



December 29, 2020

Dear Colleagues,

The Newport Restoration Foundation (NRF) is pleased to submit a proposal for the Decorative Arts Trust's (DAT) IDEAL internship program for the 2021 season. Our proposed program will extend an internship invitation to one undergraduate student from an underrepresented community to gain experience in the fields of museum practice and decorative arts scholarship. This opportunity will provide an introduction to and experience in decorative arts interpretation and museum work, while simultaneously supporting the intern with a mentorship network of museum professionals of color and exposing them to various types of museum work and experience in Rhode Island and the Massachusetts South Coast. NRF requests funding from the DAT in the amount of \$5,000 to support this effort.

NRF oversees three museum sites—Doris Duke's summer home, Rough Point, Prescott Farm, an historic farm site in Middletown, RI, and the Whitehorne House Museum (WHM), the only museum in the world dedicated solely to the exploration and exhibition of 18<sup>th</sup>-century Newport furniture and associated crafts and design work. All three museums, and indeed all NRF properties, sit on the ancestral homelands of the Narragansett people. The internship will focus primarily on work and research related to WHM and will include, among other partnerships, regular engagement with the Narragansett.

1. Diversity at NRF

As with so many museums in America, the staff at NRF is not particularly diverse. We are a small organization of 27 full-time staff and, therefore, the three staff members of color on our team represent a little more than 10% of the NRF staff. While we do not have a Diversity Officer on staff, our Human Resources Administrator has taken diversity training as part of her ongoing professional development.

As DAT notes in the funding description, it is critical that any DEI internship be led to some extent by colleagues of color. We believe that any intern of color might find the lack of diversity on our museum team to be alienating, and so we have put together a network of three mentors, all of whom are museum professionals and/or scholars of color who frequently work with NRF's museum team. These colleagues have helped plan the program, and the IDEAL intern will spend about 30% of their internship meeting with and learning from these local leaders in the fields of museum work and public history, visiting their museums, receiving advice and support on navigating the world of museum work, and receiving feedback on their capstone projects.

*Museum Staff Involved in the Project:*

Erik Greenberg, Ph.D. Director of Museums

Kristen Costa, Senior Curator

Gina Tangorra, Manager of Interpretation and Visitor Experience

Caitlyn Sellar, Manager of Education and Public Engagement

*Mentor Support Network:*

Theresa (Soni) Guzman Stokes—Director, Rhode Island Black Heritage Foundation

Akeia de Barros Gomes, Ph.D.—Curator of Social History, New Bedford Whaling Museum

Lorén Spears— (Narragansett/Niantic)—Executive Director, Tomaquag Museum

**Newport Restoration Foundation**

51 Touro Street, Newport, RI 02840

[www.newportrestoration.org](http://www.newportrestoration.org)

## 2. Internship Marketing (Feeder School)

NRF will be recruiting an intern from Rhode Island College (RIC) through our partnership with the Rhode Island Black Heritage Foundation (RIBH). RIBH has recently reached an agreement with RIC to locate their archives at the college and develop a program on the history of people of African descent in Rhode Island. Some 39% of the school's undergraduate population is comprised of students from communities currently underrepresented in the field of museums. RIBH will also provide research materials for the intern's capstone project.

## 3. Timing, Duration and Fund Dispersal

The internship will last ten weeks and can take place any time during WHM's projected seasonal opening and closing period (late May through mid-October). The intern will work 35 hours a week either onsite at the Whitehorne House Museum, Rough Point, or at the work sites of our mentor network. NRF has an existing budget for an intern salary of \$14.50 an hour, a 38% increase over state minimum wage. Any funds from the Decorative Arts Trust or other sources will help us raise the intern rate to \$15.25 an hour, support travel for the intern (tolls, mileage, etc.), and, of great importance, help provide honoraria for our mentor network. We believe that our mentors will be critical to the intern's success and to NRF's future DEI work. It is essential that we provide substantial honoraria to recognize their value and support the hours they set aside from their own work to help in this important project. At present, we estimate spending approximately \$1,000 per mentor, either as a direct payment or as a donation to their organizations.

## 4. Capstones and Outcomes

The intern's capstone project will engage with NRF's collection of 18<sup>th</sup>-century furniture at our Whitehorne House Museum. As the readers may know, the historical record makes clear the presence of African-Heritage craftspeople (both enslaved and free) as well as Narragansett peoples within the 18<sup>th</sup>-century Newport economy, but the current sources do not point to specific contributions of people of color in the creation of 18<sup>th</sup>-century furniture. The intern will work with the interpretive staff and our network of mentors to consider how one addresses these absences in the historical record for the public while still pointing to the presence and likely contribution of people of color to Colonial Era Newport's material culture. The intern will also use the Rhode Island Black Heritage Foundation's archives to learn more about African heritage craftspeople in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries to consider the historical continuities concerning the contributions of makers of color in Newport. The end result of this work will be a public-facing project, either the creation of a small panel exhibition that will be in dialogue with our collection, or the interpretation of one specific piece in our collection. The project will be shared on our social media accounts, and via an intern blogpost.

Additionally, the intern will learn about a broad array of museum practices and professions by assisting in the onsite interpretation of WHM, attending and/or working on our public programming, and through shadowing NRF museum staff and our network of mentors.

