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Rhode Island Historical Society

Leslie Lindenauer Dr
WCSU, Lindenauerl@wcsu.edu

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sites: Mystic Seaport and Plimouth Plantation, reviewed by Seth Bruggeman and Jessie Swigger, respectively. Seth Bruggeman's review of Mystic Seaport is infused with his personal reminiscences of visiting the site as a child. This, juxtaposed with his professional eye, provides a balanced assessment of the many benefits and pitfalls of living history programs. He concludes, "Mystic achieves that rare blend of immediacy and relevance that keeps its magic alive." Swigger too, finds immediacy and relevance in the presentation at Plimouth Plantation and praises the museum's efforts to offer a bicultural presentation that challenges traditional representations of the Pilgrim arrival. While there is always room for improvement, Plimouth Plantation "has successfully responded to the now old call for a new history."

This review section offers a glimpse into the rich collection of historic sites and resources available in the greater Providence area. We at *The Public Historian* are, as ever, deeply grateful to our conscientious reviewers and to our gracious hosts, particularly Steven Lubar, who as local arrangements chair aided us in selecting sites for review.

Rhode Island Historical Society. BERNARD FISHMAN, executive director.
John Brown House Museum. Providence, Rhode Island. Museum of Work
and Culture. Woonsocket, Rhode Island. www.rihs.org

Established in 1822, The Rhode Island Historical Society (RIHS) is the fourth oldest state historical society in the United States, but this is not your grandmother's organization. From its bold decision to highlight social historical themes alongside family history at the John Brown House Museum, to its commitment to collaborating with the local community to tell the story of Rhode Island's immigrant laborers at the Museum of Work and Culture in Woonsocket, the Rhode Island Historical Society reflects much of what is promising in public history today.

The RIHS's John Brown House Museum is one of Providence's grandest mansions. John Brown, a prominent Rhode Island businessman, politician, patriot, and slave trader, built the house in 1788 and, with his wife Sarah, raised four children, who in turn lived in the house with their descendents. In keeping with recommendations in its strategic plan (made available to the public on the Web site, part of a trend toward transparency that serves history organizations and their publics well), the RIHS launched a new interpretive plan for the museum, shifting the focus from the decorative arts to the rich social history of the house, its residents, and Rhode Island. Visitors become acquainted with the Brown family in sickness and health, through deaths, births, and marriages (one of the Brown daughters was married in the house). The house and its residents serve as a window on the social history of Rhode Island in the colonial, revolutionary, and early national periods.

The story of slavery in the north, and the Brown family's involvement in the trans-Atlantic slave trade, is one of the RIHS's most compelling and pro-



The John Brown House, Rhode Island Historical Society. (Courtesy of reviewer)

vocative subjects. Indeed, the historical society seems intent on provocation—taking interpretation beyond the bounds of the conventional house museum. The theme is most clearly articulated in the exhibit on the first floor, where visitors often begin or end their tour. “The Voyage of the Slave Ship Sally, 1764–1765,” an often poignant display (created in collaboration with Brown University students) of documentary and material evidence, also serves as the focus for school programs on slavery and the slave trade in the north.

The emphasis on social history opens richly layered domestic spaces to more complex interpretation, across race, gender, and class. A splendid collection, especially the family portraits and domestic objects, adds texture and depth to the experience. Of special note are the textiles, too often a rarity in historic house museums; here they are displayed in a variety of contexts that help bring the rooms to life. Visitors are particularly captivated by John Brown’s chariot, the oldest extant American-built vehicle, which has the added distinction of having been ridden in by George Washington.

Tourists, some of whom undoubtedly expect a decorative arts focus, especially given the elegance of the house and its collections, may occasionally resist the emphasis on social history. Though the education staff at the RIHS is prepared to cater to the needs of that audience—on one of the days that I visited I overheard an interpreter offering a more conventional decorative arts

tour—the staff is equally prepared to meet the challenge of mediating traditional notions of an historic house tour. There has been some internal resistance as well; the museum’s stakeholders include its docents, some of whom have been giving tours for decades. Change is hard.

