



# Alumni Spotlight

## Katrina Ponti '15



**Katrina Ponti**, a historian and 2015 graduate of Millersville University, says that learning she was a recipient of a Fulbright grant was surreal. “I filled out an application six months prior without getting my hopes up, as there are always so many strong applications, and then I got word that I was a finalist.” Complications due to COVID-19 delayed the process a few days longer, but she finally learned on April 12 that her research proposal had been accepted.

“It’s an honor to be a Fulbright grant recipient,” says Ponti, who’s currently pursuing her Ph.D. in Early American History at the University of Rochester. “There is certainly pride [there] as well, I’m thrilled to represent the positive aspects of my nation abroad.” The purpose of the Fulbright Program is diplomatic in nature — it encourages academics and scholars around the globe to share knowledge, research and resources. Ponti’s research will aim to do just that.

She plans to use her Fulbright grant to support research with the University of Victoria in Victoria, British Columbia in Canada for her dissertation project titled, “Agents of Exchange: American Public Diplomats in Foreign Affairs: 1783-1818. She says the first half of her project will focus on the Pacific World, where early American merchants, explorers and scientists became what she describes as, “. . . the first representatives of the United States,” who visited places like India, China and the Pacific Northwest of North America. “They were tasked by the U.S. government to make favorable first impressions and to assure their international hosts that though a new nation, the United States was a worthy trading partner,” explains Ponti.

Ponti says she chose Victoria, B.C. as her study location for several reasons. First, the Royal British Columbia Museum is located there, and hosts a repository of historical documents that chart the early Anglo-European trade in the Pacific, which is key to her research. “[Another reason I chose this location] is the relationship the University of Victoria has with the Coast Salish people, who are the descendants of the First Nations tribes that met and interacted with my American subjects,” says Ponti. “I intend to conduct interviews within their community in order to access their rich oral histories.”

Finally, she explains, since the Fulbright program and her dissertation are about American diplomats, creating person-to-person cultural and personal relationships, “I intend to view my time abroad as a way to help me connect with the experiences of my subjects, to understand first-hand how diplomacy can be made between average people.”

Someday, Ponti hopes to become a history professor. “[I’d love to teach] at a state school like Millersville and teach courses in American, international and diplomatic history,” she says. She says her time at MU, where she earned a master’s degree in history, was incredibly positive. “I always look back happily on my two years at Millersville University,” she says. “It was a time for me to rediscover my love of history and gave me the confidence to continue on to a Ph.D. program.”

Key to this experience were her professors. “The faculty in the history department were especially impactful. They provided me with a rigorous education while also treating me like a junior colleague and a partner in research.” If it wasn’t for Ponti’s education and experiences at MU, she says she wouldn’t have had the confidence to apply for a Fulbright grant. In her own words, she says, “I’m grateful for what I learned at MU!”