Protecting the Whiteborne House Museum and Its Collections

White Paper

National Endowment for the Humanities
Sustaining Cultural Heritage Collections
Grant Number: PF-271930-20

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Newport, Rhode Island
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Project Summary

In 2020, the Newport Restoration Foundation (NRF) requested and received an NEH Sustaining Cultural Heritage Collections Grant to fund a study of the Whitehorne House Museum’s exterior, climate control, security, and collections storage systems and to make specific recommendations about products and procedures that would help remediate any problems. Working with the Landmark Facilities Group, we coordinated a multi-disciplinary study that included experts in the fields of construction, engineering, climate control, security, and collections management. The end result is a report that we will use as a guide to prioritize actions and fundraising to help protect this historic building and our historic collections.

Links to Key Participants:

Newport Restoration Foundation- www.newportrestoration.org

Landmark Facilities Group- https://www.lfginc.com/

Project Origins and Goals

The Samuel Whitehorne House was NRF’s first museum and was, in many ways a passion project of our founder, Doris Duke. Ms. Duke purchased the Whitehorne House, a Federal Period brick mansion, in 1969, and by 1971, the house is mentioned as “our future museum” in the annual meeting minutes of the board. In its early days, the Whitehorne House Museum served as a fairly traditional house museum. In the mid-2010s, however, the staff held a number of programs and charrettes to gather feedback from scholars, museum professionals, and the public about Whitehorne’s collection and its museum experience. Through this process, NRF staff determined that the museum’s furniture collection was by far the most significant component of its collection. Our collection includes works by several members of the Townsend and Goddard families, the premiere names in the creation of Newport furniture, as well as by other well-known, lesser-known, and anonymous joiners, cabinetmakers, and
other craftsmen from 18th-century Newport. Our collection is also recognized as an important resource for scholars and furniture enthusiasts alike. Indeed, many of our pieces (70 at present) are catalogued in Yale University’s important Rhode Island Furniture Archive (https://rifa.art.yale.edu/index.htm).

In 2017, the museum closed for two years, as staff and others began plans for a new Whitehorne House Museum that focused on its furniture collection as well as telling the histories of the people who made these pieces and the whole furniture industry of Colonial era Newport itself. Whitehorne House reopened to the public in May of 2019 as the only museum in the world that focused on Newport furniture, craft, and design. At that time, NRF’s new Director of Museums (Erik Greenberg, Ph.D.) began an assessment of the museum’s needs and goals. After just a little research it became clear that while the museum’s average temperatures and relative humidity (RH) fell within acceptable ranges, both measures also experienced wide fluctuations (which are significant threats to the collection’s stability). It lacked any security cameras and at the time had only one of its two major sites of egress armed with alarms. Additionally, the museum’s storage area on the third floor lacked any climate control, security systems, or even storage equipment. These vulnerabilities led to NRF’s application to NEH’s Sustaining Cultural Heritage Collections Grant to fund a study of the museum’s physical and systems’ needs.

To be sure, NRF had undertaken previous studies in the past, but those inquiries resulted primarily in interpretive recommendations with little or no focus on the physical needs of a museum. Throughout the grant application process and during the hiring of our research team we made clear that we had an exceptional interpretive team at the museum and had no interest in a report about how to best exhibit our pieces. Similarly, we insisted to our contractors that any report had do more than just describe the problems we were facing. In the initial meeting with the team in December of 2020, the Director of Museums made clear that any report that failed to include actionable recommendations would be considered unacceptable.
Project Activities, Team, and Participants

As noted above, the project began with a kickoff meeting on Zoom, during which we laid out our expectations. This was followed by a few conversations with contractors on the team and then by visits to the Whitehorne House Museum by members of the project team (participants listed below). Through e-mail, NRF was in contact with contractors, sharing files and other information as needed, and after careful examination of the property, the team members each wrote drafts of their reports, which were compiled and edited by Tom Newbold at Landmark Facilities Group. NRF staff participating in the project (i.e., the Director of Preservation, Director of Museums, Senior Curator and Executive Director) reviewed three separate drafts of the report and made suggestions and requests, most of which asked for greater clarity with respect to recommendations, and the final draft was agreed to in early April of 2022. Below is a list of activities and their dates, as well as team members.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activities</th>
<th>Date</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Project Kickoff Meeting on Zoom</td>
<td>12/15/2020</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contractor visits to the Whitehorne House Museum</td>
<td>5/17-5/18 2021</td>
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<tr>
<td>NRF receives first draft of report and begins review. We made several recommendations for edits and additional details in the weeks following receipt of the report.</td>
<td>9/17/2021</td>
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<tr>
<td>NRF receives second draft of report.</td>
<td>2/12/2022</td>
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<tr>
<td>NRF receives additional information to draft.</td>
<td>3/30/2022</td>
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<tr>
<td>NRF staff meets with Tom Newbold and approves final draft of the report.</td>
<td>4/4/2022</td>
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Team Members

