issues during the tumultuous period before and after the Civil War, while Sarah would write about her domestic experiences, entertaining Bloomington society and tending to the house, the garden and the servants."

Ledvort could not help but notice a theme running throughout every letter. "The letters are primarily a love story. The important details regarding David's political life and Sarah's domestic life, which are pivotal to researchers today, were simply that to David and Sarah – just details," she said. "That was my favorite part about the letters—they cared for each other so deeply."

By the end of the project, the number of transcripts available online will be over 1,500. Every transcript will serve an educational purpose to guide future researchers, students and historians.

Ledvort's work with museums did not end there. Her experience at the David Davis Mansion was pivotal in solidifying her desire to work in a museum environment, preserving the past for future generations. She interned at the McLean County History Museum in 2012, and now works as a Volunteer and Tour Coordinator at Pleasant Home Foundation, which supports the Prairie-style historic mansion and National Historic Landmark in Oak Park, Ill.

Not only did the digitization project establish Ledvort's career goals, it also exposed her to the collaboration between different organizations and the community to promote the common good.

"This project is very near to my heart because it is a collaboration between two institutions which are so important in my



Sarah Davis (Photo from the McLean County Museum of History)

life,” Ledvort said. “The David Davis internship inspired me to pursue a career in the museum field, and Wesleyan provided me with the resources, the training and a strong foundation to achieve those goals.

“Words cannot express how grateful I am to the David Davis mansion and Illinois Wesleyan, and everyone in this process who provided me with such an irreplaceable experience.”

By Tia Patsavas '16