

Application for the 2015 Randolph College Student/Faculty Summer Research Program

Names of Applicants:

Faculty: Gerry Sherayko (Associate Professor, History), Student Samantha Strickler (History '17)

Project Title:

A History of the Rivermont Historic District

Abstract:

Due to the efforts of the Friends of Rivermont Historical Society (FORHS), in 2002 the area along Rivermont Avenue was designated by the Virginia Department of Historic Resources as Lynchburg's largest historic district. Though there have been social, cultural, and architectural histories of Lynchburg that have included many of the buildings on Rivermont, there has never been a comprehensive history of the district. As a result of the research conducted during the 2010 and 2011 SRPs, the [FORHS website](#) was established in 2012. The website contains photos of all of the structures along the Avenue as well as information about the architectural style of the buildings and who lived in them. For this phase of the ongoing Rivermont research project, we will take the oral interviews already recorded and create written narratives for the website, conduct additional interviews, and research the non-residential structures along the Avenue.

Project Description:

As a result of the efforts of the Friends of Rivermont Historical Society (FORHS), in 2002 the area along Rivermont Avenue was designated by the Virginia Department of Historic Resources as Lynchburg's largest historic district. Though there have been social, cultural, and architectural histories of Lynchburg that have included many of the buildings on Rivermont (homes, apartment houses, businesses, churches, schools) in their studies, there has never been a comprehensive history of the district. The goal of this project is to continue the research on the history of the structures along Rivermont and the people who have lived, worked, studied and worshipped in them. The history, which will be placed on the [FORHS website](#), is intended to be a perpetual work in progress, to be added to as people move, businesses change hands, structures altered, and new uses are found for old buildings. The information provided would be of interest to the general public, particularly those interested in historic buildings and preservation, as well as a resource for those people who want to know the history of their own homes and businesses along the Avenue.

As an overview of what has been completed on this project thus far, in order to carry out our research for the information on the residential structures in the District during the 2010 and 2011 SRPs, we utilized a wide variety of primary and secondary source materials located in the Jones Memorial Library, the Lynchburg Public Library, the Lynchburg Circuit Court Clerk's Office, and the Lynchburg Department of Community Development. Among the sources used in our research were city directories, the fascinating (though partial) "Historic Preservation Survey of Rivermont Avenue" carried out by the Lynchburg Junior League in the late 1970s, the 2003 United States Department of Interior historic architectural survey of Rivermont Avenue,

information found on the Lynchburg city website, and individual tax assessment records. Along with these unpublished sources, we used published works, most notably S. Allen Chambers' seminal study, *Lynchburg: An Architectural History*, as well as several works about the history of Lynchburg (see bibliography). Such resources will continue to be invaluable as we add to the information already included on the website.

In addition, the project included interviewing both current and former residents of the historic district to gain as much anecdotal history as possible about the structures, the people who occupied them, and life along the Avenue. The information gleaned from the interviews will be utilized for the narrative histories of individual structures and for the district in general that will be included on the website. Over the course of the two summers we sent letters to over 270 current and former owners of buildings along the Avenue and conducted thirty oral interviews that were videotaped.

Photos of the buildings along Rivermont were yet another component of this research project. During the summer of 2010 we took over one thousand photos of more than 275 structures under the same conditions at the same time of day to make sure, as much as possible, consistency in the photos for the website.

Once the research and images were gathered and the website constructed for each home we included information on architectural style, when it was built, who built it, how it was altered over the years, and who lived there and when.

As much work that has been completed for the website since 2010, there is still much more research and writing that needs to be done. The main goals for this upcoming summer are taking the interviews already recorded and creating written narratives for the website, conducting additional interviews, and researching the histories of the non-residential structures on the Avenue.

The processing of the interviews will be a challenging task that will hone both my and Samantha's skills as historians. Gathering information is the first act in research, the next is to process what you have, to decide what is useful/relevant/interesting and what is not. Some of the interviews conducted during past SRPs were relatively short (twenty minutes) yet many are quite long (a few are over an hour). How to glean from these interviews relevant information, deciding where to present it on the website, and then the actual writing up of that information will take a large chunk of the summer. For example, in the course of an interview an individual can provide interesting and useful information about the house they grew up in, their grandparent's home, their church, their school, the stores where they shopped, and the performances they attended at a local woman's college when they were a child. All of these stories could have taken place in buildings along Rivermont Avenue. Taking that information and augmenting and corroborating it with additional research from written sources (published or not) will be a time consuming yet quite rewarding aspect of our research this summer.

