

By Catherine W. Zipf

Print Page

September 25, 2014 12:01AM

Catherine W. Zipf: Newport takes revolutionary approach toward history

Rhode Island has a lot of historic houses. How many depends on how you count. According to the Rhode Island Historical Society's RHODI project, there are 464 historic organizations that are publicly accessible...

Rhode Island has a lot of historic houses. How many depends on how you count. According to the Rhode Island Historical Society's RHODI project, there are 464 historic organizations that are publicly accessible (rhodi.org). Imagine visiting each one. It would take you more than a year, assuming you could do one per day.

Rhode Island has many historic sites because a lot happened here. Many of these sites were preserved at a time when it was fashionable to create museums out of houses that nobody wanted. As a result, we are particularly rich in historic house museums. In some cases, like The Breakers, these houses were of national significance. But most of the time the significance was purely local. Today, many of these museums are struggling to stay in business, because of declining donations and numbers of visitors.

The problem has not gone unnoticed in preservation circles. An Aug. 9 article ("The great historic house museum debate") in The Boston Globe touched on several sides. Online forums, such as LinkedIn's The Anarchist's Guide to Historic House Museums, tackled the subject in multiple postings. Even the National Trust is taking an interest. All agree that inventive programming is key.



Costumed actors re-enact American history where it actually happened.

With the survival of 464 public historic sites at stake, Rhode Island's historic community has embraced the problem head on.

Recently, the Newport Historical Society hosted a re-enactment of the 1765 Stamp Act riot that blurred the lines between living history and street theater. Centered in historic Washington Square, costumed actors replayed the riot's events as they happened more than 200 years ago. After creating a (real) effigy of Martin Howard and then (pretend) burning it, "rioters" moved to the historic White Horse Tavern for a (not historic) drink, returned to Washington Square, and then ran off to (pretend) loot the house of tax collector and Loyalist (to the King) Martin Howard. The day's events ended in front of the Colony House with a settlement between the parties — and a (not historic) reception.

It was fun. An engaged crowd watched "rioters" argue back and forth as they ran up and down the streets. Howard's effigy was happily pelted with apples. Items from Howard's house were gleefully thrown around the yard and then carried off down the street. And, everything happened in full view of the public.

Some viewers had come expressly to attend the event but many more were taken utterly by surprise. The audience was not a self-selected group whose members had paid admission. It was everyone who happened to be walking down Broadway at about 4 p.m. that Saturday afternoon.

The lack of a pay wall was not the only ground-breaking thing about this event. Newport is blessed with many of its original structures. But it is also blessed with most of its original street pattern. Re-enactment events happened where they had originally happened.

Martin Howard's house is better known as the Wanton-Lyman-Hazard house, but it was where Howard really lived. And one can still get a drink at the White Horse Tavern. But the best part was getting to watch the streets come alive with history. Re-enactors ran up Broadway just as rioters did 239 years ago. It was an unprecedented use of historic public space.

The event was free to the public, but it was not free to the NHS. One hopes that sponsors were found and the costs were covered. But, a far greater payoff lies in bringing Rhode Island's history to life in exciting new ways. Faced with competition ranging from The Disney Corporation to the iPhone, none of which existed when the historic house model was created, historic houses must find new ways to connect with their audiences — or die. This event was an unqualified success.

Historic houses do fail. Magee Farm, in Kushla, Ala., is only the latest casualty. It was there, on April 29, 1865, that Confederate Gen. Richard Taylor and Union Gen. E.R.S. Canby negotiated a ceasefire and surrender one week before the end of the Civil War.

There will surely be others, but hopefully not in Rhode Island. Just as we support other innovative businesses, we must support innovation in the nonprofit historic community. Rhode Island's history is a big part of what makes life in the state unique and enjoyable. Many states have a wonderful waterfront, but only Rhode Island has Rhode Island's history — and Rhode Island's collection of historic sites to show it off.

Catherine W. Zipf, of Bristol, an occasional contributor, is an architectural historian and research scholar at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

<http://www.providencejournal.com/article/20140925/OPINION/309259900>

Print Page