



# The Power and Pedagogy of Place: St. Johnsbury Academy's Freshman Humanities Capstone

*Extending the classroom into the community allows students to engage in experiences with local experts and helps foster a deeper connection to the community.*

BY DENISE SCAVITTO

**W**alking through the doors of the St. Johnsbury Athenaeum Art Gallery, my students and I step into the past. Over sixty paintings—religious scenes, landscapes, detailed portraits—grace these walls, hanging above one another, as was the style in the late 1800s. Gilded frames catch the light entering from the skylight above. On the western wall looms the centerpiece of the collection, the colossal ten-by-fifteen-foot painting, *The Domes of the Yosemite* by Albert Bierstadt. Cases line the walls, teeming with rare and antique books from the original library collection. Every detail in the room is exquisite; our twenty students stare in awe at the artwork, the frames, the space, taking it all in. My teaching partner and I exchange a quick glance, knowing these kids are hooked. The Freshman Humanities Capstone, a place-based and project-based initiative, connects the 9th graders at St. Johnsbury Academy with four community partners. The St. Johnsbury Athenaeum, the Fairbanks Museum & Planetarium, Catamount Arts, and the St. Johnsbury History & Heritage Center will become our classrooms for many afternoons, as students work with these local cultural organizations to design, research, and create projects that reflect the values of the local community.

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## THE POWER AND PEDAGOGY OF PLACE: PLACE-BASED AND PROJECT-BASED LEARNING

David Sobel, director at the Center for Place-Based Education at Antioch University New England, defines place-based education as:

[T]he process of using the local community and environment as a starting point to teach concepts in language arts, mathematics, social studies, science and other subjects across the curriculum. Emphasizing hands-on, real-world learning experiences, this approach to education increases academic achievement, helps students develop stronger ties to their community, enhances students' appreciation for the natural world, and creates a heightened commitment to serving as active, contributing citizens. Community vitality and environmental quality are improved through the active engagement of local citizens, community organizations, and environmental resources in the life of the school.<sup>1</sup>

The existing partnerships between St. Johnsbury Academy and local cultural institutions presented the perfect opportunity to pursue an experiment in place-based education with our Freshman Humanities program.

Six years ago, St. Johnsbury Academy created the Freshman Humanities course, a yearlong, team-taught, interdisciplinary course that focuses on key skills such as critical reading, analytical writing, research, and oral communication. It combines students' Social Studies and English courses for the freshman year. The overarching themes of the course focus on explorations of community and identity through world history and cultures. A few years after the program began, we added the Freshman Humanities Capstone project. By exploring the themes of community and identity on a local level, the Freshman Humanities Capstone program allows students to demonstrate their progress with these critical skills at the end of their freshman year.

The first year of the Freshman Humanities Capstone program also coincided with our one-to-one iPad pilot program. The possibilities were exciting: How could we better connect our students with the resources in their community? How could we use this mobile technology to take our students outside of their classrooms to learn? How could we encourage students to create their own original content on the iPads? How could we unleash student creativity and let them develop projects about which they were passionate? When the Freshman Humanities Capstone program began in 2012, we embarked on an experimental year during which students worked in teams with our partner institutions to research, design, and create products for presentation and display. Our students worked collaboratively to define research questions and assign tasks as a team. They worked with local experts to conduct research, including interviews and extensive

work with primary sources. They pitched their ideas about final projects to their Capstone partners, getting feedback and adjusting their work to meet the needs of the audiences who would view it.

Integral to our new project was the role of place. In their introduction to *Place-Based Education in the Global Age*, David Gruenewald and Gregory Smith discuss place-based learning as the “community-based effort to reconnect the process of education, enculturation, and human development to the well-being of community life.”<sup>2</sup> Place is central in grounding us not only in history but also in the current moment. Gruenewald defines place as “a critical cultural and educational construct . . . described as the nexus of culture and environment; places are where we constantly experience their intersection.”<sup>3</sup> Each of these St. Johnsbury cultural institutions represents this intersection of culture and environment; each of these institutions has a unique identity and history, and central to that identity is place.

Extending the classroom into the community allows students to engage in experiences with local experts and helps foster a deeper connection to the community. As Julie Bartsch, educational consultant with The Rural School and Community Trust, notes, “When students’ academic work is linked to the needs, issues, and community development imperatives of the local community, their level of engagement in both academics and community increases.”<sup>4</sup> Through their personal involvement with our partner institutions, students are able to confront local themes and issues that are immediately relevant to the community, presenting them with the opportunity to solve real-world problems. They are intimately immersed in the history of the organization and, by extension, the local community. With many elements of student choice, these place-based projects also make history personally relevant.

