An old wood smell surrounded Roger Williams University students who sat at the dining room table of the early nineteenth century Spaulding House. Shaded lamps and open shuttered windows lighted portraits hanging on the walls and plates displayed on the fireplace mantle. Grandfather clocks ticked as Preservation Society of Pawtucket President Dennis Stark told the story of the neighborhood, the house and its late owner, Elizabeth Johnson. This fall, students will help Stark turn his stories into a narrative and the house into a museum.

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 showcase three rooms of the Spaulding House as exhibit space.

The industrial revolution changed Pawtucket, as Slater Mill turned its water wheel in the Blackstone River. A few blocks away from the factory, Joseph Spaulding, a middle class cabinetmaker, built a house in 1828. The property passed from the Spaulding family to the Kingly family and finally to the Ratcliff family —Elizabeth’s grandparents, and was left to Elizabeth upon their passing. She and her husband John had the house authentically restored in 1978, and this federal style cottage is on the National Register for Historic Places and remains the only restored house in the historic neighborhood.

Born in 1924 and raised in the house by her grandparents, Johnson was an active volunteer and a self-educated archivist and genealogist. She contributed over 200 stories about Pawtucket history to a local paper during a ten-year period. She amassed a sizable collection of records: engravings, photographs and newspaper clippings that documented the growth of textile mills, community service and culture in Pawtucket. These now dwell in the Pawtucket Public Library. To preserve her home and collection, she created a non-profit organization that was eventually subsumed by the Preservation Society of Pawtucket.

“It’s my job to fulfill her dream,” said Stark. “I feel obligated to Ms. Johnson, having known her over the years.” She wrote her autobiography in the things she kept and where she kept them. Everything in her house is accounted for and in the places she left them. It is a window into the mind of the woman, where she placed a couch or a lamp or a candlestick. Students working on the CPC project will spend the semester telling Elizabeth Johnson’s tale through the objects in the house – starting in her dining room, library and sitting rooms. Students will be preserving the memory of a woman who dedicated her life to a small corner of the world.