Provide an overview of the organization/research project and a summary of your responsibilities, tasks, and/or projects.

The Thomas Jefferson Foundation is a World Heritage site, historic house and museum, research institute, Presidential Library, and a privately owned non-profit corporation. The Foundation also manages the Virginia residence of Former President Thomas Jefferson known as Monticello. Ideally located in a curious community with a rich educational tradition, I was able to walk the grounds one of the country’s Founding Fathers used to call “home”. While at Monticello, I worked for the Education and Visitor Program. My responsibilities included leading forty-five-minute historic house tours three days a week and staffing other educational programs such as Family Friendly Tours and hands-on activities for families and children. On the days I was not leading tour groups around the campus, I researched and developed plans for a virtual fieldtrip of the Monticello grounds for students to experience the historical site without having to physically be there. Additionally, I assisted with the creation of visitor surveys and analyzed the responses in order to improve visitor experience.

During your internship, what did you accomplish or how did you make a difference? In what ways did you grow in your professional and technical skills?

From my first day at the Foundation, I dove into researching information on Thomas Jefferson and Monticello to craft my personal house tour script, which was unique to each tour guide. By memorizing my tour, I greatly improved my public speaking skills while giving six to eight forty-five-minute tours of 25 visitors through the historic house per day. However, no two tours were the same, so I was able to learn how to adjust my dialogue with each group, while remaining comfortable during tough questions and encounters, in order to help every visitor have the best experience possible. My Sewanee experience provided a strong background in learning how to properly answer challenging questions concerning slavery and Thomas Jefferson. Every day I would learn something new about Thomas Jefferson from reading or listening to my colleagues and mentors.
I believe that I made a difference by using my strengths as an effective communicator and by volunteering on any extra task my superiors or coworkers needed.

Describe a problem that you helped to solve at your internship. What skills or knowledge from your education at Sewanee helped you address the problem?

Over the course of my internship, Monticello was the victim of a ransomware attack that crashed the computer systems for over a month. The original focus of my internship was completing a project for my supervisor, which required the use of the Internet. When the Internet was compromised, I was able to quickly adapt and communicate with my coworkers to assist with giving additional house tours and working on various ongoing projects within the Foundation. I dealt with the unexpected change of plans with a positive attitude and willingness to help whenever and wherever I was needed. Sewanee has taught me how to remain optimistic when facing an unanticipated situation while simultaneously searching for alternative ways to overcome and succeed.

In what way were your teamwork skills strengthened?

While giving historic house tours, one constantly needs to prepare for any question a visitor may ask. On multiple occasions during my tours, I would not know the answer to questions about specific objects within the house or who the craftsman was for a peculiar piece of furniture. It was during these times that I could easily turn to one of my colleagues to ask for help. He or she would either reply right away or ask another colleague in order to find the best answer to my question. This type of teamwork is woven into Monticello’s work culture. We all worked as a team to help Monticello’s visitors have the best experience possible while touring the home of Thomas Jefferson.

How did your internship affect your career plans?

After working at Monticello for two and a half months, my perception about the education and visitor department in a museum changed significantly. As an art history major, I have always been grateful for the privilege to learn and immerse myself with new perspectives and knowledge. Often it seems that many of us do not realize what goes on behind the scenes of an art exposition, a historic house, a museum, or other type of artistic expression. The Foundation is not only interested in education but also in both preservation and customer experience, among many more characteristics. My internship showed me how eager I am to talk about a certain topic, to spread knowledge, and it confirmed my passion for art and history.

In what ways did your internship cause you to encounter people of different backgrounds from your own? What steps did you take to communicate effectively with such persons? What did you learn from such persons’ perspectives?

Working in a historical house and museum caused me to encounter people of many different backgrounds from my own. Given that I was constantly interacting with people while giving tours, I had the opportunity to listen to other people’s opinions about Thomas Jefferson and communicate effectively what the Foundation hopes to encourage its visitors to gain from their visit. One of the most sensitive topics at Monticello is slavery. People from all over the country and world come to Monticello not only to observe Jefferson’s architectural masterpiece, but also they came to acknowledge the paradox in Jefferson's life. When questions or opinions about slavery were raised among the public, I always listened respectfully to my client’s opinion, restated what he or she asked or stated and then proceeded to comment on their perspective if necessary. I learned that we study our past to try to understand our present and fight for a better future.
Words of advice for future interns (housing, transportation, etc.)?
Monticello is the best place on Earth! Charlottesville is a beautiful town in Virginia that has the spirit of Thomas Jefferson imprinted in its culture. I agree that one needs a car for this internship, and as for housing there are many apartments that UVA students rent out for the summer. I lived in a house in downtown Charlottesville with a former Sewanee alumna, which was close to town and to Monticello too. The Foundation itself is always running and does not stop even when the system crashes. Everyone is willing to share his or her knowledge about Thomas Jefferson. I would suggest getting involved in the community. Keep yourself busy, learn, and fully enjoy your time at Monticello, the home of Thomas Jefferson.

Words of thanks to your internship funding donors:
Dear Mr. and Mrs. Babson,

Thank you very much for the most incredible internship. The opportunity to work for a World Heritage site like Monticello was an absolute honor! This is a magical place where the mind of Thomas Jefferson captivates every person who steps foot on the plantation. I had a wonderful time leading historic house tours and interacting with people who are very interested in Jefferson’s life and accomplishments. The staff is outstanding, it is no wonder why everyone loves Monticello. It was truly a profound learning experience. I could not be more thankful for your generosity!

Sincerely,

Clementina Davila