Choice is an important element of the project-based learning approach. In the Freshman Humanities Capstone project, not only do students decide where they want to study, but they also help define the scope of the project and its medium. Students work with their community partners to identify a target audience and craft projects that address the needs of that audience, but have choice in how they present what they have learned. Students might create video projects, design websites, or write short stories based on their research. This element of choice allows students to share their voices and interests while challenging them to learn new skills. In short, project-based and place-based learning require creativity, problem solving, long-term planning, and many other life skills, all packed into an authentic assessment. It’s messy, but it’s exciting and rewarding, and teachers have the opportunity to learn alongside their students.

## ART, CULTURE, AND EDUCATION IN ST. JOHNSBURY

The vibrant cultural scene in St. Johnsbury has a long history, much of it relating to the legacy of the Fairbanks family. Arriving in St. Johnsbury in 1815, Joseph and Phoebe Fairbanks and their sons, Thaddeus, Erastus, and Joseph, settled and set up a sawmill and gristmill near the Sleepers River. By 1817, Thaddeus was already making a name for himself designing wagons. In the years that followed, he would also produce cast-iron plows and stoves.<sup>5</sup> Soon, Erastus joined Thaddeus in his manufacturing endeavor, and the two turned their sights to a technological need in the community. Hemp was a lucrative textile commodity, and many local farmers were growing the crop. As Peggy Pearl notes in *A Brief History of St. Johnsbury*, “Hemp was delivered by the wagonload and valued at that time around fifteen dollars a ton. . . . Thaddeus turned his attention to bettering this method of weighing, and the result would be known as the platform scale.”<sup>6</sup>

Thaddeus, Joseph, and Erastus Fairbanks founded E. & T. Fairbanks Company.<sup>7</sup> Each of the three brothers brought unique skills to the company: Joseph was remembered as a capable businessman, whose “alertness of thought and sound judgment won the public confidence and gave steadiness and solid quality to the business.”<sup>8</sup> As the first salesman for the company, he was instrumental in its success. Erastus, who was head of the company for thirty years, “became prominent in public life and a trusted leader in civil affairs; he secured the construction of the Passumpsic River Railroad of which he was president; was made governor of Vermont in 1852; again in 1860, when on the breaking out of the civil war the state placed a million dollars at his disposal, relying solely on his judgment as to its use—a mark of confidence amply justified, for his administration of the state was, like that of his private business, energetic, true, firm, successful.”<sup>9</sup> Thaddeus focused on the mechanical aspects of the business, “continuously advancing on his original invention, constructing special machinery, devising new applications for which he secured a series of patents, thirty-two in number.”<sup>10</sup> As E. & T. Fairbanks Company grew, it received orders from around the world; by September 1887, the company employed around 625 men and was finishing 1,500 scales a week. Even with this staff, they were 5,000 orders behind.<sup>11</sup> Demand for scales and other Fairbanks products continued. The company grew and prospered; in 1916, Edward Fairbanks noted, “the Fairbanks scales keeping abreast of all industrial progress, are now constructed for every department of trade, manufacture, architecture, science, transportation, postal, and government service; and have for many years been the standard both in this country and abroad.”<sup>12</sup>

The Fairbanks family invested their wealth in churches and other pub-

lic organizations in this little town.<sup>13</sup> Their generosity and community commitment created St. Johnsbury Academy in 1842. The Fairbanks brothers planned to establish a school where “youth of both sexes would receive a thorough and systematic mental training . . . [aiming] not so much to the acquisition of knowledge as to the improvement of the mind . . . [fitting] the individual for subsequent self-cultivation.”<sup>14</sup> At the dedication of North Hall in October 1873, Principal Homer Fuller addressed a crowd of 1,200 people, outlining the goals of the Academy: “The aim of this school is to occupy the middle ground between common schools and colleges. To supply an actual need of this region where most towns cannot maintain good high schools, to afford such superior instruction in the classic and higher English branches that no school shall send more thoroughly fitted students to college than this; to offer facilities for good practical education . . . and withal so to develop heart and character that the noblest aspirations may be kindled, and incitements be furnished to the most beneficent labors for humanity.”<sup>15</sup>

In 1873, the Academy was reincorporated to offer technical instruction as well as traditional college preparatory classes. Today, St. Johnsbury Academy, an independent school accredited by the New England Association of Schools and Colleges, has a diverse student body of more than 970 students, and a unique and rich mixture of day and residential students.