The interpretive changes at the RIHS are part of a larger effort to connect to new audiences, including bus tours and conventioners, and to serve traditional audiences in new ways. The Historical Society offers a series of programs for school groups, including tours that focus on slavery and the slave trade in Rhode Island, the China trade (through which the Brown family built a fortune), and a program that explores women’s history in the new republic. In addition, the RIHS offers online lesson plans for teachers, with more online resources to come. The museum has made its collection catalog available online as well. Walking tours of the historic neighborhood take advantage of Providence’s remarkable built environment. The RIHS also participates in Providence’s Gallery Night, presents a summer concert series on the lawn, and collaborates on programs with local museums, including the Governor Stephen Hopkins House, the Athenaeum, and the RISD Art Museum.

The RIHS has an informal relationship with Brown University’s John Nicholas Brown Center for the Public Humanities. There is potential there for even greater levels of collaboration—indeed, few academic programs are better situated to take advantage of the historic house museum as learning laboratory. That collaboration might extend to the RIHS’s Museum of Work and Culture, too.

Twenty miles to the north and a world away from historic College Hill, the Museum of Work and Culture was founded to tell the story of workers in Rhode Island’s textile factories. The museum, part of the Blackstone River Valley National Heritage Corridor, opened in 1997 in what was the Barnai Worsted Company. The building itself serves as a significant link between the past and present.

Seventy-five percent of Woonsocket’s population was French Canadian in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century; mill agents lured Quebecois to work there in the textile factories. There was some logic, then, in the museum’s decision to focus initially on the town’s French-Canadian roots (on the day I visited, I tagged along with a French class from Connecticut; their guide, who had grown up in Woonsocket and had attended one of the town’s bilingual parochial schools, delivered the tour in a mix of French and English). That said, immigration patterns changed in the twentieth century, and the museum has wisely introduced an interpretive plan that reflects a broader regional history of immigration, labor, and family. In so doing, it has strengthened its ties to the contemporary Woonsocket community.

In contrast to the John Brown House Museum, the tour of the Museum of Work and Culture is self-guided. The museum encourages interactive learning, from the invitation to punch in as a mill worker at the very beginning of the tour, to the use of sound in exhibits. Especially effective was the exhibit



The factory floor at the Museum of Work and Culture, Rhode Island Historical Society. (Courtesy of reviewer)

about labor on the factory floor. Standing in front of massive textile machines, visitors hear the voices of people who worked in Woonsocket's textile mills, describing the deafening sound of the machines, and the oppressive heat (exacerbated by the need to keep the windows closed and the thread damp to prevent it from breaking). Their voices are interspersed with a recording of operating textile machines.

The recreated factory floor is one of the more successful in a series of stage sets, beginning with a French-Canadian farmhouse that features an audio dialogue between two sisters discussing the possibility that their family will be moving to Woonsocket to work in the mills. A recreated Catholic church underscores the powerful role that faith played in immigrant culture but seems less suited for screening a film about labor in the textile mills. The film and a 1934 Union Hall exhibit at the end of the tour also detail the emergence of the Independent Textile Union. Though factory management receives some attention in a recreated board room, the museum makes clear its intent to privilege the voices of laborers.

Though most visitors explore the museum on their own, guided tours and special programs are available for groups. The school group whose tour I joined encountered an interpreter playing the role of an early-twentieth-century mill agent, Jean Boisvert, who tried to recruit them to work in the textile mills. Of particular interest to the group was the recreation of a parochial school classroom, with desktops that cleverly open to reveal additional information about the role of education in the lives of children who worked in the mills.

Like most not-for-profit educational institutions, the RIHS must contend



An interpreter performing as Jean Boisvert, a mill agent, at the Museum of Work and Culture, Rhode Island Historical Society. (Courtesy of reviewer)

with an increasingly difficult economic climate. In the face of these challenges, the RIHS not only continues to preserve, collect, and share its resources, but has expanded the reach, depth, and breadth of its programs.

LESLIE LINDENAUER

Western Connecticut State University

Roger Williams National Memorial. JOHN MCGRIFF, Ranger. National Park Service, United States Department of the Interior. <http://www.nps.gov/rowi/>

Located in downtown Providence, Rhode Island, the Roger Williams National Memorial celebrates the life and ideals of seventeenth-century theologian Roger Williams, the founder of Providence and an early, passionate champion of religious freedom. The site occupies a four-and-a-half-acre park called Benefit Square, wedged between Canal and North Main Streets at the foot of College Hill, approximately one quarter-mile east of the Rhode Island statehouse. This is the site upon which Williams and his followers founded Providence in 1637 and established the town's first residences. At the northeast end of the park, an eighteenth-century Georgian Colonial-style residence called the Antram-Gray House serves as the Memorial's visitor center and museum.