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Image/caption(s): Little Harbour School students, Karina Beer and Sierra Mikolaites participate in the Third Grade Portsmouth History program run by the Portsmouth Historical Society. Here they are investigating a foot stove and trying to figure out what it may have been used for.

Third Graders Touch Portsmouth's Past Portsmouth Historical Society's Third Grade Portsmouth History Program Celebrates Tenth Year

“fun and accessible local history”

*Portsmouth, New Hampshire...*They have never known a time without smartphones or WiFi. Barack Obama has been President since they could walk. They are Portsmouth's third-graders. And they attend school in a city almost 400 years old.

The kids at Dondero and Little Harbor School call her “the History Lady.” Her name is Claire Spollen. Six times a year she shows up with strange and wonderful objects from the past. It might be a small wooden box with a door, a handle, and a lot of holes.

“What do you think this is?” she asks.

Is it an ancient radio? Could it be a cage for a canary or a fancy squirrel trap? The puzzling objects stimulate discussion about a world without video games, airplanes, batteries, and flush toilets. The kids touch, think, and talk.

This particular item is called a foot stove, the History Lady explains. People put hot coals inside in a little bowl and used it to warm their frozen toes during the long New England winter. The handle let them carry it to church or in a carriage or upstairs to bed.

Claire Spollen is the newest History Lady in an educational outreach sponsored by the Portsmouth Historical Society. The Third Grade History Program brings stories of Portsmouth history right to the classroom, creating a guided museum experience. The object is the jumping off point. It could be a photograph, a document, a metal candle mold, an iron, a teacup, a leather fire bucket or a mysterious tool.

“We want children to feel connected to Portsmouth, to feel more connected to

where they live,” Spollen says. “We’re trying to give them a taste at an early age, of history and preservation and learning from primary sources.”

The program got its start in 2006 when historian and curator Sandra Rux began offering in-class talks at Dondero School. Each monthly visit focused on a different topic. Students were introduced to Portsmouth’s deep and complex history focusing on sailors, merchants, African Americans, women and children, immigrant families, shipyard workers. They heard tales of famous figures from John Paul Jones and Celia Thaxter to Prince Whipple and Polly Warner.

“At the end of each year, kids toured several historic houses, all of which they had seen and talked about beforehand,” Rux says. Classes have visited the Moffatt-Ladd House, Warner House, the Portsmouth Athenaeum, the African Burying Ground and more.

Spollen is supremely qualified to be the latest History Lady. Originally from Larchmont, NY, Spollen has an M.A. in Museum Studies from the Harvard Extension School and an M.A. in Elementary Education from Lesley College. Before moving to Portsmouth she worked for many years at Boston Children’s Museum and at the Educational Development Center (EDC), an educational outreach nonprofit funded by the National Science Foundation. She is the mother of three children, aged four, two, and five months.

One of her favorite history objects, a chunk of dried cod, has been living in her freezer for years. She takes it out annually to spark discussion about the region’s founding fishermen and Portsmouth life in the 1600s.

“Object-based teaching is an exciting tactile way for students to begin learning about Portsmouth history and build a love of community,” Spollen says. “How can an old piece of fish not get stinky? How far away is England? Why would dried cod be so important to the first settlers? We explore these ideas together. The kids make the connections. I’m just their guide. That’s how we all learn about this amazing city.”

According to Director of Programming Allison Galliher, "This program helps students build their observation and questioning skills. They have extended classroom discussions and participate in small group presentations. We want to bring a museum experience right to the classroom. We want children to feel connected to Portsmouth and proud of where they live. Our third grade Portsmouth history program is both a perfect introduction for students to their city and a perfect lead in to what will come in the fourth grade when they tackle New Hampshire."

About Third Grade Portsmouth History Program

We created our Third Grade Portsmouth History Program in 2006 to increase understanding and enthusiasm for local history by sending our PHS educator into local classrooms for an-depth, year round educational experience. The

educator develops relationships during nine visits with each class, culminating in a field trip through Portsmouth. This exposure and continuity helps children understand that local history is fun and accessible. Our solid program has strong credibility and substantial teacher support; and has the added benefit of preparing students for the state of New Hampshire's fourth grade state history program.

Portsmouth Historical Society, founded in 1917, is a tax-exempt 501©3 nonprofit devoted to introducing, interpreting and stimulating the study of Portsmouth history and to maintaining collections of historical artifacts and documents. It operates two facilities – Discover Portsmouth and the John Paul Jones House.

Discover Portsmouth is a cultural gateway that houses a welcome center/clearinghouse for residents and visitors interested in the city's history, arts and culture; a museum of exhibitions and programs (on site and in elementary schools) devoted to Portsmouth history; a museum shop of unique Portsmouth gifts and books, including those offered by its in-house publishing division, and Historic Tours, including of the Portsmouth Black Heritage Trail. A gathering place for Portsmouth nonprofits, it is a popular location for event rentals. Discover Portsmouth, located at 10 Middle Street, Portsmouth, NH. Open daily from 9:30-5pm, Discover Portsmouth remains open until 8pm for Art Round Town, the first Friday of each month. During the month of December, Discover Portsmouth will be open late each Friday and Saturday evening from 5-8pm. For further information on exhibitions, publications, gift shop, lectures, rentals, and tours, please call 603-436-8433 or visit PortsmouthHistory.org.