A Little Addition
Written by Community Partnership Center AmeriCorps VISTA Dana Brown
West Warwick, RI, 22 September 2014

A small maroon building on Main St. in West Warwick hunkers next to a city park with an open field, a shaded walking path, a basketball court and a playground. Built in 1876, the Revolution’s centennial, what once was the Crompton Library, now serves as the headquarters of the Pawtuxet Valley Preservation and Historical Society.

On September 22, students enrolled in the Historic Preservation Workshop at Roger Williams University visited the Crompton Library to tour the site. These students will spend the fall 2014 semester partnering with the Community Partnerships Center to determine the best methods and ways in which to add an addition to the historic structure. Students will provide the partner with a summary of recommendations, requirements and techniques, which the organization can utilize when designing the new addition.

On this afternoon, students arrived to a locked door at the Crompton Library. This deterred them little.

The student preservationists wrapped the building in tape measures — sizing up the dimensions of the building and its position on the plot. They were working on drafting multiple models for an addition to the site.

One of the values Professor Arnold Robinson wants students to take out of the experiential learning exercise is that there is always more than one solution. By devising different designs, the students can offer the partner options to work off of in their considerations for moving the project forward.

The day was sunny and warm. Shade slanted longer as the sun rolled through the sky. Just as the last quantification was recorded, the partner, Cecelia St. Gene, appeared and opened the door.

Eyes filled with childlike curiosity and wonder at the stupendous selection of historic uniforms, helmets, hats, dolls, books, trophies, busts, statues, plates, photographs, paintings and complete, leather bound chronicles of The Pawtuxet Valley Gleaner. The basement
agglomerated the archives Gerard Heroux presides over. Roller racking held documents and artifacts in the process of being converted to digital copy. After perusal of the irreplaceable, one-of-a-kind collection, students sat around a wooden table in the research room to have a discussion with the partner about the needs of the project.

“There is never enough space,” said St. Gene. Collateral has accumulated to the point of overcrowding the local history museum. The project requires more storage space for their collection, exhibit and display areas. It also calls for the inclusion of handicap access.

The plot the building sits on is small, and the addition will have to be sensitive to the historic integrity of the structure. This project will build physical capacity of the society’s facilities. They will be able to aggrandize their contribution to the community by creating a more comprehensive narrative of the areas cultural identity.