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Dr. Hardy

Pottsgrove Manor Internship Reflection

From May 18, 2015 to August 20, 2015, I interned at local Montgomery County Historical Site, Pottsgrove Manor. A colonial-style Georgian mansion built in 1752 by John Potts as a new home for his family, the town of Pottsgrove (later, Pottstown) grew up around the manor. The Potts family was an influential and successful family in the PA iron industry, before and during the Revolutionary War. After the Revolution, the family sold the house and it changed hands many times in the next two centuries. By the 1950s, the state of Pennsylvania owned the Manor and several restorations took place. In 1988, the state turned over the site to the county of Montgomery, who now holds it.

While at Pottsgrove, I primarily shadowed the curator, Amy Reis, in her day-to-day work. I learned about the ins and outs of working at a historical site, the traits and qualities of many people she had interacted with in the museum industry, her past and present experiences involving the field, and some of the differences between local, state, federal, and private historical sites. In learning about the role of a curator, I followed tours and became proficient at explaining many of the exhibits and rooms on display. I also helped to catalog Pottsgrove's collections inventory. This meant I was allowed to handle historic pieces and assess their condition. In doing so, I learned how to handle objects with care—when to use gloves and when not to, how to lift and move antique furniture, how to handle documents and books that might be deteriorating, and how to tell Pottsgrove's reproduction pieces from their authentic pieces.

I also spent a great deal of time following tours. I shadowed all four full-time staff members as they gave tours to varying age-groups, and I recognized how they tailored the tours they gave to the interests that guests showed, whether the guest was an expert on colonial Pennsylvania or a 5-year-old on a daycare field trip. We also gave tours to Potts descendants from Maryland, although Potts descendants have visited from as far away as Australia. Throughout the tours, I became familiar with the rooms of the house, the stories of many of the family members and the items on display. I became particularly interested in what the staff referred to as the “Potts’ Pieces,” or the actual items owned by the Potts family during their stay at the manor. These were the primary sources that helped me picture what life might have been like for the Potts family. Near the end of my internship, I helped set up a tea party exhibit that showcased the formal parlor of the house. I learned how to clean the rooms also, and we spent a day cleaning out each room by dusting, vacuuming, and scrubbing the windows.

Another large part of my internship was learning the actual histories. The history of the Potts family was the first and most personal history I learned, but I also researched the Pennsylvania Iron Industry, for which I visited nearby Hopewell Furnace (a forge owned and operated by a contemporary rival of the Potts family) and Valley Forge (owned by the Potts family during Washington’s winter encampment). Additionally, I learned a good deal about the manor itself, the history of the house after leaving the Potts family, and the history of Pottstown as it grew out of the manor as the central fixture. In tying all of these together, I also researched colonial Pennsylvania and in particular, medicine practiced here during and before the Revolution. Similarly, I researched the ideas of loyalism and patriotism in Pennsylvania leading up to the Revolution and how the political atmosphere changed over time. Being as wealthy and influential as it was, The Potts family was right in the center of all of these issues.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, I was able to forge a bond with all of the staff members at the site. I enjoyed having discussions about many historical topics with other members and

volunteers and I was able to learn as much from them as through my own research. Additionally, I was able to talk to staff members about their experiences working in this field, their own internship(s), and any advice or suggestions for prospective museum workers. I was often praised for my professionalism and treated with respect and trust, often being allowed to catalog the items on my own after I had demonstrated an understanding and care for the objects. I participated in several special events held onsite, and conversed with volunteers and guests while in colonial garb, and I learned some colonial games and pastimes.

The internship I had at Pottsgrove Manor was a valuable experience for many reasons. Firstly, I learned more about the jobs available in the museum world. Secondly, I expanded my knowledge in both colonial and local history. Finally, I made a lasting impact on the people I interacted with, and can certainly use Pottsgrove as a reference if I ever look for work in the museum field. All of these improvements helped to make Pottsgrove an enjoyable and valuable life experience, and all of them helped me to think critically in a physical and tangible environment, and not simply in the classroom setting.