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"We're Still Here!" Gentrification and Resistance in a New England City

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We're Still Here! Gentrification and Resistance in Portsmouth, NH

Mikey Ippolito '21 – (Sponsor: Professor Amy Richter)



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Grappling with Local History in Portsmouth, NH

Portsmouth, NH is small colonial city nestled along the state's short coastline between Maine and Massachusetts. Life in Portsmouth has always revolved around its bustling downtown and working port on the Piscataqua River. In recent decades, the city has oriented much of its economy towards tourism. A large part of that tourism today focuses on museums and historical attractions highlighting Portsmouth's past.

While local history is deeply important to Portsmouth, both culturally and economically, the city's memory of its own past is highly selective. Popular conceptions of Portsmouth history tend to favor only the parts of its colonial past which can be celebrated by locals or commodified and sold to a tourist demographic. Tugboats, old mansions, and heroes of the Revolutionary War are uplifted while less savory elements are excluded from the narrative. Those events, people, and places of Portsmouth's past which are not so pleasing are often whitewashed from the urban environment, fading into memory and then into obscurity.

We're Still Here! was a LEEP project to prompt a public reckoning of how Portsmouth imagines its local history. Grappling with local history in Portsmouth means rejecting the sanitized narrative of told through our tourism industry and considering instead a more encompassing picture of the urban space. This counter-history tells a very different story - one of Native genocide, African enslavement, and a long, ongoing trend of displacing and excluding people of marginalized identities from its borders. Telling this counter-history is crucial to the project of achieving social and economic justice in the city.



Fig 1: Promotional art for Issue #3, depicting Portsmouth's waterfront view from the area known today as Prescott Park, formerly Puddle Dock. Photo by Jillian Benham.

We're Still Here! zine

Research findings on the history of urban displacement in Portsmouth, NH were published in the form of an online "zine," a kind of DIY-magazine, free and accessible to the public. All research insights were presented in an easily understood, editorialized form alongside art and creative writing from other community members. Each issue was a collaboration between the researcher and various artists, writers, and poets in their community.

We're Still Here! published three issues during the summer of 2020, plus an additional issue in winter 2020/2021 that served as a showcase for art and writing for creators in Seacoast NH/ME.

Displacement of Marginalized and Working-Class People in Portsmouth, NH

This historical research addressed the issue of belonging in the city of Portsmouth. Who is allowed a place in Portsmouth's living history, and who is excluded? To answer this question, the research focused on Portsmouth's history of displacement and exclusion of marginalized and working-class communities, focusing especially on the area of downtown today known as Prescott Park, what was historically the neighborhood of Puddle Dock.

At the time of its destruction, Puddle Dock was a working-class community comprising of mostly Irish, Black, Jewish, Eastern and Southern European households. From the late 1800s, Puddle Dock had a reputation in Portsmouth as a slum. It was the center of the city's commercial sex industry, as well as the most demographically diverse part of town. Puddle Dock had long been the target of racist, sexist, xenophobic, and classist scapegoating of various city problems when by the 1950s, when federal funding was made available to US municipalities to redevelop areas deemed "blighted" or "in decay." The neighborhood's destruction represents just one major example in the city's longer history of displacement and exclusion.

Addressing Portsmouth's history of exclusion in events like the "cleaning up" of Puddle Dock allows present-day residents to better frame and understand contemporary instances of displacement through gentrification, a topic frequently explored in creative works by community collaborators of the zine.

Zine Content

Throughout its three issues in summer 2020, the zine addressed issues of belonging in Portsmouth in a number of ways. Each included one or more pieces by the researcher and project head, Mikey Ippolito, on the history of working-class displacement in Portsmouth. These pieces covered topics such as policing, sex work, and cultural alienation in the changing urban environment. Complementing these pieces were various works of original art, photography, memoir, poetry, and persuasive essays from local creators of various working-class backgrounds.

**Full issues can be viewed at
wearestillhereportsmouth.com**

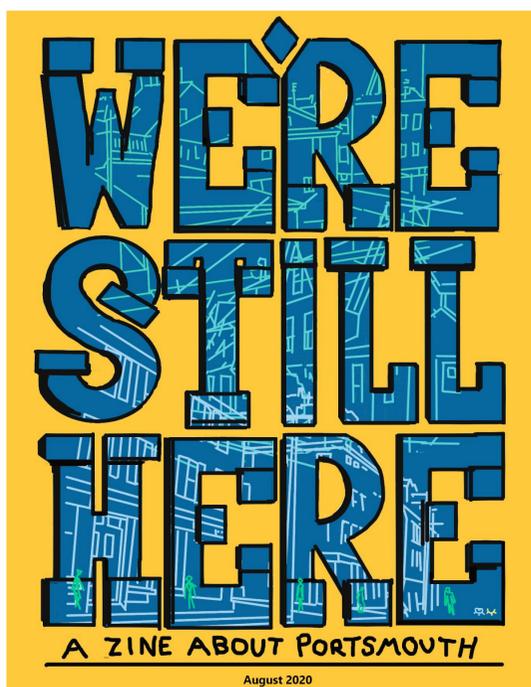


Fig 2: Cover from Issue #3. Art by Tyrell Ellis.



Fig 3: Promotional art for Issue #2, depicting Water Street (now known as Marcy Street), the historical center of Portsmouth's commercial sex industry. Photo courtesy of Strawberry Banke Museum.