Teachers and students at St. Johnsbury Academy are fortunate that within a few minutes’ walk from campus are several cultural gems. Growing up in this town, it is easy to take these treasures for granted, but the Freshman Capstone Program seeks to change that. In December 2015, we brought our students to each of these cultural institutions to learn more about their programs, missions, and identities in preparation for our fourth round of projects in spring 2016.

#### ST. JOHNSBURY ATHENAEUM

In 1871, Horace Fairbanks, son of Erastus and Lois Fairbanks, made a gift of the St. Johnsbury Athenaeum to the town as a free public library.<sup>16</sup> After starting at E. & T. Fairbanks Company as a clerk, Horace became head of the company twenty years later when Erastus died in 1864. In 1876, he became governor of Vermont.<sup>17</sup>

In his brief remarks at the Athenaeum’s opening, Horace Fairbanks said, “It was early a much cherished purpose of mine to place at the disposal of the citizens in this town in my life time, a free public library. My fullest expectations will be realized now if now, and in the coming years, the people make the Athenaeum a favorite place of resort for patient research, reading, and study.”<sup>18</sup> At its opening, the Athenaeum was home

to more than 8,000 volumes in a collection assembled by William F. Poole, an acclaimed librarian who had worked at the Boston Public Library for ten years, and who was sought out by Horace Fairbanks.<sup>19</sup> In the evenings leading up to the official opening of the Athenaeum, a series of lectures on the importance of books and public lecture spaces were given. In one address, Judge Luke Poland noted, “This gift is one of singular munificence. By it, the donor has opened a fountain of learning whose stream will flo on through all time.”<sup>20</sup> Two years after the Athenaeum opened, the art gallery was added; “Horace Fairbanks and his family assembled the bulk of the collection with St. Johnsbury in mind. They recognized the cultural limitations of living in a rural area and sought to offset them by bringing a premier collection of literature (through the library) and art (through the gallery) to their community.”<sup>21</sup> During visits to the Athenaeum, we gazed in awe at Bierstadt’s *The Domes of the Yosemite*, experiencing how the painting changes when viewed in natural versus artificial light. One group of students explored the history of this phenomenal work, including its creation, purchase, and addition to the Athenaeum’s collection. While they found useful information online and in books, the most fascinating finds were in the archival materials housed at the Athenaeum. They sifted through manila folders filled with letters, maintenance receipts, publishing inquiries, and other information about this monumental painting.

Over the course of two years, groups of students developed a digital tour of the Athenaeum’s gallery to be viewed on smartphones. Students selected paintings, researched the paintings and the artists, wrote short descriptions of each work, and created a website for their digital tour. As we explored the gallery, we chatted about the societal values on display in the collection, including a discussion about the artistic and cultural values Horace Fairbanks tried to share with the people of St. Johnsbury in choosing these particular paintings. Exploring the story of *The Domes of the Yosemite* and the Athenaeum gallery, for example, has connected these students to an important place in our community, but also helped spark discussions about local history, the role of public libraries and galleries, and the importance of art as a lens for exploring human expression and a community’s values.

In 2014, one class was particularly thrilling: One group of students had the opportunity to examine a rare and valuable book. They didn’t just stare at it through a display case or stand at attention in a semicircle as an adult held it for them to gawk at. Instead, Bob Joly, the director of the St. Johnsbury Athenaeum, gave them a crash course in the basics of bookbinding and handling delicate artifacts. His hand cradling the spine of a vellum-bound volume from the early 1600s, he first taught them to



*St. Johnsbury Athenaeum gallery, featuring Albert Bierstadt's painting, The Domes of the Yosemite (1867). Photo courtesy of the author, used with permission of the St. Johnsbury Athenaeum.*

support the covers and gently open the book. He then pulled two more books from a stack, explaining how Horace Fairbanks had filled the original Athenaeum collection with many books imported from London, bound in beautiful green-and-red leather, the titles embossed in gold leaf on the spines. The books were meant to inspire awe and reverence, and as the students delicately thumbed through these volumes over fourteen decades later, the effect was not lost on them. One tome dominated nearly a quarter of the table—one volume of *The Holy Land, Syria, Idumea, Arabia, Egypt, & Nubia*, a collection of illustrations by David Roberts transformed into lithographs by Louis Haghe, accompanied by historical descriptions by William Brockedon. The students were fascinated by the intricate depictions of Egyptian temples, pyramids, and the Sphinx; things they have studied in class came to life in these striking images in their hands.

