



City of Alexandria

City Council Chambers at
Del Pepper Community
Resource Center
4850 Mark Center Drive
Alexandria, VA 22311

Legislation Text

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City of Alexandria, Virginia

MEMORANDUM

DATE: FEBRUARY 22, 2017

TO: THE HONORABLE MAYOR AND MEMBERS OF CITY COUNCIL

FROM: MARK B. JINKS, CITY MANAGER /s/

DOCKET TITLE:

Consideration of a Grant Application for up to \$18,000 to the American Council of Learned Societies for the Creation of a Website Focused on Archaeology and Historic Store Ledgers.

ISSUE: Consideration of approval for the Office of Historic Alexandria (OHA) to apply for a Digital Extension grant for up to \$18,000.

RECOMMENDATION: That City Council authorize the City Manager to:

- 1) Approve the application to American Council of Learned Societies (ACLS) for a grant of up to \$18,000;
- 2) Approve the acceptance of funds from ACLS for up to \$18,000, if the grant is approved; and
- 3) Authorize the City Manager to execute the necessary documents that may be required.

BACKGROUND: Alexandria Archaeology (AA), a division of the Office of Historic Alexandria (OHA), will partner with the lead applicant, University of Wisconsin, Madison (UWM), and the Smithsonian Institution to undertake the grant activities. The AA component of the grant seeks up to \$18,000 from ACLS to support a digital humanities project that will bring merchant William Ramsay's store ledger to life, through transcriptions, customer biographies, and archaeological artifacts recently discovered on Alexandria's waterfront representative of the time period and type. The grant will fund 3 semester-long internships and the purchase of photography equipment.

The goals of the overall project are to:

- 1) Complete the transcription of the first William Ramsay ledger book and transfer it into searchable, online database (UWM and Smithsonian);
- 2) Catalogue and photograph artifacts from an 18th-century privy to illustrate goods sold from Ramsay's store

(AA);

3) Research and write biographies of some of Alexandria's earliest residents who held accounts at the Ramsay store (AA); and

4) Publish the updated website as a digital humanities initiative (UWM).

Funding from ACLS will directly support the increased accessibility and cutting-edge interpretation of the archaeology of Alexandria's historic waterfront.

DISCUSSION: This project had its genesis in preparing for an exhibition at the nation's premiere historical stage, the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History in partnership with UWM. Opened in July 2015, the "American Enterprise" exhibition chronicles the history of American capitalism from the mid-1700s to the present day. William Ramsay's ledgers anchor the exhibition's interpretation of the nation's Merchant Era from the 18th to the mid-19th century. The following link contains the Smithsonian's online exhibit: <http://americanhistory.si.edu/american-enterprise>.

Work by the University of Wisconsin has provided a template for the grant project. In the template, the online user can study what purchases customers make, see them as real objects rather than unfamiliar words, and finally, evaluate a range of options, a modern cost comparison, and other items purchased by a customer, painting a picture of life in early Alexandria. Evidence and artifacts from local archaeological materials are a final source of materials to match customers and residents. Students and a more general audience will be drawn into the world of 18th-century goods via a modern online store, but scholars are also offered a robust and curated data set.

UWM contacted AA just a little over a week before this grant was due to ACLS. As a result, the grant application was submitted, pending subsequent City Council approval. If not approved, the application will be withdrawn.

FISCAL IMPACT: This grant, if awarded, will provide up to \$18,000 toward the research and digitization of artifacts related to the Ramsay period and the store's customers. The project will have minimal fiscal impact on City resources since the grant does not require any matching funds. Archaeological staff will oversee the project, which will be completed by interns who will conduct the bulk of the work. Applications to other granting sources will continue for the digital humanities project.

STAFF:

Emily A. Baker, Deputy City Manager

J. Lance Mallamo, Director, Office of Historic Alexandria

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Francine Bromberg, City Archaeologist