Finally, NRF intends to ask this intern (and subsequent interns who take part in this program) to become a part of our mentor network to help the next DEI intern at NRF. In this way, the program will train a cohort of diverse interns in the practices of museum work *and* create a network of diverse college students and graduates to support each other as they enter into the fields of museum work, education,



and other related fields. Naturally, we believe our network of museum professionals will also help support and mentor our intern after the completion of the program as well, but it we believe it is equally important to create a support network of emerging professionals in the region.

Evaluation will be multi-faceted and ongoing and will include an exit interview with the intern, feedback from our mentor network, the success in having former interns join the mentorship network, and, in future years, anonymous surveys to assess the program's success over time.

#### 5. NRF's Current Status on Inclusivity and DEI Internships

This is the first effort at DEI internship planned at NRF, and that fact reflects the recent onboarding of most of its institutional leadership. Over the past three years, the organization has hired a new Executive Director, a new Director of Preservation, three new managers of museum departments, and a new Director of Museums. All of these new leaders have a particular interest in making NRF more responsive to the needs of the community and to considering new approaches to the absence of a diverse and inclusive cultural landscape in and around Newport and in the museum world in general.

In some sense, the conversation about equity and diversity at NRF began in early 2019. In that year, the museum staff worked with Keith and Soni Stokes (current leaders of the Rhode Island Black Heritage Foundation and founders of the 1696 Heritage Group) to create a pop-up exhibition and associated programming on African heritage craftspeople in Newport at the Whitehorne House Museum. That same year we began discussions with Newport's Martin Luther King, Jr. Center (MLK) on community programming, and with Tomaquag Museum on including Native voice at NRF's Prescott Farm and on land acknowledgement practices across the organization. Additionally, our Director of Museums has had discussions with our Executive Director and the Chair of NRF's Collections Committee about transforming NRF's existing internship into a DEI program.

Other conversations began in response to the death of George Floyd and the subsequent Black Lives Matter protests across the country. As museums across the country expressed solidarity with the movement through very public statements, NRF staff debated the best way for a largely white and privileged organization to address equity and inclusion in our museums, especially. Ultimately, this led to discussions with staff members of color and an institutional belief that actions (like the creation of this DEI internship) would matter more than public proclamations. After all, it is very easy to claim allyship with marginalized communities, but genuine change is much harder and requires much deeper commitments.

The above conversations and projects are important, but they do little to create a more diverse museum workforce. Consequently, this program is part of a developing awareness of and nascent investment in DEI work at NRF. It will represent a dramatic improvement in our DEI work and a recognition that building capacity among up and coming students of color and those from other underrepresented communities in museum work and academic discourse is essential to the future equity, humanity, and health of the field of museum work.

#### 6. Fostering Conversations on Equity and Inclusivity

One of the central ways in which this program can foster conversations on equity and inclusivity is through feedback from and engagement with our mentor network. No doubt, we will want feedback and critique from our intern as well, and welcome those conversations (even difficult conversations).

Still, regardless of how open NRF staff may be to those discussions, we know that the power imbalance inherent in the intern/employer relationship may hinder fully open communication. And numerous accounts from museum professionals of color makes clear how hard it has been for them to express their sense of frustration and marginalization especially when they are/were junior staff or interns. While we are not suggesting that our mentors alone will speak for the intern, their commitment to this program as well as their position outside the institution will allow them to express themselves in ways that a young, undergraduate may not feel at leave to do.

#### 7. Why NRF is Interested in This Opportunity

As we have noted at other points in this application, NRF has already planned to move forward with a DEI internship, but we believed that the funds available in our budget are not sufficient to undertake the kind of robust and sound program necessary to make a DEI intern feel fully comfortable and supported. Funds from DAT's IDEAL internship initiative would help us undertake precisely the kinds of practices we had hoped to engage in (most notably, more equitable intern pay, support for intern expenses and support for a network of prominent and engaged mentors). We will almost certainly undertake a pared down version of this program if we cannot obtain additional funds, but we believe that the plan laid out in this application represents best practices for this type of work, and we would prefer to do our work in this way.

The program we have laid out will be part of an ongoing project, and as such will transform NRF by creating a diverse pool of future candidates for positions on the museum side of the institution as they become available (ranging from front of house interpreters to future education, programs, and curatorial staff). It will also help expand NRF's engagement with the community into Rhode Island College, help deepen our relationship with the Rhode Island Black Heritage Foundation, and help build capacity among a future cohort of diverse museum professionals.

#### 8. Other Pertinent Information

As we note in item five, NRF's commitment to the community has grown with the arrival of its new leadership. Still, it is important to note that the people who oversee this work are not strangers to community engagement or DEI work. In particular, our Director of Museums, Dr. Erik Greenberg, has had more than two decades of experience working in communities of color. His experience includes working extensively with many of California's Native communities and students from Southern California's diverse school districts, and with the Getty Multicultural Internship program. He consistently hired first generation college students from California State University, Los Angeles (where the majority of the student body are students of color) to work in the education department at the Autry Museum of the American West.

While NRF's commitment to DEI work is comparatively new, that newness does not reflect the demonstrated credentials of its staff to undertake a successful and sustained DEI internship program.