

The Castle Chronicle

Vol.4 Issue 1

Letter from the President by Chet Browning

Dear Cocumscussoc Association members:

The President's Message for this issue will be brief in content but high in confidence that "we will persevere." The current COVID-19 pandemic has caused the entire world to stop normal activities and lifestyles. Smith's Castle has become a part of this reality with operations halted as we await a cure for the virus or a vaccine.

Because of CDC and Rhode Island Department of Health regulations Smith's Castle and the Association's administrative office in the annex have been shuttered due to restrictions limiting the gathering of only two persons (recently raised to five) at one location. The recent addition of face masks to be worn in public further limits interaction with visitors.

Our schedule of activities and events for 2020 are currently canceled; however officers and staff continue to work on funding, and plans once we reopen our doors. We have been diligently looking for alternate funds to sustain operations. We have applied for and are awaiting confirmation of two COVID-19 grants to assist our budgetary needs. Our Sites and Grounds Committee has been successful in obtaining a construction grant for repairs to the annex.

Our Office Manager/Bookkeeper has graciously agreed to take a 75% pay cut for the time being. We still hope to host a Funny4Funds event in the fall, and our "Christmas at the Castle" to close the year. Our Committees and members continue to work outside on the grounds in preparation for visitors. Our Publicity Committee is preparing media activities announcing our reopening; our Docent leaders are currently training new volunteers for Castle tours.

We will open down the road. We plan to continue our efforts to educate the public to our historic site. I ask our members to be mindful of any sources which can assist the Association in completing our mission.

Restrictions Revive Interest in Outside Attractions

The weeks we've had to stay at home and restrict our activity to solitary walks have meant the cancellations of opening weekend and Strawberry Festival as well as a delay in opening the Castle for tours. But that hasn't meant that the flow of visitors to Cocumscussoc has ceased. The silver lining for many in these difficult times has been the sheer beauty of the property around our historic house museum.

In these past weeks, when I've come to work in the Annex library or to maintain the trails, I've noticed a good number of visitors coming as they always do, to bask in the sun with a view of the peaceful cove, if only for a little while. Others come, even before the bloom, to have a look at the colonial gardens, and perhaps ponder what they might do at home. I've noticed dog-walkers and whole families taking advantage of the trails we have open. As with my grandchildren, such a nature walk is one of the few remaining activities a family can still do together. One day after meeting a few of these visitors, I went home and posted our motto for these times: "Keep Calm and Come to Cocumscussoc"

As we look forward to reopening, we can be thankful that we have these outside attractions, and lookin back on these times, to realize what an asset they can be for the visitor experience at Cocumscussoc.. A new path has been blazed along the remains of an old stone wall that bordered an 18th century orchard. The "Orchard Wall" path will have a corresponding sign to present the historical significance, and the environmental changes -the path uncovered a small, growing grove of holly bushes-that have occurred on the landscape.

A generous donation from the Society of Colonial Wars will allow us to restore the punt on the north lawn, and construct some time of shelter for the restored boat, and another sign to educate visitors about the historical use of punts in a setting such as the trading post, and the history of the maker and the punt's use during Castle festivals in earlier days.

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1772 Foundation Grant Approved, Other Plans Moving Ahead

by Denise Boule

The Cocumscussoc Association has been awarded a 1772 Foundation Preserve Rhode Island Historic Matching Grant to fund the roof and gutter replacement for the historic “Annex” building. Although this proposed project to replace the roof and gutters of the “Annex” building stands alone, it is an important element of the Association’s long-term, four-part plan to upgrade its site facilities and programming to better serve the community.

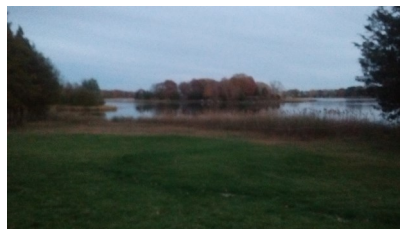
1)The first part of this plan, the “Smith’s Castle Exterior Preservation Project,” was completed in 2017 and focused on painting and exterior repairs to the Castle, including a new roof. The work was funded with support from the Champlin Foundation and RIHPHC.

(2)The second part focuses on the Annex building, which houses the Association’s administrative functions, library and archives, and provides meeting and preparation space for the Association’s active programming. The outside of this building is in immediate need of repair and it is important to insure its exterior integrity before we proceed with renovations to the interior space. We will focus first on replacing the roof and gutters, which is the focus of our present grant request to the 1772 Foundation

The next priority will be exterior painting and surface repair. We have worked with architect J. Michael Abbot, Principal Architect, Northeast Collaborative, who has drawn up preliminary design plans for interior renovation, which will include public/handicap access restrooms, upgrade of building systems (electrical, mechanical, plumbing), and the re-design of interior space to better accommodate the Association’s administrative and programming functions. We are presently seeking funds to support this interior renovation.