NRF Team

- **Mark Thompson**, Executive Director of NRF
- **Erik Greenberg, Ph.D.**, Director of Museums, NRF—PROJECT DIRECTOR
- **Alyssa Lozupone**, Director of Preservation, NRF
- **Kristen Costa**, Senior Curator, NRF
- **Alicia Cipriano**, Manager of Development and Donor Relations, NRF
- **Chris Mercer**, Crew Foreman, NRF

Contractors Team

- **Project Lead for Contractors**
  Tom Newbold of Landmark Facilities Group
- **STRUCTURAL**
  Amy Jagaczewski, P.E., Principal
  GN CB Engineers, Old Saybrook, CT
- **SECURITY**
  Tim Siebold
  Seibold Security, Rochester, NY
- **ART CONSERVATION & STORAGE PLANNING**
  Paul Himmelstein
  Appelbaum and Himmelstein, NY, NY

Outcomes

Per our request to NEH, the final outcome of this phase of the project is the completion of an 89-page report that documents in detail the challenges the museum’s exterior shell and interior systems face and how to address them to better protect the collection.
**Project Evaluation and Impact**

The ultimate goal of this project was, in fact, a kind of evaluation of our museum and its ability to protect our artifacts from temperature and relative humidity swings as well as loss through theft or fire. Of equal importance, the information had to have a use beyond simply indicating problems. We required concrete solutions, and we evaluated the findings in its various drafts to assess its applicability.

While we expected a number of issues, we were particularly surprised to learn of water infiltration threats through our masonry and windows, and will have to make these repairs priorities as we prepare for the next steps in this process.

**Project Continuation and Long Term Impact**

NRF entered the NEH grant application process with an understanding that this was the first in a series of steps to stabilize and protect the collections at the Whitehorne House Museum. As we note in our grant application:

A completed plan will serve as a blueprint for all subsequent operations at and fundraising for the Whitehorne House Museum. Once completed, the project team will undertake a comprehensive review of the plan with the leadership team and other staff and board members to determine what projects (based on recommendations and priorities) NRF can undertake on its own, and what projects will need outside, financial support.

Those projects that can be undertaken with existing resources (and with the least disruption to the site) will begin right away. More intrusive but affordable projects will be worked into a long-range calendar that takes account of when the museum is closed and open for the season, as well as any needs for removing and temporarily storing existing collections, and the most costly projects will become the centerpiece of the museum’s fundraising efforts (including seeking an NEH implementation grant).

Our responses to NEH and this White Paper represent the end of this phase of our process.

Next steps will begin sometime in the summer of 2022, as staff will meet to prioritize our list and develop a fundraising tool (either a pamphlet or perhaps additions to our website—or both) to share with philanthropic organizations and the public. We will similarly prioritize repairs based on need. In our recent discussions with Tom Newbold it has become clear that the most advisable way to approach our work is to begin with issues related to the shell and structure of the building (e.g., water infiltration,
improved window installation, etc.) and then move on to systems work once we have stabilized issues related to the building envelope.

Perhaps the greatest challenge will concern collections storage. In his recommendations to NRF, collections consultant Paul Himmelstein has recommended that the institution seek offsite storage for its collections. This makes a lot of sense for many reasons, including space limitations, the absence of climate control on the storage floor, and the increasing number and severity of storms the museum faces as a result of climate change. Whitehorne House Museum is just two blocks from Newport Harbor, and it is extremely vulnerable to increased precipitation. Indeed, this is true of both of NRF’s museums, as our Rough Point facility sits right on the coast of the Atlantic Ocean. In all likelihood, any successful storage plan will require that we move our collections to a climate controlled facility at a greater distance from the water. The acquisition of such a facility will be costly, and its conversion to a collections storage site will cost more still.

Nevertheless, our museums and their collections are well worth the effort. Newport is a fascinating place with a unique relationship to its history (which attracts tourists from all over the world). Whitehorne House pays particular attention to that history through both its collections and the stories we tell about them. We are deeply grateful to the National Endowment for the Humanities for their support, and we look forward to working with them in the future as we take steps to ensure that we sustain our cultural heritage collections.