As the students handled this volume from 1842, they rested the front cover on another book in an effort to protect the spine. They gingerly turned the pages, noticing the details of the marbled paper inside the cover and the discoloration of the creamy pages over the past 170 years.

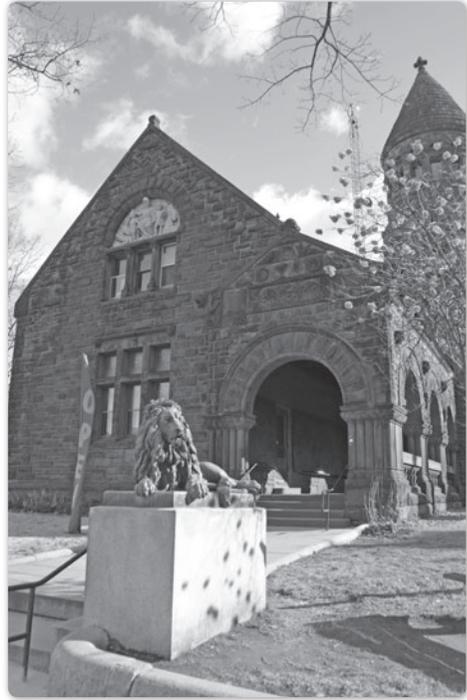
As their classmates wandered in from other rooms and other research projects, the group studying rare books proudly shared what they had learned, and suddenly this book—this historical document and artifact—had gone viral. The group buzzed all the way back to campus about their Egyptian adventure. In the months to come, they had this and other volumes by Roberts to explore.

Several individual and group projects were inspired by the students' visits to the Athenaeum. In the spring of 2014, students created a digital map helping visitors understand the landscape in Bierstadt's *The Domes of the Yosemite*. This interactive map includes pins that describe landmarks like Half Dome, Cloud Rest, and Upper Yosemite Falls. Inspired by the paintings in the art gallery, several students wrote short stories and poetry to be shared with visitors to the gallery. Fascinated by the architecture of the Athenaeum, two teams of students created a website about the architectural features of the building and also explored the history of several of the rooms from the opening of the Athenaeum to now.

Through the Freshman Humanities Capstone project, groups of students have explored the Athenaeum's gallery, the book collection, the intricacies of the building's architecture, and folder after folder of archival materials about this institution and its holdings. These projects are deeply rooted in the history and identity of the St. Johnsbury Athenaeum. As the students began primary source research, worked with the Athenaeum staff, and created original content, they also forged deeper connections with and took active roles in the local community.

#### FAIRBANKS MUSEUM & PLANETARIUM

The Fairbanks Museum & Planetarium, founded by Franklin Fairbanks in 1889 and opened to the public in 1891, houses an impressive and eclectic collection of natural and cultural history items. Franklin Fairbanks, brother of Horace, also worked at E. & T. Fairbanks Company in all the departments of the scale business. He became a partner in the company in 1856 and, in 1888, head of the company.<sup>22</sup> His personal collection dominated the third floor of his family home at Undercliffe, which he opened to the public on Sunday afternoons; it included "approximately 450 birds, various rocks and minerals of all shapes and sizes and artifacts from countries such as Egypt, Japan and India."<sup>23</sup> He and his wife, Frances, continued to add to the collection and worked with Lambert Packard to design a museum to house it and better share these treasures with the people of St. Johnsbury. The museum building itself is beautiful; the red sandstone building, built in Richardson Romanesque style, is decorated with carved faces high-



*Fairbanks Museum,  
St. Johnsbury, Vermont, 2015.  
Photo courtesy of the author.*

lighting important natural scientists, and a limestone carving featuring Minerva faces Main Street. Inside, an oak, barrel-vaulted ceiling runs the length of the building, “an architectural marvel.”<sup>24</sup> What started as a hobby has grown to a collection of over 75,000 specimens and 95,000 historical artifacts,<sup>25</sup> as well as a public planetarium, Balch Nature School, and the Northern New England Weather Center that has been responsible for the “Eye on the Sky” forecasts on Vermont Public Radio since 1981.<sup>26</sup>

