Internships at Ellis Island and the Oyster Bay Historical Society

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This summer, I interned at Ellis Island, part of the Statue of Liberty National Monument, and the Oyster Bay Historical Society, a small, local archive dedicated to preserving history related to the town of Oyster Bay. My experiences at these institutions were vastly different; at Ellis Island, I was working for the National Park service, an enormous governmental agency tasked with preserving the history and character of the United States’ national parks, whereas at the Oyster Bay Historical Society, I interned with only three or four other employees to reorganize, catalog, and improve upon its collections. I am very glad that I had the opportunity to intern at these two very different places over the summer. As a result, I am considering a career in public history after graduation.

At Ellis Island, I worked primarily with my supervisor in the park’s oral history program, which boasts a collection of over two thousand interviews of immigrants who entered the United States through Ellis Island, employees of the National Park Service, and immigration and professionals in the medical field who worked on the island while it was still receiving immigrants, and even American servicemen (mainly those serving in the Coast Guard) stationed there. My work in the oral history program entailed reading, transcribing, summarizing, and reviewing these interviews. I received a firm grounding in the fundamentals of the processing of oral histories, and I was able to contribute to a culturally and historically significant program that makes accessible the personal experiences and memories of generations who passed through Ellis Island. I expanded my knowledge of the history of immigration to the United States, not only during the years Ellis Island was operational as an immigration station (1892 to 1954) but also, owing to recently installed exhibits in the museum, in the post-World War II era to the present day and even the period from 1500 to 1800.

Working at the Oyster Bay Historical Society was a drastically different experience. For two days a week, I undertook a ten-minute commute to Oyster Bay (as opposed to a two-and-a-half hour commute to Ellis Island three days a week) and worked with a supervisor on projects relating to the town’s history, working closely with artifacts such as mechanical tools, clothing, booklets, posters, photographs, maps, and centuries-old documents (including deeds, wills, and legal miscellany) from the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries. I analyzed, sorted, and organized these materials, placing them into storage spaces and labeling them while updating the Society’s descriptions of them. We also undertook a reorganization of hundreds of documents that had been labeled with an antiquated numbering system. We then relabeled and renumbered them according to up-to-date archival standards, while also rehousing them in newer archival boxes to better preserve them. I also assisted in the selection of materials for and building of an exhibit on historical hats ranging from approximately the 1910s to the present day. The exhibit will be on display until September.

Both internships have piqued my interest in the archival profession, which I am now seriously considering pursuing in graduate school. They have broadened my knowledge of the work that constitutes an essential part of working in archives, all the while expanding upon my grasp of local and national history.

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