Concerning the research of the non-residential structures, Samantha and I will start with the recoding of the histories of the individual businesses along the Avenue. By going year by year

through the Lynchburg City Directories, we will be able to determine the history of a particular structure since it was built. Once we know which types of businesses were in a building and how long they were in operation, we can then include that information on the website. In the future we could then go to the next step of researching the history of those individual businesses themselves.

Our plan is to also conduct new interviews. As for potential interviewees, over the last few years several people have contacted me about being interviewed, including those who were unaware or unavailable to be interviewed in 2010 and 2011. Also, it is worth sending our yet another mailing along Rivermont to see if anyone else would be willing to contribute to the website. As for how the interviews will be conducted, please see information under the section “Statement about Student Researcher.”

As a reasonable goal for this summer, throughout the weeks of the SRP the two of us will work together when interviewing owners, will collaborate in the writing of the histories based on the interviews, and will work on the histories of the businesses along the Avenue. At a minimum, we would like to have the information on the individual businesses along the Avenue and stories from the interviews (both ones conducted in the past and ones we will conduct) ready for entry onto the website. If time allows, we will also start researching the histories of the churches along Rivermont.

Having been involved with historical research at the Monroe County Historical Museum (Bloomington, Indiana), a volunteer tour guide for the Historical Landmarks Foundation of Indiana at the historic West Baden Springs Hotel, a member of a wide variety of historic preservation societies, and a board member of FORHS since 2006 and the president from 2007-2014, I understand how time consuming but ultimately rewarding this type of original research can be. I have also been gratified to have received support for this project from the wider Lynchburg community. The Friends of Rivermont Historical Society has applied for and received two \$1000.00 grants from the Greater Lynchburg Community Trust to help establish and maintain our website. Also, as recognition of my work for the Friends of Rivermont, I received the “Preservationist of the Year” award from the Lynchburg Historical Foundation at the LHF’s annual meeting in January 2011. This award was an acknowledgement of the various public outreach programs performed by FORHS as well as the ongoing Rivermont research project. These endorsements are an indication of interest and excitement surrounding the establishment of the Rivermont Historic District website.

Preliminary Bibliography

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Dissemination Goals:

As stated above, the work already accomplished during the 2010 and 2011 SRPs is evident in the FORHS website which has been available to the public since 2012. The work accomplished this summer will again be integrated into the information on the website, as a result, the work carried out by Samantha and myself, like the research done during previous SRPs, will be a permanent feature of the website.

Beyond that, in 2011 the two students I worked with that year, Callie Jones (History '13) and Janie Campbell (History '12), presented their research at the annual Friends of Rivermont Ice Cream Social. While timing might not allow for Samantha to present her research in the near future, (she's applying to go to Reading, England for the 2015-2016 academic year), the plan is that she will be able to present what she has done at a Friends of Rivermont event (either the ice cream social or the annual meeting), during her senior year. In addition, as a member of the Jones Library Board and given that much of our work will be conducted at the Jones this summer, I am hoping that perhaps the two of us could present our research there as part of the Jones Library's lecture series during the 2016-2017 academic year. Such a presentation will bring attention to the Friends of Rivermont and the website as well as Randolph College and the Summer Research Program.

Past Outcomes:

Though already covered above, I would like to note that without the work carried out during the 2010 and 2011 SRPs, the website would most likely have never been established. The background research on the residential structures and the photos taken are the basis of much of what is on the website today. In addition, the interviews conducted, though yet to be processed

(the plan for part of this summer), will prove to be an invaluable extra layer of information about the Avenue. The fact that some of the older interviewees have since passed away, makes it even more essential that we continue to identify additional long-term residents of Rivermont and that their memories are recorded, processed, and placed on the website for the public.

External funding:

We do not plan on applying for external funding, though, as noted above, FORHS has paid for the establishment and maintenance of the website through two grants from the Greater Lynchburg Community Trust.

Academic Credit:

Samantha is not seeking academic credit for this project.

