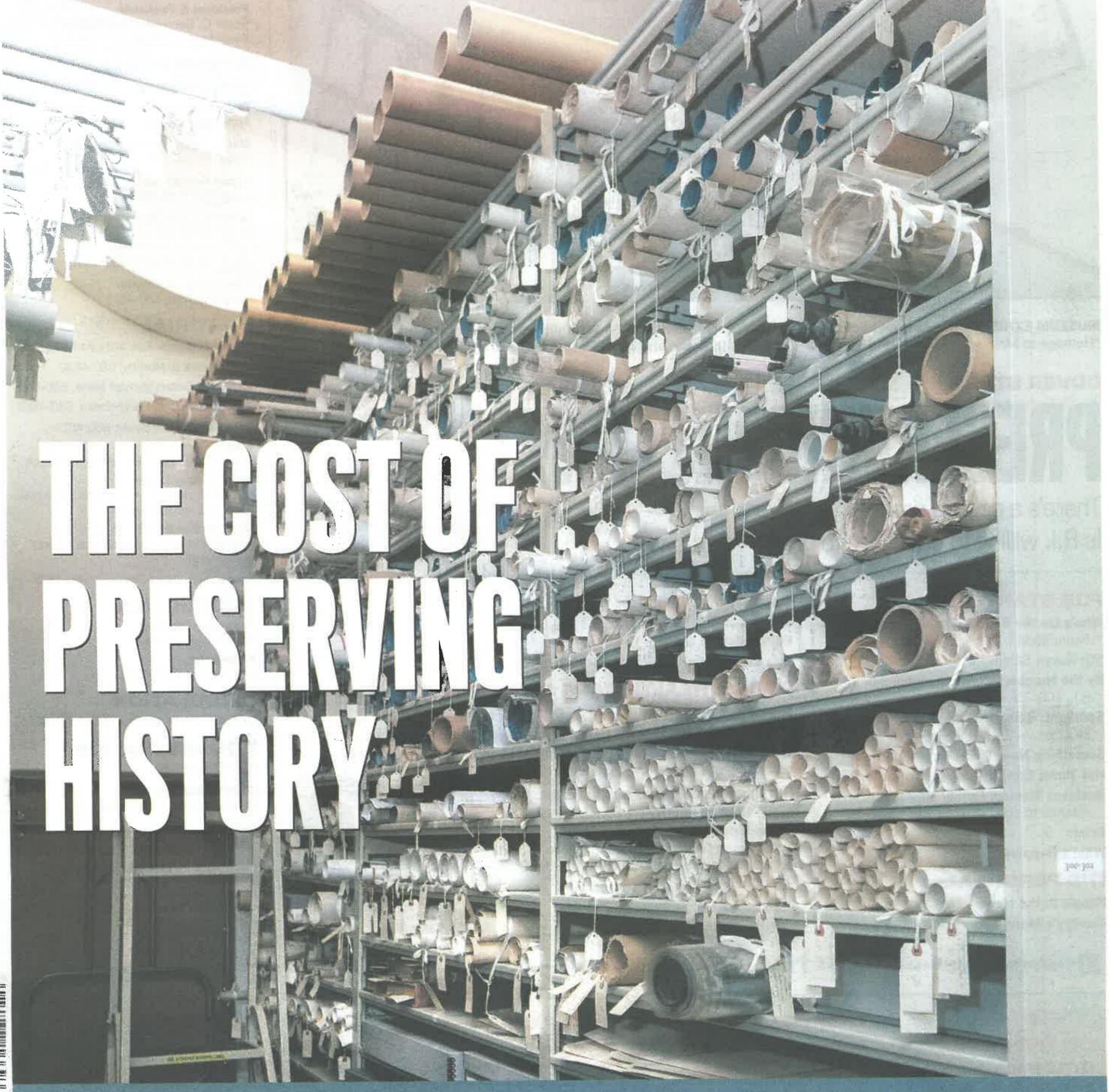


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THE COST OF PRESERVING HISTORY



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PRESERVING HISTORY

There's a cost to preserving history. Is R.I. willing to pay more to preserve its own?

