

A 'magical' place steeped in the past

The Museum of Primitive Art And Culture in Peace Dale marks 125th anniversary

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The Museum of Primitive Art and Culture in Peace Dale.
Photos: Michael Derr

Dark and mysterious, the room is at once comforting and curious. It's certainly not what one would expect to find at the end of a second-story hallway in an old mill building in the village of Peace Dale.

Spacious, with filtered light, stucco walls, elegantly shaped windows and wooden ceiling beams, the room is a gallery housing cases and cases of ancient artifacts. With two canoes suspended from the ceiling, along with several, rather large, mounted animal heads, it's hard for a visitor to know where to look first. However, in this room, time is at a standstill, and not of the essence; leisure and imagination can take precedence.

Such is the atmosphere of the Museum of Primitive Art And Culture, which is celebrating its 125th anniversary this year. On a recent afternoon, Sarah Turnbaugh, past president of the museum; Lisa Fiore, current board president; Mary Brown, trustee and education coordinator; and Louise Weaver, a recent trustee and longtime administrative assistant, gathered to discuss the history of the space and the awe it inspires in each of them.

"Everyone who comes in here feels the spirituality of the room," said Fiore, who grew up in the Oaks neighborhood of Peace Dale and said the museum inspired her to study anthropology and history at the University of Rhode Island.

"[There is] a synergy and positiveness to this place," said Turnbaugh adding, "it's like the collection in the room finds the right people" to take care of it and ensure its future.

The museum was founded in 1892 by Roland Gibson Hazard II. The product of eight generations of Hazards in southern Rhode Island, his family established and operated the Peace Dale Manufacturing Co. textile mills, beginning in 1804. The village of Peace Dale is named for his great-grandmother, Mary Peace Hazard. Hazard succeeded his father as company president in 1898.

Turnbaugh, an anthropologist, along with her husband, William A. Turnbaugh, a professor of anthropology at the University of Rhode Island, authored "The Nineteenth-Century American Collector: A Rhode Island Perspective," which explains that Hazard maintained an "avid amateur interest in both ornithology and archaeology" throughout his life. The creation of the

museum stemmed from his personal involvement in archaeology and anthropology, and a desire to showcase artifacts in his collection.

These objects were first housed in the Hazard Memorial building, presently the Peace Dale Library, across the street from the current museum. This building was built by the Hazard family with the idea of creating a community space for the mill workers living in the village, and included a library, several classrooms and a 700-seat music hall. It was officially dedicated in 1891, and in 1892, Roland Gibson Hazard II, then president of the Narragansett Library Association, solicited donations of “Indian antiques to be displayed in a proposed ‘Arrow-head Room’” in the library.

According to the Turnbaughs, many area residents responded, primarily with “small white quartz or green-grey slate projectile points from nearby farms and shores.” These objects, along with others, were displayed in cases around the reading room. And although they didn’t know it at the time, this display was the foundation of the museum.

In 1894, Hazard issued another call for artifacts, which yielded objects from “other parts of the nation and several cultures of the Old World.” Hazard’s personal and professional interests also enabled him to travel around the country, as well as throughout Europe and to the Near East, which allowed him to add to his own collection. His primary focus, however, remained on objects reflective of the local native population.

Over time, as the collection grew, there were more objects to be displayed in the reading room than there was space available. Certain items were stored in the building’s basement. In all, more than 80 donors – from family friends to mill workers – contributed to the original collection.

“Those objects are still largely intact in this collection,” Sarah Turnbaugh said.

Hazard died of a heart attack at age 63 in 1918, leaving behind instructions that his collection be housed in a new, designated building. His wife, Mary Pierrepont Bushnell Hazard, saw this dream to fruition, marking the beginning of a history of women preserving the museum's collection.

Mary Hazard decided on the museum's current location in the Peace Dale Office Building, which was built in 1856 and originally called the Peace Dale House. The building was initially

the family's company store and a dormitory to house single women mill workers – literally “spinsters” – along with the village post office and a public assembly hall. The current museum gallery occupies what once were two floors of the dormitory.