The excursion to the Fairbanks Museum & Planetarium in December 2014 started with an introduction to the organization’s history. Throughout the course of the day, Leila Nordmann, director of programs, museum educator Bobby Farlice-Rubio, and science educator interns Jaelyn Mertz and Na Na Zhan introduced the 200 freshmen to the museum collection. As students wandered the main floor, many of them reminisced about field trips to the museum during grade school. Students were able to go behind the scenes, entering the basement storage, archives, and office area. As they wandered through rows of materials not on display, they asked excellent questions. Where did these items come from? Why weren’t they upstairs on display? Had

they ever been on display? This became an opportunity to discuss a possible project topic, and a chance for students to explore the intricate details of the creation of museum displays, as well as the decisions that go into creating a public exhibit. Back on the main floor, they wandered to their favorite animals, snapped photos with their iPads, and made notes about the specimens in the cases. They climbed the narrow stairs to tour the balcony. Students lingered at displays of coins, dolls from around the world, and fossils. They stared at images of snowflakes and chatted about Wilson “Snowflake” Bentley. They viewed historic postcards of St. Johnsbury and pointed out images of the St. Johnsbury Athenaeum and the Masonic Temple. They stopped at a display about St. Johnsbury in the Civil War and marveled over weapons, uniforms, and photographs of people who lived in this town long ago. Continuing to the Lyman Spitzer Jr. Planetarium, students gazed at the domed ceiling as they learned more about NASA’s Orion spacecraft, which launched that day.

In previous years, our students created a digital tour of the Fairbanks Museum & Planetarium for younger students. Using the floor plan of the museum as a framework, they highlighted several exhibits. This digital tour was intended to connect younger students to this fascinating place. Other groups researched the history of Franklin Fairbanks and his family, working closely with archivist Pat Swartz. Some groups have been intrigued by the planetarium, working to research the mythology behind the constellations in our night sky. Others worked with the staff at the weather center, including Mark Breen, Lawrence Hayes, and Steve Maleski, to research extreme weather events in Vermont. The students’ work culminated in a website about floods and hurricanes in Vermont, highlighting the Flood of 1927, the Great New England Hurricane of 1938, and, more recently, Tropical Storm Irene (2011). These planetarium and weather projects are intrinsically connected to place; they relate not only to the programs and resources of the Fairbanks Museum & Planetarium, but also specifically focus on our region. Researching the constellations in our night sky at different times of the year helps connect students with regional history, including exploring history and mythology, as they seek to understand how those who came before them explained the world around them. The weather project not only attuned students to weather patterns and history, but also gets to the crux of human and environmental interactions. They learned about more than storms and the science behind them, but also how these events affected people of this region. In these interdisciplinary projects, these groups of students became better grounded in these subjects as well as the local community.

## CATAMOUNT ARTS

Newer institutions make a mark on the town as well. Just down the hill is Catamount Arts, founded in 1975 to further incorporate the arts into the St. Johnsbury community. From its inception, “Integration of the arts into community life has been [Catamount’s] guiding principle and we attempt to cultivate awareness and appreciation of the arts through a diversified schedule of film, music, theater, dance, and the visual arts.”<sup>27</sup> Catamount Arts brings stellar performances to the Northeast Kingdom, hosts a variety of lectures and film screenings, and facilitates art outreach programs for local students.

Once located in the old post office on Eastern Avenue in St. Johnsbury, several years ago Catamount Arts opened next door in the Masonic Temple. Built in 1912, the temple was given to Catamount Arts by the Passumpsic Lodge to be converted into a new arts center. Catamount Arts embarked on an impressive capital campaign, raising money to renovate the space with support from local businesses and the community. St. Johnsbury Academy’s building trades classes did much of the building renovations, further strengthening the bond between these two institutions. Since moving to the refurbished space in 2008, “the new Community Arts Center features two movie theaters, allowing Catamount Arts to present a regular schedule of acclaimed foreign-language and independent films; two state-of-the-art classrooms, which are used for art, computer, and music education; an 80-seat performance space dedicated to regular performances by local artists; and a gallery showcasing local and area artists’ work.”<sup>28</sup> Working with more than twenty partners throughout the region, Catamount Arts enriches the St. Johnsbury community by providing access to high-quality artists and experiences, both local and regional.

When we visited Catamount Arts with our students in December 2014, Jerry Aldredge, Catamount’s artistic director, greeted us. As they sat in a cozy theater, students learned about the many facets of Catamount Arts, including the performances of all kinds they sponsor and host, the gallery displays, the films that play there, the arts programs for children, and the new Catamount Outback Artspace, home to workshops, camps, and performances. Students light up when talking about Teen Open Mic Night, and start scheming about what their projects could look like. How could they promote Open Mic to their musician peers? Why are performance opportunities so important for young artists? What is the role of art in a community? These larger discussions came alive because of our situation in this place that values and prioritizes art and performance.