(3)The third part of the long-term plan focuses on improvements to the Post Road entrance to the property, parking, traffic flow, and water management in consideration of climate change issues. Preliminary plans for this segment of the plan were initially drawn in collaboration with the Landscape Architecture Program at the University of Rhode Island and RICRMC. These plans have been revised by DiPrete Engineering, Cranston, RI, and will be used in a capital campaign to fund this project

(4)Our major programming initiative focuses on the intersection between cultural and environmental history.



The Cocumscussoc Association is fortunate to be custodian of an important historic house planted on a site that gives evidence of the many changes wrought by centuries of human habitation by indigenous peoples and by generations of European colonists and their descendants. Environmental professionals at Rhode Island Resource Management Council (CRMC) have stated that this 23-acre property is the most interesting coastal site on Narragansett Bay, due to the unusual number of ecosystems—fresh and saltwater wetlands, upland vegetation, a seasonal water feature, a freshwater spring, and an island. Traditionally, interpretation of the site has focused on the historical Castle structure to the exclusion of the surrounding property because of a lack of access to interior spaces. In the past several years, with the help of the Boy Scouts and a Certified Local Government grant (CLG), trails have been cleared to provide access, and interpretive signage and a brochure (Cocumscussoc: an evolving landscape, 2018) have been developed to illuminate the built and natural features of this varied landscape. The Graham Garden, a colonial revival garden established in 1953 by Irmgard Graham and cared for by the University of Rhode Island Master Gardeners, is not only a beautiful addition to our landscape, but is the focus of the Gardeners’ public education program. Please reach out to Denise M. Boule at dbouleb@aol.com and Susan Danforth at susandanforth82@gmail.com Co-Chairs of the Grant and Site Committee, if you have any questions and/or concerns.



Slave Monument to Be Dedicated on Castle Grounds

By Robert A. Geake

The long-awaited slave monument from the Rhode Island Slave History Monument Project is set to be delivered to the Castle this spring.

By agreement of members of the Executive Committee and the Grounds and Site Committee, the boulder with brass engraved plaque will be set at the area where the path leading to the back entrance of the house and the front diverge,

This small, triangular area before a lilac bush at the northwest corner of the house, sits below the room which we will dedicate this year as a “slave bedroom” to acknowledge and tell the story of the domestic slaves in the house during the Updike era.

A dedication of the monument was originally scheduled to be part of our Opening Day celebration, but is now rescheduled for October 10, 2020.

The monument will be on the Castle grounds during the season, and visitors with smart-phone capability may access a QR code which will give the narrative of the slave history at Cocumscussoc.

This narrative was written over the past two years by members of the Education Committee, who will continue to add information for RISHM’s web page in the future.

The expense of the monument is being paid for by private donations. A “Go Fund Me” site was set up by Vice-President Bob Geake, and private donations through this and other sources currently amount to \$750 of the \$1500 needed to complete the installation.

Charles Roberts, the president of RISHM has been active himself in fundraising for the project. In meeting with the Education Committee last February, he stressed the value he placed on the history we hold at Smith’s Castle, and the presentation of that history by our docents in tours, and our other activities.

It is our hope that in dedicating the slave bedroom in the Castle, and having the monument on the grounds will achieve the presentation of a fuller history of the Castle during its plantation era.

In future presentations we hope to tell visitors the lives, as best we can, of some of those enslaved at the Castle.

Such exhibits will attract more school visits, and scholarly notice for potential seminars and historical presentations.

Docents to “Distance Learn” until Opening

Docent training coordinators Joyce Fuller and Marilyn Harris faced a unique challenge this year. Heading into the planned annual docent training at the Castle, the women expected a dozen docents to be to attend the planned five-week training session before this year’s opening weekend. Of course the pandemic changed all plans for the Castle, and other house museums preparing to open for the season.

As we began to realize that the “stay at home” orders would be a prolonged event, the ladies coordinated a program of distance learning for the new volunteers. Marilyn sent out materials for home study over the course of the weeks, as well as coordinating mentors for each new docent to communicate with during this time away from the Castle.

Later this month, online Zoom sessions will begin, with presenters sharing online discussions about the history of the house, the lands of Cocumscussoc, and the people that lived and worked on the plantation and farm for more than a century. With the dedication of a slave bedroom in the house, the slave narrative that has always been part of the docent presentation will be allowed to be expanded, and at the same time focused on one material place in the house, though we know, and will share with visitors the many capacities they held within the household.



Around and About Smith's Castle

We hope to have a schedule of events posted by June, as we learn what the allowed capacity will be for attendees of events. Tours will be managed efficiently, but we may have to limit attendance at planned talks, teas, and our colonial dinner planned for October.

For updated information go to our website at www.smithscastle.org