BY EMILY GOWDEY-BACKUS | Gowdey-Backus@PBN.com

RHODE Island's state archives, which include pre-1650 artifacts, have sat in nondescript commercial office space in a Providence flood zone, lacking proper preservation technology, for decades.

Exhibit space at the 337 Westminster St. location is about the size of a small studio apartment. Heavy with rolled maps, blueprints and highway plans, metal shelves stretch 30 feet up, while card catalogs of all shapes and sizes line the roughly 8,000-square-foot storehouse.

Visitors and researchers access microfilm in a large, open room that takes up most of the public space. While neatly stacked and organized, there are so many documents in the state's care, they abut a bathroom entrance and the office's break room/cafeteria.

Secretary of State Nellie M. Gorbea, whose office oversees the archives, thinks it is time for a new, state-of-the-art facility that could not only better protect valuable historical documents but potentially help raise the profile of museums and attractions tied to Rhode Island's rich history.

CRAMPED QUARTERS: Secretary of State Nellie M. Gorbea tours the state archives building in Providence. She has proposed a \$52 million, state-of-the-art facility that would better protect valuable historical documents and raise the profile of museums and attractions tied to the state's history. PBN PHOTO/MICHAEL SALERNO

She thinks a new archive could serve as an “anchor” institution, situated kitty corner from the Statehouse – connecting visitors with “other cultural historic sites” in the state.

Though funding for the \$52 million project appears a long way off, it’s an appealing concept for some of the mostly disconnected museums and cultural attractions across Rhode Island. For them, survival is often inextricably tied to fundraising in an era of limited state support. And any statewide efforts to better link and promote museums and cultural attractions can only help, they say.

“It never [ends],” said **Preservation Society of Newport County** CEO and Executive Director Trudy Coxe of the time she spends “raising money, calling people and begging.”

Coxe’s organization, which employs roughly 400 full-time, part-time and seasonal employees, is one of the largest museum organizations in the state. But its challenge to consistently raise money to support its operations and grow is similar to those on the opposite end of the resource spectrum, she says.

The society, which operates 11 historic sites, including Gilded Age homes The Breakers, Marble House and Chateau Sur Mer that dot the Newport coastline, completed its first-ever capital campaign in 2017, surpassing its fundraising goal by \$14 million.

Such successful fundraising efforts mask “the fact that there isn’t a lot of state ... money for museums,” she said, citing a recent pause in funding for state historic grant programs.

“Every museum,” she said, “is going to struggle from here to eternity.”

WHAT EXISTS?

The museum sector, as defined by the American Alliance of Museums, one of the leading industry research and management groups, includes: aquariums, art museums, culturally specific museums, historic sites, history museums, maritime museums, military museums, science and technology centers, and zoos.

An AAM December 2017 report found nationwide in 2016 this collection of institutions generated \$50 billion in direct, indirect and induced spending, \$12 billion in fiscal contributions – \$8 billion in federal and \$4 billion in state and local taxes – while supporting 726,200 jobs.

In Rhode Island, museums had a \$230 million financial impact in 2016 supporting 3,560 jobs, per AAM data. These institutions paid \$161 million in income to employees and paid \$55 million in taxes – \$38 million in fed-

‘We had to go out of town to find anything on Portuguese history [in Bristol].’
JANE LAVENDER, Bristol Art Museum chairperson



PBN PHOTO/KATE WHITNEY LUGEY

eral taxes and \$17 million to state and local authorities.

While the AAM did not provide a local count, the **R.I. Department of Labor and Training** identified 44 museums, historic sites and parks – the category does not distinguish between the three – in 2016, the most recent full-year data available. Using a different metric from the AAM, the DLT calculated average industry employment that year was 830, which was the high point over a decade that saw employment slip to its lowest point of 632 in 2009.

