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RHODE ISLAND COLLEGE

600 Mount Pleasant Avenue, Providence, RI 02908
www.ric.edu | (401) 568-8000



R.I. HISTORICAL PRESERVATION & HERITAGE COMMISSION

Old State House 150 Benefit Street Providence, RI 02903
www.preservation.ri.gov | (401) 222-2678

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Contact: John Taraborelli, jtaraborelli@ric.edu, 401-456-8977

Sarah Zurier, sarah.zurier@preservation.ri.gov, 401-222-4142

Rhode Island College Earns Federal Historic Designation

Site of the former Rhode Island State Home and School, on the college's east side of campus, added to National Register of Historic Places

Providence, R.I. – The Rhode Island State Home and School for Dependent and Neglected Children, built on what is now the east side of Rhode Island College's campus, has received federal recognition for its contributions to the history of community development and architecture. J. Paul Loether, Executive Director of the Rhode Island Historical Preservation & Heritage Commission (RIHPHC), announced that the National Park Service has added the **State Home and School for Dependent and Neglected Children Historic District** to the National Register of Historic Places. The National Register is the federal government's official list of properties throughout the United States whose historical and architectural significance makes them worthy of preservation. The nomination was prepared by RIHPHC Principal Architectural Historian and Rhode Island College alumna Elizabeth Warburton Rochefort '10.

The State Home and School is a significant example of an institution for dependent children that influenced the development of Rhode Island's modern child welfare system. Chartered by an act of the Rhode Island General Assembly in 1884, the State Home and School cared for 10,000 children between 1885 and 1979. In 1885 the State of Rhode Island purchased the Walnut Grove Farm and converted its stone farmhouse to a superintendent's house and administrative building. Using the "cottage plan" pioneered by the State of Michigan and adopted across the country, the State Home then built a circle of domestic-scale cottage dormitories, a school and a hospital, and continued farm operations to support the institution's mission.

The State Home and School continued to expand into the twentieth century and was renamed the Dr. Patrick I. O'Rourke Children's Center in 1946. The Children's Center constructed 10 modern brick dormitories and expanded the original cottage plan by creating a second circle around existing buildings. The new dormitories were intended to replace the earlier wood-frame cottages, which were seen as outdated and systematically taken down. Despite a shift in childcare practices and these attempts at modernization, the Children's Center closed in 1979. By the time Rhode Island College acquired the property in 2002, the brick dormitories were vacant and the only surviving 19th-Century wooden dormitory ("Cottage C," sometimes called the Yellow Cottage) was slated for demolition.

Recognizing the historical significance of the site, the late Richard Hillman '83, M.S.W. '96, a social worker and RIC alumnus, urged then-RIC President John Nazarian to renovate rather than raze Cottage C and to research and preserve records of the institution. Thus began the State Home and School Project, a research, documentation and preservation project that ran from 2002 to 2010. Project members collected oral histories of former residents and employees of the State Home. Transcripts of these interviews are archived in Rhode Island College's Special Collections, along with newspaper clippings and other historical documents. Digitized photos can be found in the State Archives, while physical artifacts await housing in a state facility.

The group also conducted archaeological excavations led by RIC Professor Emeritus of Anthropology Pierre Morenon, a founding member of the State Home and School Project and an RIHPHC commissioner. He noted that this site is important for archaeological reasons, in addition to historical ones. "The building, grounds and land are all an important part of that historical record," he said. One of the State Home and School Project's major accomplishments was restoration of Cottage C with a State Preservation Grant from RIHPHC. Cottage C now features space for a large classroom, two conference rooms and an office.

A condition of the State Preservation Grant award required that Cottage C be listed on the National Register of Historic Places. Preliminary review of its historic and architectural significance revealed that it was one piece of a larger story. Cottage C survived alongside buildings from each period of the State Home and School's history from 1885-1979. In total, eight buildings, all of which are still in use by the college, met the National Park Service criteria for listing on the National Register: a stone farmhouse (c. 1870) that was converted to the superintendent's house; a stone boiler house (1885); Cottage C (1885), the only surviving wood-frame dormitory; four brick dormitories (1958, 1959 and two in 1960); and one medical services building (1963). The historic district is also considered an area of archaeological interest.

Joining Rhode Island's historic places listed on the National Register is a fitting culmination of a project that began almost two decades ago, said Rhode Island College President Frank D. Sánchez. "This is a well-deserved recognition of the history that existed at this site even before it became a college campus," he said. "The many years of hard work and research have put a spotlight on an important chapter in our state's history and opened up new possibilities for preservation that come with this federally recognized designation."

RIHPHC Executive Director J. Paul Loether commented, "We are pleased that this unusual type of resource is now listed in the National Register. This property is a tangible reminder of the experience of thousands of Rhode Island children in state care. The designation represents the complexity of our shared history."

In addition to honoring a property for its contribution to local, state, or national history, listing on the National Register provides additional benefits. It results in special consideration during the planning of Federal or federally assisted projects and makes properties eligible for federal and Rhode Island financial incentives for historic rehabilitation projects. As the state office for historic preservation, the RIHPHC is responsible for reviewing and submitting Rhode Island nominations to the National Register.

About Rhode Island College

Established in 1854, Rhode Island College serves approximately 8,500 undergraduate and graduate students through its five schools: the Faculty of Arts and Sciences, the Feinstein School of Education and Human Development, the School of Business, the School of Nursing and the School of Social Work. For more information, visit www.ric.edu.

About Rhode Island Historical Preservation & Heritage Commission

The Rhode Island Historical Preservation & Heritage Commission is the state agency for historical preservation and heritage programs. The Commission operates a statewide historical preservation program that identifies and protects historic buildings, districts, structures, and archaeological sites. The Commission also develops and carries out programs to document and celebrate the rich cultural heritage of Rhode Island's people. For more information, visit www.preservation.ri.gov.

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