

SEMO Students Spend Part Of Summer Giving Ste. Genevieve Museum A Facelift



Each spring, the Ste. Genevieve Museum gets a little facelift courtesy of the Southeast Missouri State University Historic Preservation Program

Professor Steven Hoffman brought 15 students to town during the final two weeks of May for a Field School program, which gives the students hands-on experience in a variety of areas.

One of the projects involves three days spent at the museum, rearranging displays and adding informational labels for the artifacts.

“The people of Ste. Genevieve have done a fabulous job collecting artifacts and displaying them and preserving them,” Hoffman, coordinator of the Historic Preservation Program, said. “What we do in our field school is bring some of our technical expertise and our youthful enthusiasm and give the displays a sharper interpretive focus.”

The Field School is part of the summer pre-session and is offered as a historic preservation elective.

Hoffman said the school focuses on two areas: interpretation and documentation. The class works with Jim Baker, president of the Friends of Ste. Genevieve Museum, to organize educational opportunities in Ste. Genevieve during the two weeks.

“We work very closely with Jim Baker and his staff, and we think about the interpretive focus of historic sites and

museums,” Hoffman said. “We spend a day physically touring with him at the Bauvais-Amoureux House and the Felix Valle House, and then the second day we tour all of the other historic sites in town, and we get a sense of what is their interpretive plan and how they all work together.”

For the documentation elements, students participate in a measured drawings workshop as well as a photo workshop before working on documentation in those methods. This year, they did measured drawings on the Kiel-Schwent House.

They also did a Sanborn Map exercise. The Sanborn Maps originally were used for fire insurance purposes but the detail and accuracy have made them a valuable part of preservation efforts.

“The students go out and compare how the town has changed in the last 100 years, what’s still here in terms of fabric and what’s missing, how it has changed,” Hoffman said. “The Sanborn Map is a really good source for that.”

The students also get hands-on experience with a restoration workshop involving Durand Cabin on the Bequette-Ribault House property.

Hoffman said the Field School has been coming to Ste. Genevieve since the late 1990s with the exception of a couple of years when the coordinator duties were in transition.

The Ste. Genevieve Museum project, he said, is incremental. A few of the cases are identified each year for reorganization, and students submit proposals to Baker on what they would like to do with the cases.

Last year, the display of arrowheads was reorganized by a team of anthropology minors.

This year, the display on the Church of Ste. Genevieve and a case of household items from the late 19th century and early 20th century were among those worked on.

“There are a couple of things in here that are not appropriate,” student Kelly Owens said while directing work on the household items, “so we’re going to move them to other areas where they are a little more appropriate. We’re making new labels because all of the labels were hand-written and some of them were tiny and difficult to read. We picked a standard size that matched the rest of the computer-printed labels. We made them a little easier to read, a little bigger, a little more uniform.”

Looking at another case that contained a less-focused display of items, Hoffman said, “This one had a ton of photographs that got lost in the background. Part of it is just going to be a refocusing.”

He said the students also learn to apply their expertise while working within real-world limitations, which can be a beneficial complement to the classroom.

“One of the constraints is if we had more money, better storage,” Hoffman said. “You might not want all of your artifacts out on display, but the storage is not great here so you might as well have them out.

“It’s good experience for the students because they get to make a difference and sharpen their saw as to how they can take a collection of artifacts and give it an interpretive focus, but they also get a heavy dose of working with limitations. In class sometimes, textbooks tell you how you’re supposed to do it but in the real world you may not be able to move the shelves over because there are fade marks behind them, which means we’d have to replace some things. We can do all those things but we can’t do them in three days so in some ways we have these very severe constraints.”

The Field School has a book each year that charts the work done and chronicles any relocations of artifacts.

“We try to leave the museum in a slightly better place than when we got here,” Hoffman said.

Baker said the help is welcomed.

“It’s extremely helpful for the museum,” he said. “They have gone through and updated every one of the cases. They’ve done reorganizing and relabeling and have done a facelift up there. They get to use their expertise and get hands-on experience. It’s a great benefit for the museum to have them back every year.”

Two of the students—Samantha Kluesner and Samantha Bruer—were at the museum May 27 to talk about their project during the Fourth Friday Art Walk.

“It was a good experience,” Bruer, who will be a senior next year, said. “We actually got to put to use some things in our textbooks and some other things we learned in class like building conditions and how a building works and can stand the test of time.”

Kluesner worked with Stephanie Chapman on the cabinet which displays religious artifacts.

Hoffman said the brief experience does not make his students experts but gives them a sample of historic preservation and its value in the real world.

“You’re not going to become a building documentation expert because you spent an afternoon taking measured drawings but they understand it and could do it better than the average person,” Hoffman said. “They understand Sanborn Maps as a research tool in class but it’s different to take it and look at

it in an environment that is alive and inhabited and is the context for this great interpretive story of Ste. Genevieve and see how it's changed.

“They learn that if you were a historic site, how you could use this understanding of context of the neighborhood and how it's changed over time. The larger context is part of what you tell your visitors and it enriches their experience and understanding of the community.”

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