Exemplary Project Description

In 2016, the Appalachian Center for Civic Life and the degree program in Civic Innovation completed a major four-year project in partnership with the Wilderness Road Regional Museum in Newbern, Virginia. This came to be called, “The Newbern Project.” The Newbern Project engaged eighty-five students, from across the College, from a range of majors in each of the College’s five academic divisions, in addition to part-time and full-time staff. Under the direction of Civic Innovation Professor, Dr. Tal Stanley, these students catalogued, indexed, and archived more than 100,000 original documents dating from the middle years of the eighteenth century to the 1990s. This archive contains store account books from the 1820s through the 1970s, court records, farm and family records, collections of letters and diaries, lists of the contents of estate sales dating back to the 1780s, in addition to more than 5,000 photographs.

In documents they read and catalogued, students witnessed the daily, quotidian ways by which racism has been written into the fabric of American civic life and culture, often tracing this across multiple generations. They gained a clearer understanding of the hard work necessary to be honest about that process. They saw first-hand the means by which privilege accrues; the unconscious complicity of all white people in the processes that have resulted from and reinforced that privilege; the desperate urgency to address racism in substantive ways. They also better comprehended how the vicissitudes of the national economy are felt in local places by ordinary people struggling to hold their lives and farms together, and what was for thousands of people across many generations, the short, precipitous path to poverty in this place.

Students read and catalogued letters written from the front during the Civil War, World War I, World War II, Korea, and Vietnam. They read letters of application from the survivors of soldiers killed in action or disabled veterans, asking for any help possible. Though much of their archival work focused on that particular place, by implication their work interrogated larger, national issues and questions that go to the deep core what it means to be a citizen now. Moreover, the work these students did, the stories they found, the documents they uncovered and preserved, the photographs they digitized, continue to find their way into Civic Innovation courses.

With the students’ work as a foundation, and with this archive, the Wilderness Road Regional Museum has available now a remarkable resource for lay and professional students of Appalachian and American history, as well for African American families who are seeking to trace their family heritage and genealogy. Building on this archive, the Wilderness Road Regional Museum has been able to undertake the more ambitious work of citizen education, expanding its role in the civic life of the place.