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Dr. Joseph Moore Writes Forgotten History of Covenanters

BOILING SPRINGS, N.C. – A story uncovered in research for his dissertation has led one Gardner-Webb University faculty member to be published by the prestigious Oxford University Press.

Dr. Joseph Moore, assistant professor of history, wrote the book, “Founding Sins: How a Group of Antislavery Radicals Fought to Put Christ into the Constitution,” from research that took him to the United Kingdom. It chronicles the attempts of The Covenanters to convert America to a Christian nation and traces their political roots from Scotland to the New World.

“I am honored to have Oxford take the project. These are the greatest people in the world at what they do, and every step of the way it showed,” Moore observed. “It speaks highly of Gardner-Webb, also, that our university’s scholars can take part in the most important conversations in their respective disciplines.”

Moore’s experience also serves to inspire his students in their own research.

“I have always been firmly committed to the teacher-scholar model of college education. Engaging with scholarship gives me fresh ideas for my students, but they give me fresh ideas for my research,” Moore remarked. “More importantly, my research experience helps me teach my students what it is like to unearth the treasures of the past and think about them today.”

Intrigued by what he found out about The Covenanters, Moore wanted to learn more about this group of fundamentalist Presbyterians who adamantly believed that the United States was not a Christian nation because slavery was in the Constitution but Jesus was not. While the religious sect was successful in establishing their form of Christianity in Scotland in the 1600s, their efforts to replicate those foundations in the newly-formed United States were unsuccessful.

“No one has ever written this history from its Scottish origins — where they founded a Christian Scotland in the 1600s — to their attempts to do that in England, and in America, and beyond,” Moore explained. “I wanted to write that history and tell their story.”

He has integrated some of his findings into courses at GWU, such as American Christianity, Slavery in the Atlantic, and the Colonial and Revolutionary America. His discussion is enhanced by the travel opportunities he had while working on the book. He applied for a travel grant from Harvard University's International Seminar on the History of the Atlantic World, and was awarded funds to travel to the United Kingdom to do research in archives in London, England and Edinburgh, Scotland. Gardner-Webb also assisted with funds to extend his visit to Belfast, Northern Ireland, where he presented some of his research at a conference.

"The Covenanters were very well-known in their own day, but are almost completely ignored today because the American separation of Church and State made their central issues irrelevant," Moore said. "In Britain, Covenanters sparked wars to decide whose church would rule the land. In the United States, no such option existed. Here, their influence had to be much more subtle, so their arguments about God and government became imbedded into more popular arguments today associated with the Christian versus secular America debate. They were easy to miss unless you went looking for them."

Moore's next project explores where Americans learned financial ideas before there was a financial advising industry in the 20th century.

"I'm currently doing research for an honors course on 'Financial Wisdom in American History,'" he shared. "It's a lot of fun and involves everything from pamphlets telling people to buy cheap land in America to advice from Benjamin Franklin to sermons preaching about land speculation after the Revolution."

He and the other faculty members encourage their students to seek out those forgotten stories. Gardner-Webb history students do more research than some graduate students and these experiences lead to their success after graduation.

"Our history students get very good at hands-on exploration of historical texts, and it's a big reason they are so successful when they go into law schools, history Ph.D. programs, and jobs," Moore observed. "I've often said that studying history can lead to many jobs, but the skills we teach also lead to many promotions after getting the job: investigative acumen, critical evaluation of sources, composing clear narratives from complex facts. These are all sets of skills students learn by doing, and you do them by researching for yourself. I'm fortunate to research along the way, but the most impressive thing I've seen in my years here is the remarkable volume of research by students that shapes their own career trajectories."

Founding Sins: How a Group of Antislavery Radicals Fought to Put Christ into the Constitution is available online at Oxford University Press (<https://global.oup.com>) or on Amazon in hardcover or eBook.

Located in Boiling Springs, N.C., Gardner-Webb University offers a comprehensive academic experience that introduces students to the diverse world of ideas and to the people who think them, preparing them for professional success and for productive citizenship.