*Catamount Arts building, St. Johnsbury. Photo courtesy of the author.*

In 2014, several groups of students were interested in the history of the Masonic Temple. They were intrigued by the history of the Masons in St. Johnsbury. As they conducted their research, students were invited to explore the physical space of the Masonic Temple; the lodge is still active and uses the top floor of the building as its meeting space. They researched the history of the Freemasons and the rules and guidelines of the organization. They even had the opportunity to interview some local members, learning about the importance of symbols, and how this Masonic group connects with others throughout the area. In their research, they learned about the sister groups such as the Order of the Eastern Star, interviewing members of this organization as well. Overall, the guiding theme of what students learned focused on community; in their research and interviews, they repeatedly encountered programs such as the Shriner's Hospital and other aspects of the Masons' community outreach.

In another Humanities section, students were excited to showcase the variety of programming at Catamount Arts. Throughout the course of their research, these students filmed events each day at the arts center, highlighting community conversations, dance lessons, stu-

dent art camps, film screenings, and more, and then compiled their interviews into a short documentary. While filming, the students interacted with dozens of community members and a number of staff members at Catamount Arts, including Executive Director Jody Fried, Arts Education Coordinator Anne Campbell, and several interns from Lyndon State College. The students were introduced to a variety of programs they hadn't known about before. Looking ahead, project possibilities include highlighting local musicians and identifying musical genres that are prevalent in this area. Students can explore how music plays a role in defining and showcasing a region's identity. All of these projects better connected students with the local arts community, with Catamount Arts serving as the cornerstone of these place-based projects.

### ST. JOHNSBURY HISTORY & HERITAGE CENTER

The new kid on the block, the St. Johnsbury History & Heritage Center, started its fundraising campaign in the fall of 2013 to purchase a permanent home for its growing collection of artifacts that tell the story of St. Johnsbury's history:

The Center's vision is to provide a stimulating environment for the citizens of the St. Johnsbury community . . . in order to celebrate and enrich the town's history. By engaging people of all ages, the Center builds the foundation of its beliefs and objectives on the importance of preserving history, teaching history, exhibiting history and instilling history for generations to come. The Center's primary focus is to preserve the valuable collections while promoting history education for all of St. Johnsbury's students. The Center's educational vision is to inspire an appreciation of St. Johnsbury's history and traditions and to build a historical foundation and understandings of our collective past for our community's future leaders.<sup>29</sup>

After an extensive search, the St. Johnsbury History & Heritage Center settled on 421 Summer Street as a permanent home. The house offers plenty of space for exhibits, archival storage, offices, and a classroom. There is a large barn in the back that can house larger items, such as a Fairbanks wagon and platform scale. Financial support in the form of a grant and donations from the St. Johnsbury community and many St. Johnsbury Academy alumni made the vision of a permanent home a reality. After extensive fundraising, the St. Johnsbury History & Heritage Center officially purchased this property in August 2014. Renovations have been underway ever since with the help of the St. Johnsbury Academy building trades classes and the St. Johnsbury Work Camp. The St. Johnsbury History & Heritage Center formally opened its doors to the public in the fall of 2015.

As the class tromped through frozen sludge to the old Summer Street School to meet with St. Johnsbury History & Heritage Center Director Peggy Pearl, students chatted nervously about their topics. One group was interested in the Civil War. Some were curious about how the town had changed over the years. One student was hoping to learn more about a relative, John Belknap, who had made exquisite rifles in the 1800s. Ms. Pearl greeted us with a stack of fascinating resources. Sprawled on tables were maps, books, newspaper clippings, magazine articles, photographs, and postcards. With a wealth of stories about town history, she led us down paths of increasingly interesting discussions on topics ranging from Thaddeus Fairbanks to steeplejacks to family mansions and beyond.