While the state’s museums vary in size, most are nonprofits. Many of the larger entities operate under the auspices of a parent organization able to provide guidance and financial support.

For example, the **Rhode Island School of Design Museum** in Providence and the **Haffenreffer Museum of Anthropology** in Bristol are tied to RISD and **Brown University**, respectively, and two museums – Woonsocket’s **Museum of Work and Culture** and the **John Brown House Museum**

in Providence – are managed by the **Rhode Island Historical Society**.

The RISD Museum completed its first-ever capital campaign between 2001 and 2006, raising \$32 million – \$23 million from direct donations for the museum and a \$9 million contribution from the university.

The reason fundraising hadn’t been prioritized previously, said Director John W. Smith, was the same as that for museums across the country. In the 19th century and first half of the 20th century, he explained, “often a small group of donors affiliated with the organization footed the bill among themselves.” In RISD Museum’s case, he added, the founding families felt it was “a civic responsibility” to provide such an institution.

Fast forward to the 21st century, and it’s a different story. “Fundraising here is challenging,” said Smith. The smallness of the state paired with the high “number of worthy organizations,” he said, “makes [for] a particularly competitive field as many of us try to raise money from the same pool of individuals.”

BUILDING ENDOWMENTS

The **Providence Athenaeum** is an East Side library and historic site dating to 1836. Its main foyer is lined with bus-sized card catalogues and stocked floor to ceiling with tomes and specimens illustrative of the capital’s storied history.

For Executive Director Matthew Burriesci, getting people in the door is the key: “Once people get past the exterior and see the inside of this place, they want to get involved.”

Therefore, he said, “you’re probably going to lose more traffic as a result” of charging minimal fees.

Unlike smaller museums in the state, the Athenaeum has the benefit of an \$11 million endowment and a \$1.2 million annual budget covered mostly by event sponsorships, rental fees and memberships.

Annually, it receives a \$5,000 grant from the **R.I. State Council on the**

CONTINUES ON PAGE 14



CHALLENGING ENDEAVOR: Rhode Island School of Design Museum Director John W. Smith says fundraising in Rhode Island is challenging due to the smallness of the state and the high number of “worthy organizations” competing to raise money from the same pool of individuals.

PBN PHOTO/MICHAEL SALERNO

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 13

Arts – its sole state funding. While that money is “greatly appreciated,” said Burriesci, “If it were to go away, we would [still] be sustainable.”

RISD Museum’s endowment stands at \$78 million, with a roughly \$8 million annual budget – receiving approximately \$3 million annually from its parent school – funding 93 staff positions and collection care.

As of April, the Preservation Society’s endowment was \$42 million with a \$25 million annual budget – reflecting the fruits of its first capital campaign.

“Most nonprofits,” said Kaity Ryan, Preservation Society deputy chief of staff, “place a lot of emphasis on building their endowment” – what she called “a critical source of funding.”

But how do the smaller museums and cultural attractions unable to build healthy endowments survive?

Open 12 hours per week, the unaffiliated **Bristol Art Museum** operates with one part-time employee and 20 volunteers.

Lacking space big enough to hold large fundraisers, Chairperson Jane Lavender said the nonprofit museum opts to promote community events such as Art in the Garden tours featuring artists positioned in local gardens, and Art al Fresco, which includes the display of works by 40 to 50 artists on the Linden Place fence.

The museum’s 2017 income totaled \$81,100, with the majority – \$56,000 – coming from donations, grants and membership fees. Rental income

was \$15,000, with community events bringing in \$3,000.

What it lacks in direct funding for programming, it fills in with collaborative efforts that have led to visiting professors and artists from across the state, said Lavender.

Morgan Grefe, Rhode Island Historical Society executive director, agreed that “cooperation and collaboration” have been “key to not just [sustaining] but growing” local museums in Rhode Island.

