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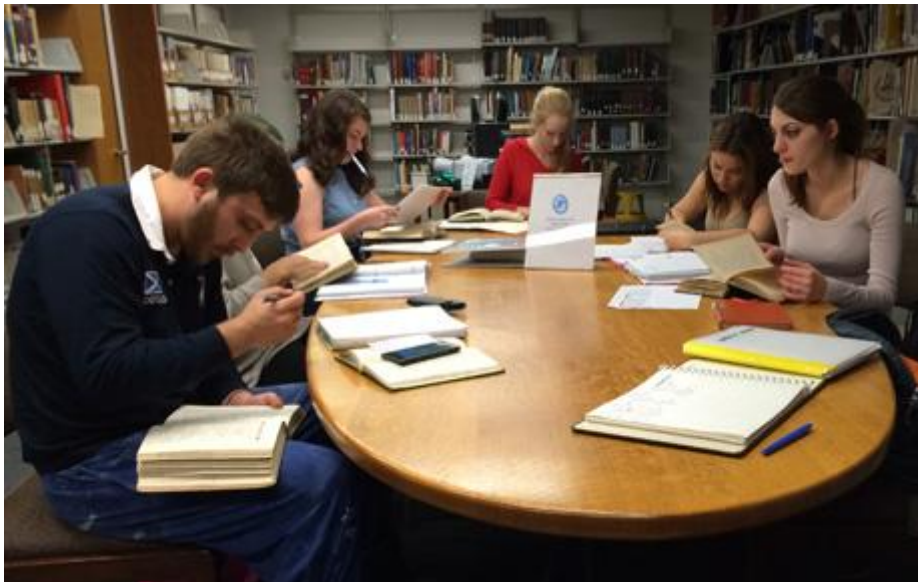
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Student Research Digs Up Dirt on Newport's Pre-Revolution Historic Properties

Historic preservation students uncover hidden truths behind seven colonial buildings



December 9, 2014 | Sabrina Polin '17

BRISTOL, R.I. – Murder, bankruptcies, 18th century interracial marriages – not the standard fare a group of RWU historic preservation students expected to uncover in their recent field research of Colonial Era buildings in Newport. Yet they were as enthused as they were stunned to discover such tales.

“These kinds of finds opened eyes in many ways to the lives of these buildings,” says School of Architecture, Art and Historic Preservation adjunct professor Catherine Zipf. “These are Colonial buildings – they predate the Revolution. We observe and think about how they are today, and how they began, but we don’t think about the almost 200 years in between.”

With Zipf at the helm as part of a Community Partnerships Center project, seven students from her archival research course collaborated with the Newport Restoration Foundation – which preserves, interprets and maintains Aquidneck Island’s 18th and 19th century architectural culture – to uncover the unknown history of seven of the organization’s 78 colonial properties. After a semester of intensive archival sleuthing, the group of students revealed findings on their respective NRF preservation properties in early December, at the Rough Point mansion in Newport.

As the NRF noted in its CPC application, it had insufficient and incomplete knowledge on the history behind their properties. The group hoped the student and faculty expertise through the CPC would help redress the gaps in their records – and it did.

“NRF has education as part of its mission, so it was a very suitable meeting of the missions, in the sense that we at RWU had students that needed to, and wanted to, learn and gain experience,” says Zipf. “[The NRF] had an opportunity for students to gain skills in a way that also promoted and gained knowledge about their own buildings, so it worked out very, very well.”

The collaboration gave students a firsthand look at working in the field of historic preservation with a real-world client, while the NRF gained seven detailed building reports that it didn’t have before, covering an architectural description of the building, a discussion of how the property changed over time, and an overview of the people who lived in the houses. For their part, the students went into the field weekly as a part of their class time, investigating both their respective building assignments and primary research sources – analyzing documents like deeds, directories, old photographs, historical maps and other records to develop a more complete perspective of the historic structures.

“I was pleasantly surprised with how quickly students became engaged in the history,” Zipf says. “The lights all turned on. Bringing people into the picture of historic preservation was really exciting to them. It wasn’t just about the buildings. They are all very quick to see connections between the everyday man who lived there and broader trends.”

With seven properties investigated, the students not only gave the NRF a considerable starting point, in Zipf’s perspective, but also an overview of where to go with their next level of research.

“I can’t figure out a way the project could have been more successful, to be honest,” she says.