The students interested in the Civil War's impact on St. Johnsbury searched for the names of soldiers buried in the local cemetery. Once they had selected soldiers to research, they examined *Soldiers' Record of the Town of St. Johnsbury, Vermont, in the War of the Rebellion, 1861-5*. These students sifted through the archives at the Fairbanks Museum, occasionally hitting the jackpot and finding a receipt of payment for the



*St. Johnsbury History & Heritage Center, 2015. Photo courtesy of the author.*

soldier's service, or a handwritten account of the soldier's life in a book of memories from the Chamberlin Post chapter of the Grand Army of the Republic in St. Johnsbury. They explored records at the Town Clerk's office, looking for land deeds and other documents that would help tell the story of each soldier's life. They searched old newspapers for marriage announcements, other news stories, and obituaries. Students learned about the battles of the Civil War to better understand the experiences of their chosen soldiers, but also to consider the people remaining in St. Johnsbury while the soldiers were in combat. They found the stories of wives and children, parents and siblings. The students' work culminated in biographies about these soldiers. These biographies became the scripts for actors portraying these soldiers at the St. Johnsbury History & Heritage Center's annual Ghost Walk in August 2015. Throughout this project, students developed historical empathy, helping them understand the Civil War not only as a series of battles and dates, but as a conflict waged and endured by real people from their hometown.

Another group pored over historic photographs from *Streets, Public Buildings and General Views of St. Johnsbury, Vermont*, published by F. O. Clark in 1884. They were fascinated by the changes in town over the past 130 years. Several students elected to research the buildings featured in these gorgeous black-and-white photographs; they researched the history, construction, and use of buildings long gone or that remain standing today. On walks to and from the St. Johnsbury History & Heritage Center, they clamored to point out familiar buildings and spot even the slightest changes in these landmarks. They learned about the local YMCA that stood just across from the courthouse. They traced the history of Pinehurst, once the family home of Horace Fairbanks, later the Maple Grove Inn and Tea Room, and now the home of the St. Johnsbury Elks Club. Walking back to campus, they looked at Main Street in a whole new light, pointing out churches and where buildings such as the Musical Hall once stood. Their research, written up in the form of blog posts on their website, *Historic Photos of St. Johnsbury: Then & Now*, featured Clark's original image paired with a photo of the building (or where it once stood) today, as well as a description of its history. The website showcases the work of three teams of students from three different classes, and, with more than two dozen photos remaining in the book, can be added to by future Humanities students. These projects are unique to the history of this town, and allow students to explore this history and become better connected to the community where they live, and to see history as something relevant to their lives today.

### STRONG COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS

These community partnerships are invigorating for adults and students alike. As Delia Clark notes in *Learning to Make Choices for the Future*, “The development of deep and multifaceted educational partnerships also results in the growth of social capital, that invisible web of trust and reciprocity that supports community vitality. In this collaborative environment, students are seen as a community asset, and their energy, enthusiasm and fresh outlook are welcomed.”<sup>30</sup> Our students leave campus to explore new spaces and work with local experts. They take in the opportunities that are available in this area, learning about the missions of local arts and culture institutions. They conduct research and interviews. They make determinations about the needs of particular audiences and create projects that address those needs. They work in a variety of media, creating a website, a video, a pamphlet, or physical display. Many groups also share their work with an audience outside of the school, and have their work on display or being used by our cultural partners.

Whether wandering the Athenaeum gallery, poring over photos at the St. Johnsbury History & Heritage Center, listening to student performances at Catamount Arts, or puzzling over a specimen at the Fairbanks Museum & Planetarium, because of this project, the 9th graders at St. Johnsbury Academy are better connected with the local community. Place-based and project-based learning are exciting initiatives; we are part of a different kind of learning that happens outside classroom walls, working to “reconnect kids to the magical and practical mysteries and truths of their native surroundings; and connect ordinary citizens to the responsibilities of community stewardship and civic life.”<sup>31</sup> Each project, like each of our students, is unique.

While the program has evolved over the past few years, the essential components remain the same. Throughout this project, students are connecting the course theme of identity to the learning that is happening outside of the classroom. In our Freshman Humanities program, we examine how texts, practices, and cultural artifacts inform us about a culture’s identity. The Freshman Humanities Capstone Project transfers these ideas to the real world as students seek to understand and represent the identity of these local cultural treasures.

By connecting students more intimately with local institutions, this unique place-based learning opportunity engages them in exciting ways. Students are passionate, creative, and energized. They start to see themselves as valuable members of our community whose voices should be heard, as they, too, play a role in defining its identity.

## NOTES

This article about place-based learning and the Freshman Humanities Capstone program at St. Johnsbury Academy is based on several presentations, including those made at meetings of the New England Historical Association and the National Council for the Social Studies.

<sup>1</sup> David Sobel, *Place-Based Education: Connecting Classrooms & Communities*, Nature Literacy Series 4 (Great Barrington, Mass.: The Orion Society, 2005), 7.

