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New database, old Durham

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DURHAM -- When young Mattie Southgate left Durham for the Wesleyan Female Institute in Virginia, where the offerings included moral science, calisthenics and crayon drawing, she probably never dreamed that eighth-graders would be poring over her report card more than a century later.

And William Hogan, an African-American farm laborer in the 1880s, surely never imagined that his name would someday show up in an electronic database that could be perused by anyone on the planet.

This spring, Duke University students helped resurrect information about Southgate, Hogan and others in a project that merges old data with new technology to help bring history to life. They built a database of U.S. census information and used it as a springboard to study what life was like for the 5,507 people who lived in Durham Township in 1880. Then they shared their research with eighth-graders from the Durham School of the Arts, who used the database for their own projects.

"I've always thought of our city as really a city no one had ever heard of," said eighth-grader Allison Bartlett, who was working on a display with Jenny Elander recently about the Prohibition era in Durham. "I was surprised at all the stuff going on."
Trudi Abel, who is teaching the Duke class, plans to put the database on the Web this fall, so anyone can use it.

"I think the resources we're creating could be of great use to social studies teachers in Durham and at the state level," said Abel, a cultural historian and senior fellow at Duke's Center for Teaching, Learning and Writing. "Genealogists will have a field day. It'll be a wonderful tool for folks who know they have roots in the late 19th century."

The project fits in with the goals of the Duke-Durham Neighborhood Partnership Initiative, in which the university teams up with surrounding neighborhoods and public schools to improve the quality of life of those who live near Duke -- and to increase the interactions between town and gown.

Social studies teacher Helen McLeod said the "Digital Durham" project has taught her two dozen eighth-graders to use primary sources to flesh out what they learn in history books. "Let's say we're putting together a museum for Durham," McLeod said. "They had to come up with a display for that. ... I'm loving it."

Students at both Duke and Durham School of the Arts say they've gotten to know Durham a little better. Morgan Rehrig, a sophomore from the suburbs of Washington, D.C., thought Durham was terribly small when she first moved here.

"I think Durham gets a bad rep, especially from people coming from outside North Carolina," Rehrig said. "Everyone's initial reaction was, 'Ugh.' But then you start exploring and find places like Brightleaf and Francesca's."

The project brought to life the city's glory days, when tobacco was king and James B. Duke ran offices in New York and Durham. "At one point, it was the happening place, with immense wealth," Rehrig said. It also helped her appreciate the history behind the buildings downtown and on campus named for prominent Durham families, she said. The 1880 census includes name, age, "color" (black, white or mulatto), place of birth and information on literacy and whether children attended school. The Duke students explored money and power, child labor, the African-American experience and other topics.

Laura Conn, a sophomore from Tennessee interested in the African-American experience in Durham, inspected the census, general store ledgers and journals published by black businessmen in Raleigh to find out more about African-Americans such as William Hogan. She worked with Brittney Blackmon and others in McLeod's class.

"We went on the Digital Durham page, looked up information on people and found people in the agricultural census," Blackmon said. "It was kind of exciting. I see how it was back then, and it reflects on how it is now."

Rehrig wanted to study higher education for women. Turns out that most schools in the South were "finishing schools" for women from wealthy white families, such as Mattie Southgate, the daughter of James Southgate, a 19th-century insurance executive and civic leader. "There was an emphasis on music, and not so much on math," Rehrig said. Eighth-grader Crystal Glatz described women's classes such as elocution and vocal music this way: "Weird stuff."

"It was rare for girls to go to school," said Alisha Wolf, who was working with Glatz. "There was a big difference."

In February, students at Durham School of the Arts visited Duke's Perkins Library to look at old city maps, business ledgers, letters and other documents in the archives.

"The kids got a real kick out of it, because in the special collections, they have letters that James Southgate wrote his daughter," Rehrig said. "It was cute to them that he expressed the same concerns parents today would have: Study hard. Achieve the best of your potential."

Duke junior Jason Koslofsky, who grew up in Durham, used the census to learn that about nine of every 10 school-age children worked in domestic service, on farms or in factories instead of going to school. At Durham School of the Arts, he's working with two white students and one black student-- a grouping that would never have existed in the 1880s.

"I thought they really enjoyed figuring out how different it was back then, compared to life today," Koslofsky said.

While Duke students worked on their papers, Durham School of the Arts students were busy pasting construction-paper letters and magazine pictures onto display boards. On a Wednesday morning in April, Kate Koballa and Chris Dadock wrote dialogue for a skit about what it would be like to walk down Main Street in 1880 and to stop into a shoe store, a bank or a barbershop.

"You kind of learn basically the history of where you're living," Koballa said. "And that's pretty cool."

Caption:

Duke student Morgan Rehrig, left, and Katherine Hale, an eighth-grader with whom she worked, relax after a presentation.

Staff Photos by Scott Lewis

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