But getting the public to recognize the benefits of such museums can be a challenge, in part because the return on investment, either in government funding or private fundraising, is “hard to quantify,” she acknowledged.

Locally, museums provide educational and community-building programming that “defray” costs cities and towns would have otherwise shouldered, she said, and are a “motivating factor” in communities attracting and retaining businesses

and residents.

“Cultural consumers are among the most productive for a city or town,” said Grefe of museumgoers’ economic impact.

The return to museums, however, is often not equal, forcing them to perpetually fundraise.

It’s a “tough reality,” said Grefe, who has been active in the local industry for 19 years, adding, “Rarely do [museums] function on gate receipts alone.”

PRESERVING HISTORY

From annual Gaspee Days celebrations in Warwick commemorating the burning of a British schooner in 1772 to Rhode Island’s ongoing August holiday recognition of the end of World War II, residents have historically shown an appreciation for history and Rhode Islanders’ role in it. And that’s why Gorbea is urging stepped-up state efforts to preserve related artifacts.

“If people don’t know their his-

tory, then they don’t feel part of” a greater community, she said.

The state archive – which includes thousands of historical legal documents, marriage and birth certificates, trademarks, maps, even the first depiction of the state’s official anchor seal – has been on Westminster Street since 1992.

The current three-and-a-half-year lease, with an option to re-up until 2020, costs the state \$160,960 per annum.

In April, Gorbea’s office launched a campaign to raise awareness of the need for a new facility, with historic-preservation best practices in mind. The current space can still provide preservation, said State Archivist Ashley Selima, but “it’s not the best climate possible.”

She noted conservation of a copy of the Declaration of Independence has rightly been prioritized but added: “If we were able to maintain it better in the first place, it wouldn’t have needed such intensive work.”

Gorbea hoped to get \$5 million in capital funds from Gov. Gina M. Raimondo’s budget to move architectural plans forward, but that was not included in the governor’s fiscal 2019 spending plan.

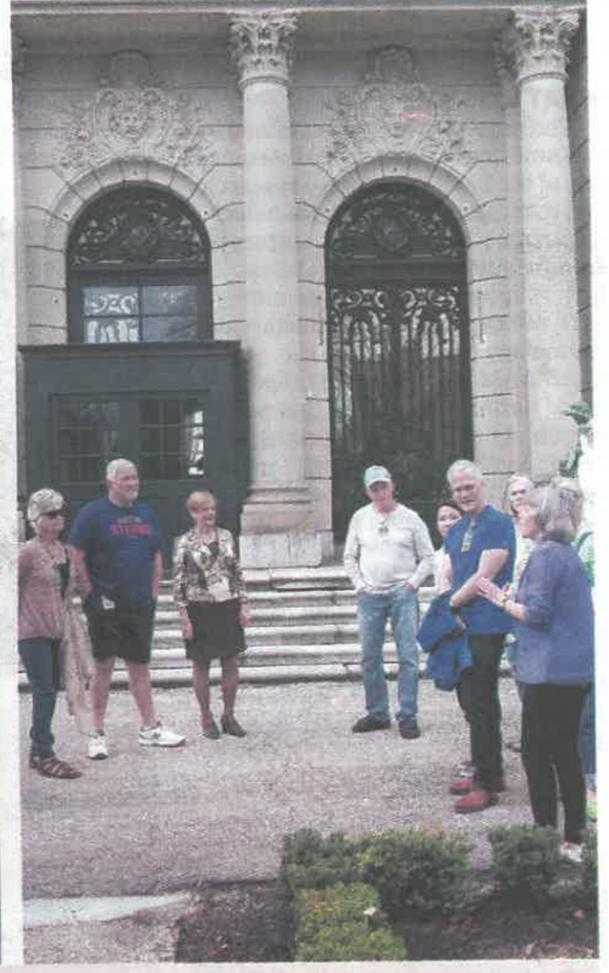
She said she has since been “in conversation with General Assembly leadership” to secure capital budget funds for the planning stage.

