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SENIOR HELPS UNCOVER PAST

HISTORY MAJOR INTERNEED WITH ST. LUKE'S HISTORIC CHURCH.

by [Jane Heeter](#) | March 3, 2021*Read time: about 2 min*

Just a few miles across the James River from Christopher Newport stands St. Luke's Historic Church and Museum, Virginia's oldest church building. No longer an active congregation, today St. Luke's in Smithfield is preserved as a museum, interpreting both the site's history and the overall development of religious freedom in America – and senior Brooke Weber '21 helped unlock more of its story.

Weber, a [history](#) major minoring in childhood studies, interned for the museum and worked on its "Out of the Ashes" project. The undertaking involves identifying people seen on film reels from the 1950s, recorded around the time that Historic St. Luke's Restoration was launched in order to preserve the church building, still standing even though it was last home to regular services in 1836. The reels were pulled from a fire in 2005 which destroyed some of the organization's corporate records, so they are a critical link to the past.

Weber's work entailed looking through the black and white digitized files, pulling images to be shared on social media in hopes of identifying who is in them. Some of the footage shows people touring the building, while other videos served as a national pitch to solicit funds to help with the preservation of the church. Many of the photos Weber shared involve groups of young children who visited the church building as it was restored in the 1950s.

"Smithfield is a pretty small town," Weber said. "I knew my highest success rate would be using Facebook to then reach out to the local community and see if they recognized anyone. It only takes one person to be like, 'Oh, that's Mr. Smith, he did this, this and this,' especially since the 1950s weren't too long ago."

“Most of them should hopefully still be local and remember what they did during their time at St. Luke’s.”

Weber’s supervisor was education coordinator Rachel Popp ‘16, who, like Weber, majored in history and minored in childhood studies. Popp helped provide guidance even as the COVID-19 pandemic altered the usual structure of the internship.

“In the future, this collected information may be used in several ways as our museum and historic site continues to expand. It may assist genealogists in their research, educate the public and bring our history to life in fascinating exhibits about the 1950s Restoration of the church building, or prove to facilitate new relationships with members of our community, etc.,” Popp said. “For now, the goal is to collect and preserve the information for future generations. The options for the exhibits, activities, blogs, research that can come from what is collected in this project are almost unlimited.”

Weber is still deciding what path she wants to take after graduation, whether it be in education, history or archaeology. For now, she said, seeing Popp and her colleagues at St. Luke’s helped highlight the importance of loving what you do.

“Everyone is so passionate about the museum and all the work that they’re doing,” she said. “That was really cool to see that it’s not just, ‘I go to work every day, from 9-5, this is what I do.’ They live and breathe St. Luke’s.”
