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Oberlin Heritage Center Intern Conjures Up Historic Buildings No Longer There!

Oberlin College junior, Rachel Luczkowski, may be considered something of a magician, for developing a new “virtual exhibit” for the Oberlin Heritage Center’s website of historic buildings that no longer exist in the community. The Bonner Scholar volunteer and Heritage Center intern has spent countless hours on a new online presentation titled “Oberlin Then and Now” that recalls many wonderful old buildings and locales that have disappeared from the present-day Oberlin Streetscape. The virtual exhibit is an expansion of one designed by Collections Assistant Prue Richards for the 65th reunion of the Oberlin College Class of 1943 during Commencement 2008. The original display was inspired by a large collection of photographs taken by Class of ’43 member, William Farquhar, in 1942 and 1944. A life member of the Heritage Center, he donated them to the organization’s local history collection in 2007.

Luczkowski had been involved as a volunteer at the Oberlin Heritage Center as an Oberlin High School student, and continued after enrolling at Oberlin College. She worked as a Preservation Intern at the Center during Winter Term 2010, and then began exploring possibilities for a summer internship with the nonprofit organization. The development of a database showing Oberlin’s changing architectural landscape was a perfect merger for Luczkowski’s interests in local history, historic preservation, and museum studies. Rolling up her sleeves and setting to work, her first step was to write a successful grant application to the Ohio Humanities Council (a state affiliate of the National Endowment for the Humanities) to support her involvement in the project.

The exhibit/database presently includes more than 80 locations with photographs from “then” and “now,” and many include a brief narrative that tells the viewer some of the social history of the original building. The Oberlin College Archives and the Oberlin Heritage Center Resource Center have served as helpful resources for her research. The exhibit takes the viewer to places he or she may never have known existed. For instance, ask a current Oberlin resident where “Botany Lane” may be found, and they may offer only a quizzical look in return. “Then and Now” explains that Botany Lane, once a paved pathway off of Woodland Street, was home to a trailer camp and mess hall set up for World War II veterans returning to college, including both single and married students and their young families. These temporary living accommodations were in place for about six years following the War. Today, the area has been returned to green space on the College’s North Campus.

View the entire project by visiting the Oberlin Heritage Center’s website (www.oberlinheritage.org and click on the “Research and Learn” tab, then on to “History Features” in the scroll-down menu). If you have photographs of Oberlin buildings, including those that are no longer standing, which you are willing to share with the Heritage Center for this or future projects to help fill gaps and add to the Resource Center photography collection, please let us know. For more information, or to share a photo or story, please call (440) 774-1700 or e-mail history@oberlinheritage.org.

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