In all, the project will cost \$52 million and would be budgeted over five years.

Similar to existing museums and historic institutions, she says private

‘Every museum is going to struggle from here to eternity.’

TRUDY COXE, Preservation Society of Newport County CEO and executive director



DEVOTED DIRECTOR: From left: Trudy Coxe, Preservation Society of Newport County CEO and executive director, and Terry Dickenson, chief of staff, look over a banner that will hang in the new Welcome Center at The Breakers; Coxe with Andrea Carneiro, PSNC spokesperson, in the textiles collection storage room at the PSNC headquarters in Newport, where they have clothing from Colonial times to the present; and Coxe, center, joins a group outside The Elms to listen to guide Nancy Christy giving a tour.

PBN PHOTOS/KATE WHITNEY LUCEY

donors will also play a role and suggested a Friends of the Archive organization will seek support – financial and programmatic – from the Greater Rhode Island community. She has already seen interest from one “trustee of a trust,” she said.

Suggesting the new facility stand in front of the **R.I. Department of Administration**, across from the Statehouse, itself a natural tourist draw, Gorbea also hopes to increase visitation to the archive, which had 1,834 visitors in 2017 – the most in four years – and to other cultural attractions across the state.

But supporters of preserving Rhode Island’s history have been here before in trying to generate financial support, says Patrick T. Conley, Rhode Island’s first historian laureate.

For decades, he said, there were failed attempts at establishing a statewide museum devoted to Rhode Island history, including the Heritage Harbor Museum project he was involved in.

While Gorbea’s proposal is not calling for a museum, her plan for a state-of-the-art archive is similar to those past efforts in trying to promote and preserve Rhode Island’s history. Conley said that’s why he’s “not optimistic” it will be funded.



ARCHIVE SUPPORT: Bristol Art Museum Chairwoman Jane Lavender, pictured in the museum’s Livingston Gallery, supports Secretary of State Nellie M. Gorbea’s call for a new state archive, understanding there’s an important relationship between proper archiving and museum exhibitions.
PBN PHOTO/KATE WHITNEY LUCEY



HISTORICAL DOCUMENTS: Ashley Selima, right, state archivist and public records administrator, discusses the history of the documents with Secretary of State Nellie M. Gorbea at the Rhode Island state archives in Providence.
PBN PHOTO/MICHAEL SALERNO

“There is very little support for historic projects from [state] government,” he said. The last time Conley remembers Rhode Island investing in the state’s cultural-heritage economy was during the nation’s bicentennial celebration.

“Since 1976, it’s been all downhill,” he said.

TOUGH SELL?

Grefe said “access [to the state’s historical documents] ... is part of good and transparent government.”

She supports Gorbea’s proposal and hopes a new archive space will create a “hub,” attracting educators, and safeguard an ever-growing collection.

Robert Doane, curator of a federally funded museum tied to the **U.S. Naval War College** in Newport, is among those who believe a new facility for the state archives could boost local museum patronage but only with the right marketing.

“Archives are always ... a harder sell,” he said. “[Tourists] think about visiting museums, parks, historic

sites ... archives are not high on [their] radar.”

Lavender, of the Bristol Art Museum, personally supports Gorbea’s call for a new state archive, understanding the relationship between proper archiving and museum exhibitions all too well.

The museum is planning a salute to Bristol’s Portuguese community this summer and, while researching, Lavender found “there was nothing” documenting the group’s impact in Bristol available in the local historical society’s archives.

“We had to go out of town to find anything on Portuguese history [in Bristol],” she added.

As Gorbea’s plan gains awareness, Lavender hopes it encourages people to think about their own stuffed closets, dusty attics and back cupboards that may contain historically significant material.

Even the museum’s own “original papers” are lacking, Lavender said.

“We don’t have a lot [documenting the history of the museum], and we know it’s out there,” she said. ■

‘There is very little support for historic projects from [state] government.’

PATRICK T. CONLEY, first R.I. historian laureate