Back cover to Welcome to the Beatles, by Kenny Miller. Courtesy of VT Publishing. https://publishing.vt.edu/site/books/10.21061/vt-history.beatles/. This image is licensed under the Creative Commons CC BY-NC-ND 4.0. https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/.
Last year Dr. Robert Stephens taught a capstone research seminar titled the Beatles and Their World. The class’s final project was to write, edit, and publish a book about the legendary band, which they titled *Welcome to the Beatles*. This book was a collaboration among all the students in the class, with each of them completing an individual chapter for the book. The students conducted their own research, wrote their own chapters, and worked together to compile, organize, edit, and publish the book. The culmination of this project was a seventeen-chapter book that delves into a variety of topics surrounding the cultural phenomenon that is the Beatles. These topics include media, race, gender, globalization, and the Beatles’ legacy.

I reached out to two of the students in the class to ask about their experiences and learn more about the project. Andrew Pregnall (VT ’19) was one of the students in the class and also served as the managing editor. Karson Lyon (VT ’21) worked on the layout team, which included collaborating with VT Publishing on the final layout of the book.

The prospect of researching and writing a historical work that would be published at the end of the semester meant that the students knew they would have to bring extra care and attention to their work. While I was sure this was an exciting opportunity for the class, I guessed it
was a little daunting as well. I asked Andrew and Karson what their reactions were when they learned about the project. “I think all the students in our class reacted in a similar way when we learned we would be creating a book,” said Andrew. “We wanted to write our best piece of historical scholarship yet. Knowing that our work would appear in a physical publication encouraged us to put a lot of time and effort into our research and writing process.” Karson, still a freshman at the time, was invited to join the class by Dr. Stephens and said she was excited about the project after first hearing about it from him: “I thought it was an awesome opportunity, and it was one of the main reasons why I agreed to participate (in the class).”

Andrew and Karson encountered different kinds of challenges along the way. Andrew recalled that his biggest difficulty arose during the editing process, namely, “Citations! Dr. Stephens and I spent a lot of time correcting citations before the book went to press. We should have taken a more active role in ensuring that students got their citations right the first time.” For Karson, her biggest struggle was her own initial self-doubt. I was impressed to hear that she took the class while in her freshman year. “I was a freshman in a class meant for seniors, so for about the first half of the semester I was worried that I wouldn’t be able to produce work at the same level as everyone else.”

The students spent a lot of time conducting their own research. They shared some of what they took away from their research experiences and what they found most interesting. Karson explored the role of the Beatles celebrity in the emerging industry of personal security. She collected many newspaper articles over the course of her research that covered the rise of the Beatles to fame: “I was lucky in that I found my primary sources interesting. I was able to find over a hundred short newspaper articles reporting on the Beatles’ tours at the height of Beatlemania.” As a result of this exploration, Karson found a new interest in Ringo Starr, who, she was surprised to find, needed more personal protection than his bandmates. “The most interesting thing that I found was how much of the Beatles’ security was centered around Ringo. Nowadays he tends to be overshadowed by the other three, but in the early 1960s people really had it out for him,” she said. Andrew said that his research into the Beatles helped expand his understanding of the 1960s more broadly. “Studying the Beatles was
a fantastic way to learn about the 1960s. As much as I learned about the band itself during my research process, I learned just as much, if not more, about the 1960s and scholarly perspectives on that period. Learning about these varied perspectives was the most interesting part of my research project.”

Karson’s favorite part of the experience was the research. Andrew’s favorite part of his experience was the opportunity to work with Dr. Stephens: “He’s been an amazing professor, mentor, and friend who’s challenged me to be a better historian, communicator, and individual. I hope to continue this relationship well past graduation.”

Both Karson and Andrew told me how working on this project helped them improve their skills at writing and research. Andrew said: “Writing historiographies finally clicked for me while working on my capstone paper. Dr. Stephens explained them in a simple and accessible way which stopped our class from overthinking the historiographical section of our papers. We also got practice articulating clear research questions, which is a very important part of the research process and something we all needed more practice at. I also got much better at incorporating primary sources into my writing so that there was a seamless transition between the source and my writing.” Karson also honed her skills in writing historiographies and the research process. “I learned how to research both primary and secondary sources thoroughly. I also learned how to write an effective historiography section,” she said.

I asked both Andrew and Karson whether there were any surprises for them along the way. Karson was pleasantly surprised by how well everything went. “I didn’t expect the process to move as smoothly and quickly as it did. Going in, I thought that either writing would consume my life for a whole semester or my chapter would be hastily put together at the end. Luckily, neither turned out to be the case.” Andrew told me that his previous experiences meant there wasn’t anything he found too unexpected throughout the process. “Prior to Welcome to the Beatles, I already had editorial experience with the Interloper, the Pylon, and the Virginia Tech Undergraduate Historical Review (a large part, I think, of why I was elected by the class to serve as managing editor), so I wasn’t really surprised by anything that came up during our project.”
I asked Andrew and Karson if this project changed the way they think about history or how they have approached other projects since. “Yes,” Andrew said, “I looked at the cultural impact of the Beatles’ album art through an economic lens, and, since then, I have started looking at other historical issues through an economic lens to see what I can learn. For instance, I am studying the history of the AIDS epidemic for my senior thesis, and I’m trying to figure out whether economic forces contributed to the spread of certain narratives about the disease. I would not have pursued this line of inquiry had I not written my Beatles paper first. As such, another piece of advice I would have for students is to try looking at historical issues through a lens you’ve never looked through before. You never know what you’ll find or learn as a result!” For Karson, the project also helped her grow as a historian, and she said that this experience helped her realize what she is capable of: “It’s given me the confidence to pursue larger projects.”

Lastly, I asked Andrew and Karson if they had any words of wisdom for other students. Andrew’s advice? “Write your first draft early, and then revise, revise, revise.” Karson’s takeaway was, “Don’t be afraid to challenge yourself.”

We are pleased to recognize the hard work and dedication of the students who worked on this project and, of course, the guidance and instruction of Dr. Stephens. You can read Welcome to the Beatles in its entirety at https://publishing.vt.edu/site/books/10.21061/vt-history.beatles/.