Many days have passed since the horses left the stables. They are not needed to transport cotton to the textile mill or to export wood from the lumber mill to the shipbuilders. Sleigh bells do not chime over a snow covered landscape. Since the boom of the industrial revolution, combustion has moved freight from the hoof to the engine. The Carriage House at the Sprague Mansion in Cranston collects cobwebs and dampness without the life forms once depended on so deeply.

Community Partner Jim Hall from the Cranston Historical Society gave Roger Williams University students a tour of the once functioning Carriage House, elaborately built by one of the wealthiest families of the time, the Spragues. Victorian vistas hung in frames on the wooden walls. Cannons from the civil war stood stoic, deactivated relics of brutal warfare. Bricks blocked the wooden spoke wheels of black carriages in a great garage.

Assistant Professor Anne Proctor’s Museum Studies course will spend the fall 2014 semester coordinating with the Community Partnerships Center and working in teams with four museums throughout Rhode Island. A selected group of students from the course will be working on designing a plan to reuse the Carriage House as a local history museum. Like the blue union Civil War uniforms made in the Sprague mills, colorful material on local history abounds.

That same fabric that clothed the soldiers backing Abraham was woven from raw cotton that suspiciously made its way up north through the blockade. “We’re not afraid to show the warts,” said Community Partner Sandra Moyer. The conglomeration of the Sprague enterprises fostered something of a wage slavery system. Laborers in the mills and on the property would take out credit at a Sprague owned store. The grocery and necessity bill would add up, leaving the proletariat with a pittance of a paycheck at the end of the week.

Moyer continued her narrative on yet darker forest trails: a group of Irishmen opened up their own store. This was competition, and they sold liquor. When laborers started coming into work drunk, William Sprague was furious. He threw his wealth and connections around and convinced City Hall to remove their operating license. Shortly after, his body, the richest man in town, was found beaten and shot to death. An anti-Irish uproar began against the independent shopkeepers. An unlucky man without a reliable alibi was executed without evidence. Later, fingers pointed toward another rogue. This event ended capital punishment in the Ocean State.

Some of the Spragues were dilettantes and gentlemen, attending the same parties as Lincoln’s children while visiting in the District of Columbia. They set up a trotting park on the Cranston property. Grandiloquent equines amble dressage, carrying their dignitaries on an afternoon jaunt, while workhorses toil at the bit, carting shipments or tugging a carriage. Horses stood as figures of fancy and function in the nineteenth century. Precisely why such a large house is dedicated to them and their accoutrements.

The mansion itself is rented out for parties and weddings to raise funds to sustain the property financially. Cranston Historical Society balances their role as a museum and civic center. By designing exhibits for the carriage house, RWU students will help solidify an identity for the society and the structures they curate. They will be able to refill the empty stalls with educational materials that will benefit a larger community. RWU students will spend the semester creating displays which would resonate with twenty-first century visitors, bridging an ever expanding gap in time.