“Museums were just starting to become a thing,” Brown said. Turnbaugh noted that the industrial recreational movement also started in the Peace Dale Office Building, before moving to the nearby Neighborhood Guild building, erected in the early 1900s.

Brown said Peace Dale and the Hazard family were “very progressive, and way ahead of the time.” Mary Hazard, Turnbaugh added, “deserves more credit than she's ever gotten for perpetuating the museum.”

Mary Hazard hired the Boston architecture firm Perry, Shaw and Hepburn – which had been enlisted by John D. Rockefeller Jr. to oversee the restoration of Colonial Williamsburg – to renovate the building and create a gallery space.

The space was designed in the Southwestern Spanish mission style, which reflects the arts and crafts movement of the time. Mary Hazard, Turnbaugh said, was “right on the cutting edge, right on the cusp of the wave” of that design movement. Arnold Lumber was hired for the project, and more than a ton of plaster was used to create adobe-style interiors walls.

By mid-1930, the room was finished, and artifacts were transferred from the reading room to the new gallery space. To ensure they were properly displayed, Ronald L. Olson, an associate of the American Museum of Natural History in New York, came to Peace Dale to professionally arrange the exhibits.

Now, the room itself is an artifact. Registered in 2004 as an interior on the National Register of Historic Places, the gallery has stayed true to its original design and organization, and so represents a “history of a history museum,” Brown said.

“[It reflects] how a 19th century collector displayed his curiosities from the world,” she added.

The collection has grown since the 19th century, with items added from African, Asian and North American cultures. The room has been modified slightly to accommodate modern electrical wiring, and the windows have been replaced.

In 1983, the Hazard family sold the building to the town of South Kingstown and incorporated the museum into a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization, relinquishing its remaining interests in the village of Peace Dale. As part of the terms of sale, a 99-year lease from the town was agreed upon for use of the gallery room. Additionally, the museum occupies a few other rooms in the building for office and educational space, which are rented at a reduced rate from the town. The museum currently has a membership base of about 350 people.

Among the objects at the museum are pieces from William Phillips Blake's collection, which Turnbaugh described as "remarkable." They include items from the French caves of Lascaux.

"It's very rare to have materials from these caves anywhere in the country," she said.

Blake was a territorial geologist from Arizona, who lived in the West "when it was really wild," Turnbaugh said. He is also an ancestor of Turbaugh.

The oldest artifact in the room was donated by Paul Able, a professor of geology at URI. After a lecture some years ago, he dropped into Turnbaugh's hand a primitive chopping tool that originated in Olduvai Gorge, East Africa, and dates back 1.8 millions years.

"That tool is an example of the oldest man-made tools known," Turnbaugh said, pointing to the relatively small item in one of the museum's many glass display cases. When it was handed to her, she said, "My chin dropped to the floor." Able, she added, was with Mary Leakey when they discovered the footsteps of Lucy, the oldest human ancestor ever discovered.

"Every object here has a story – like a library," said Brown, who noted artifacts range from bows and arrows similar to those used by Katniss Everdeen, heroine of "The Hunger Games" series; obsidian blades like the ones used in the "Minecraft" video games; and moccasins believed to have been made for the legendary Sitting Bull.

"It's really a beautiful room, magical really," said Fiore, who recalls visiting the space as a young girl and being in awe of its size. "To be in this special place was really just amazing."

Brown organizes the museum's educational programming, which includes a yearly field trip for third-graders in South Kingstown. The museum also offers programs for adults, and will be hosting two lectures this fall, both donation-based.

The museum is a grassroots organization, relying on volunteers and grant funding. It has a small education endowment from the Rhode Island Foundation. Its largest fundraising event of the year – “Trash or Treasure” – will be held Saturday at The Dunes Club in Narragansett.

The museum is open to the public Wednesdays from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. For more information about the organization and its upcoming events, visit primitiveartmuseum.org.

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