Philanthropy in the Paine House
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Coventry, RI, 25 September 2014

In the damp weather of September 25, Roger Williams University students congregated under a white pavilion at the Paine House in Coventry. Crinkly orange leaves littered the lawn. Volunteers in blue shirts were setting up lights and potted plants for the Harvest Festival the upcoming weekend.

Professor Anne Proctor addressed her Museum Studies class, pointing out things to take into consideration while observing the house: “Think about what makes a good exhibit, how the history of the house can engage a wider audience, and where the house fits in the neighborhood.”

“There’s nothing more boring than sitting in an old house,” says Community Partner and Vice President of the Western Rhode Island Civic Historical Society Norma Smith. “You have to make it entertaining.”

Students enrolled in the Museum Studies course will spend the fall 2014 semester partnering 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 narrative for the Paine House that will interest visitors and reinforce sustainability.

“You’re a whole group of fresh ideas,” says Smith. She spoke about community outreach, how the organization is trying to appeal to more people and get local schools involved — passing on the torch of history to a new generation. Curriculum integration was suggested to entice schools to have field trips at the Paine House.

President of the Society, Brenda Jacobs, showed students around the house. A musky, old wood smell wove its way around a dense jungle of artifacts dating as far back as the seventeenth century. Candles, teapots and trinkets rested on carved tables and cabinets. Corners were dark, the only light coming from windows. A butter churn sat next to a stone fireplace, vintage rugs stretching out on the floor. Sewing machines and weaving looms, long since retired, remained as reminders of the times when everything was worked for, even the dresses and civil war uniforms mounted on mannequins.

It is thought the house has stood since Samuel Bennett built a one-room shelter near his sawmill in 1691. Since then, it had been expanded. The charter founding the Town of Coventry was signed in this house, which has seen two kings and every president. “Every significant event in the country was talked about in this house,” said Jacobs.

She took the class to the tavern in the basement, where in 1742 Francis Brayton turned the home into an inn, a place of entertainment. As the keys transferred hands over time, the Paine family ended up with them in 1866 before donating them to the Society in 1953. Architecture students analyzed the structure and foundation of the building, while other students noted items of historical significance and stories about the house. The team of students working on the Paine House focused much of their time at the site visit discussing the project’s scope of work with Jacobs, taking advantage of her generous knowledge of the house and local history.