Budgetary Needs:

As a long-term member of the FORHS board, I know that the resources of our organization are quite limited, so I would ask the SRP to fund the project in full. Costs would include mailings to potential interviewees, travel costs within Lynchburg, photocopying at the Jones Memorial Library and purchasing some of the available published sources for the project. In any case the budget for this project will be relatively modest and under the \$1000.00 limit (see budget below).

Mailings to owners (past and present) including postage and stationery: \$100.00
Travel to Jones Memorial/Public Library 4 times a week for 5 weeks.

(6.4 miles roundtrip): \$64.00

Photocopying at Jones Memorial Library (\$.25 a page): \$100.00

Purchase of published sources (in & out of print): \$200.00

Total: \$464.00

IRB or Animal Research:

On 23 January of this year I checked with Carolyn Sarson, chair of the IRB, about our plans to process the interviews conducted during 2010-2011 and to conduct additional interviews this summer. I sent her a link to the FORHS website as well as attached the list of interview questions and the release form (based on a form used by the Lynchburg Historical Foundation for their own interviews about the history of Lynchburg). Carolyn wrote the following:

I would not describe your study as research needing IRB review as it falls under the IRB exempt category with utilizing interview questions and responses. The interview questions are opinion questions of low risk. It is wise to use a release form even if a study is exempt.

I would classify your current study as exempt from review by the IRB. If you change the study in any way, shoot me an email and I will review the changes and let you know if you need to change the review status.

Statement about Student researcher:

Samantha's responsibilities will be to record the history of the individual businesses along the Avenue, processing the interviews already conducted, and conducting new interviews. To undertake researching the history of each business, Samantha will need to go through Lynchburg City Directories year by year for each of the business properties along the Avenue. Located in the Jones Memorial Library, I will be working with Samantha at the Jones, most likely researching different properties, and to be available if she has any problems as she makes her way through the volumes of directories. I will also work with her as we watch the already recorded interviews and discuss which elements of the interview are worthy of inclusion in the narrative about Rivermont, and what information can be left out. I will also accompany her when we conduct new interviews this summer. We will go over the questions and how to approach an oral interview before we meet with any interviewees (as I did with my SRP students in the past) and I will accompany her to all the interviews. However, my hope is for me to step back as I have done in the past and let her conduct the interview as much as possible. Through learning how to conduct interviews, to process interviews done by others, and working with primary sources in the Jones Library, Samantha will hone her (historical) research skills throughout the course of the summer.

As for her qualifications, Samantha has proven to be a hard worker, whether in her capacity as a student in one of my courses, in her internship for the History Department last semester, or as our departmental assistant, and is one of the most mature and responsible students I have met while at the College. She wants to learn more about conducting historical research, and is quite interested in local history (she is a resident of Virginia), architectural history, and historic preservation. By working with primary/archival sources, dealing with the issues surrounding material culture and the built environment, and engaging with the public, Samantha will sharpen her historical research skills which will better prepare her for senior research and for her career after graduation. Certainly thinking about graduate school though not sure yet what direction she would like to take in her career, Samantha would like to see how this experience might deepen her understanding of what it means to be a public, rather than an academic, historian.

Statement from student researcher:

Driving down Rivermont Avenue has become somewhat of a test of will power. I have a very hard time not looking to the left or right to see all the breathtaking architecture that lines either side. The large and small houses and the magnificent churches are, quite simply, stunning to look at.

When Dr. Sherayko offered me this chance I was very excited. I believe I can offer a fresh perspective on this project. I am a hard worker, and I am really interested in the area. As a History Major, I believe that architecture is important in the historical context of the area. The architectural styles can tell you a lot about the type of community that the area was intended to be at different times. I want to dive deeper into what Rivermont Avenue was designed to be originally and how it has evolved in history. I also look forward to helping conduct interviews with the people who grew up on the Avenue. I think it will be an interesting experience to work with the oral histories and it will help me to hone my listening skills as well as my ability to pick

out important information. I think meeting the people that have lived here their whole lives will help me to form an even closer bond with this project and the area in which I currently live.

If our proposal is accepted, I hope to gain a better understanding of historical preservation and the differences between public and academic history. I believe that this project will help me with my decision on graduate school as well as what I want to do with the rest of my life. I know that this kind of project will help me to develop my historical research skills. It will also give me an insight as to what archival research is like.