<sup>2</sup> David Gruenewald and Gregory Smith, introduction to *Place-Based Education in the Global Age*, ed. David A. Gruenewald and Gregory A. Smith (New York: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2008), xvi.

<sup>3</sup> David A. Gruenewald, "Place-Based Education: Grounding Culturally Responsive Teaching in Geographical Diversity," in Gruenewald and Smith, eds., *Place-Based Education in the Global Age*, 145.

<sup>4</sup> Julia Bartsch, "Youth as Resources in Revitalizing Communities," in Gruenewald and Smith, eds., *Place-Based Education in the Global Age*, 68.

<sup>5</sup> Peggy Pearl, *A Brief History of St. Johnsbury* (Charleston, S.C.: History Press, 2009), 31.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 33-34.

<sup>7</sup> Edward T. Fairbanks, *The Town of St. Johnsbury Vt.: A Review of One Hundred Twenty-Five Years to the Anniversary Pageant of 1912* (St. Johnsbury, Vt.: Cowles Press, 1914), 414.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 414.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 415.

<sup>11</sup> Pearl, *A Brief History of St. Johnsbury*, 38.

<sup>12</sup> Fairbanks, *The Town of St. Johnsbury*, 418.

<sup>13</sup> Mark D. Mitchell, *St. Johnsbury Athenaeum Handbook of the Art Collection* (Lunenburg, Vt.: Steinehour Press, 2005), 13.

<sup>14</sup> Richard Beck, *A Proud Tradition, a Bright Future: A Sesquicentennial History of St. Johnsbury Academy* (St. Johnsbury, Vt.: St. Johnsbury Academy, 1992), 13-14.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

<sup>16</sup> St. Johnsbury Athenaeum, "The Athenaeum at a Glance," [http://stjathenaeum.org/docs/stj\\_at\\_a\\_glance.pdf](http://stjathenaeum.org/docs/stj_at_a_glance.pdf), accessed December 2, 2014.

<sup>17</sup> Pearl, *A Brief History of St. Johnsbury*, 63.

<sup>18</sup> Fairbanks, *The Town of St. Johnsbury*, 322.

<sup>19</sup> Pearl, *A Brief History of St. Johnsbury*, 65.

<sup>20</sup> Fairbanks, *The Town of St. Johnsbury*, 322.

<sup>21</sup> Mitchell, *St. Johnsbury Athenaeum Handbook*, 13.

<sup>22</sup> Pearl, *A Brief History of St. Johnsbury*, 66.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 67.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 68-69.

<sup>25</sup> Fairbanks Museum & Planetarium, "Fairbanks Museum & Planetarium: History," <http://www.fairbanksmuseum.org/history>, accessed December 15, 2014.

<sup>26</sup> Fairbanks Museum & Planetarium, "Why Is the Museum Involved with Weather?" <http://www.fairbanksmuseum.org/AboutEOTS>, accessed December 15, 2014.

<sup>27</sup> Catamount Arts, "History of Catamount," <http://www.catamountarts.org/about-us/history/>, accessed December 15, 2014.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> St. Johnsbury History & Heritage Center, "About Us," <http://stjhistory.org/wordpress/about-us/>, accessed December 15, 2014.

<sup>30</sup> Delia Clark, et al., *Learning to Make Choices for the Future: Connecting Public Lands, Schools and Communities through Place-Based Learning and Civic Engagement* (The Center for Place-based Learning and Community Engagement and a Forest for Every Classroom, December 2008), 10.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

St. Johnsbury Community Archives Guide to Historic Records. List of resources available about town history, sorted by topic (agriculture, business & industry, etc.) These resources can be accessed at the St. Johnsbury Athenaeum, St. Johnsbury Academy, Fairbanks Museum, Town Offices, etc. Download PDF here. The Town of St. Johnsbury Vt : A Review of One Hundred Twenty-Five Years to the Anniversary Pageant 1912 by Edward T. Fairbanks. Comprehensive history of the town of St. Johnsbury up to 1912. Printed in 1914. (600 pages). Search content for keywords (example: MASONIC) on Google books Dow St. Johnsbury Academy is a highly rated, private, boarding school located in St. Johnsbury, VT. It has 971 students in grades 9-12 with a student-teacher ratio of 8 to 1. Tuition is \$56,500 for the highest grade offered. After graduation, 93% of students from this school go on to attend a 4-year college. About St. Johnsbury Academy AP Offered. Boarding.