Intern Experience Blog

This summer, I interned at the Historical Society of Princeton, a transformative experience that changed how I view the place I have called home for the past several years. Born and raised in Manhattan before moving to Princeton in middle school, I have always noticed the stark contrast between the two. In New York, history felt inseparable from the city itself; the streets, buildings, and neighborhoods vividly carried the stories of those who came before me. Princeton was different. Although I knew its streets and its Revolutionary War significance from daily life, I rarely stopped to consider the deeper history beneath the surface. My time at HSP made me realize that knowing a place well is not the same as truly grasping its history.

The most meaningful aspect of my internship has been learning from my mentor, Cindy Srnka, and observing how she brings Princeton's intricate past to life through her captivating museum tours. I was continually awestruck by how much I had never noticed. As she explained the histories behind buildings, objects, and landmarks, familiar parts of Princeton began to take on an entirely different significance. I uncovered details about Princeton University that I never would have encountered otherwise—from the witty, captivating stories behind local architecture to the hidden meanings of emblems I had passed countless times without a second thought. Buildings that once seemed like ordinary backdrops suddenly revealed layers of history, connection, and purpose. Ultimately, I began to understand that merely knowing a place and truly *seeing* it are two very different things

That realization directly shaped the projects I undertook throughout the summer, shifting my role from a passive observer of history to an active storyteller. One of my primary responsibilities involved working closely alongside Cindy and Ximena Calle to develop a bilingual walking tour for Princeton's Spanish-speaking community. We quickly realized that this project required far more than a literal translation of existing scripts. To make the tour authentic, we had to bridge cultural narratives; exploring how local history, ecology, and community identity intersect for residents who might otherwise feel excluded from the town's traditional, university-centric narrative. Wrestling with how to contextualize historical jargon and ensure diverse voices felt genuinely represented broadened my understanding of true accessibility.

I also worked on HSP's history and nature programming, including a collaboration with Friends of Herrontown Woods. Through researching Oswald Veblen and the history surrounding the Veblen House, I gained a deeper appreciation for the ways in which Princeton's natural, architectural, scientific, and intellectual histories intersect. A trail through the woods or an historic house can appear to be an ordinary part of the landscape, but understanding the people, ideas, and events connected to it can transform the experience entirely. The more I researched, the more I found myself wondering how many other stories were waiting to be uncovered in places I had encountered countless times before.

One of my favorite components of my internship allowed me to experience historical research on a much smaller scale. Through an independent research exercise, I investigated a historical book containing handwritten notes and ownership inscriptions. What initially appeared to be a handful of

names and markings became an opportunity to investigate the life of the individual who had once owned and interacted with the book. It demonstrated to me that historical research does not always begin with a major discovery. Sometimes, a handwritten inscription, an overlooked architectural detail, or a single name in an archival record can serve as the first thread in a much larger story.

That is what Princeton history means to me now. It is not simply a collection of prominent figures, institutions, and events. It exists embedded within details that surround us: in the buildings we pass without a second thought, the plaques we never before stopped to look at, the books preserved in an archive, and the landscapes that have witnessed generations of change. History is not necessarily something we have to travel somewhere to find or read about in a textbook. I have experienced firsthand how it is already present in the places we know best; we simply have to learn how to recognize it.

My internship at HSP has given me the opportunity not only to learn Princeton's history, but also to understand the work involved in bringing that history to a wider community. I have learned how research becomes interpretation, how interpretation can become a tour or public program, and how those experiences can foster a deeper connection between people and the places they call home. Most importantly, I have learned to approach familiar places with greater curiosity.

As I begin my senior year at Princeton High, I know I will continue to experience Princeton differently than I did before this summer. For future students considering an internship at the Historical Society of Princeton, I cannot recommend the experience highly enough. It is a rare opportunity to move beyond simply studying history and instead participate in the process of discovering, interpreting, and sharing it. More than an introduction to Princeton's past, my internship at HSP has been an invitation to look more closely at my own community; and to recognize just how much history can be found in the places we call home.