

For Immediate Release

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YSU prof explores mysteries of Venetian merchants

Spend an hour talking with Eleanor Congdon, and the conversation darts in all kinds of directions: horticulture, art history, church architecture, figure skating, bad knees, weightlifting and the subtleties of making a church bell go “bing” and “bong.”

But get her talking about 15th century Venetian merchants, and, as she says, “I’m happy as a kid in a candy store.”

Congdon, assistant professor of history at Youngstown State University, is one of the few scholars around whose research focuses on deciphering and interpreting 500-year-old letters, ledgers and other writings of merchants who roamed the Aegean and Mediterranean seas in the Middle Ages.

“I could spend 24 hours a day working with these documents and never feel the passage of time,” she said. “There’s so much wonderful stuff there.”

Two prestigious funding agencies agree.

Congdon recently received a \$4,000 Franklin Research Grant from the American Philosophical Society. It is believed to be the first time a YSU faculty member has won a grant from APS, which was founded in 1745 by Benjamin Franklin.

She also received a fellowship valued at \$4,000 from the Dr. M. Aylwin Cotton Foundation in the Channel Islands, a foundation dedicated to furthering the study of archaeology, architecture, history, language and art of the Mediterranean area.

The research grants will allow Congdon to travel to Venice and Florence this summer and again next academic year to further her studies. She is to arrive in Venice on June 14 and will return to Youngstown about July 10.

Congdon, the daughter of a college professor father and a mother with a Ph.D. in art history, earned a bachelor of arts degree from Williams College in Massachusetts in

1988. A year later, she enrolled in the history graduate program at the University of Minnesota, where she first came across medieval merchant letters.

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Merchants of Venice/Add 1

She was immediately hooked by the complexity of the handwritten letters.

“It’s almost an international language,” combining parts of Spanish, French, Portuguese, Latin, Greek and Arabic, she said. “There is no dictionary. There is no grammar book. Venetian is a dialect that is long gone.”

The research, which Congdon continued while earning a doctorate at Cambridge University in England, involves interpreting and translating the letters and discovering what they reveal about the history of the times. “It’s like playing Sherlock Holmes,” she said.

After four years as the director of the Medieval Studies Program at Plymouth State University in New Hampshire, Congdon came to YSU three years ago and has focused her research on the writings of two specific Venetian merchants: Marco Bembo and Ambrogio Malipero.

She currently is studying copies of more than 300 letters written between 1476 and 1486 by Bembo, an international merchant who operated in the Aegean Sea during a time of war between Christian Venetians and Muslim Turks. The letters were sent to Bembo’s agents and are contained in a ledger called a “copy-letter,” Congdon said.

The trip to Italy this summer will allow Congdon to read official government records about what Venetians and Turks were doing during these years that might have affected Bembo’s activities. She noted that the grants, while quite large for someone working in medieval history, will not cover all of the costs of the trips.

“This is the very start of this project,” she said. “It will take several years to complete.”

In the meantime, Congdon said she hopes to finish a book on Venetian merchants in the Western Mediterranean, and she has plans to possibly edit a book on plants in the Middle Ages.

“For me, I just cannot be narrow-focused,” she said. “I have to have the diversity. That’s who I am. It feeds me.”

