Describe how you see this project furthering your research goals

This project is an interdisciplinary collaboration of historians, historic preservationists, material culture scholars, and experts in digital humanities to engage a group of undergraduate students in the research and development of a self-guided tour of the Nightingale-Brown House (NBH). Students will learn research and digital skills; participate in a team project; and contribute to on-going research that preserves and presents one of the most important historic houses in Rhode Island to the university and the larger community.

Built in 1792, the NBH was the home of five generations of the Brown family and has been the headquarters of the John Nicholas Brown Center for Public Humanities and Cultural Heritage since 1993, and part of Brown University since 1995. Five rooms in the NBH were restored to their mid-20th century appearance during rehabilitation of the building in 1987-1993. These rooms contain historic furniture, fine and decorative arts, and interior finishes reflecting two-hundred years of Brown family collecting and the lifestyle of John Nicholas Brown II, Anne S. K. Brown, and their family. The NBH is architecturally and historically significant and was designated a National Historic Landmark by the Department of the Interior. The NBH is open to students, parents, faculty, funders, and Brown staff during Commencement, Parents’ Weekend, Staff Development Day, and a variety of programs and events sponsored by the public humanities program. There are frequent requests for tours of the NBH, which cannot always be fulfilled by staff.

Through this UTRA, students will create a self-guided tour of the NBH using a digital platform. Visitors will be able to check out iPads or tablets provided by the Center and explore the NBH on their own. This is consistent with research and current best practices in the museum field that suggest a self-guided experience be included with other tour options to suit the needs of people with diverse learning styles. The Center for Public Humanities sponsored a national conference, The New Tour: Innovations in Place-Based Storytelling, in September and learned a lot about how tours might best be structured. This UTRA project grows directly from the speakers and discussion of that conference as we plan how best to apply what we learned to our own work.

The project will be coordinated by Ron Potvin, Assistant Director and Curator of the John Nicholas Brown Center and Adjunct Lecturer in American Studies, and the Center’s Director and Professor of American Studies Susan Smulyan in collaboration with Postdoctoral Fellow in Digital Public Humanities James McGrath. Potvin teaches courses on museum collections and historic house museums focusing on the interpretation of historic spaces and objects; Smulyan is an expert in twentieth century cultural history; and McGrath has overseen a series of large digital projects, including Our Marathon.
Students will research the historic use of the restored spaces and their objects, identify appropriate media, write text, and identify a digital resource to serve as the platform for a self-guided tour. Many primary source materials about the house and its inhabitants exist in the archives of the JNBC but others need to be discovered in the John Hay Library, the John Carter Brown Library, and the Rhode Island Historical Society. Students will learn to:

- Use primary and secondary sources to study history
- Become fluent in the methods and vocabulary of material culture
- Improve and refine skills in writing for a broad public audience
- Become familiar with digital resources such as Omeka and WordPress
- Understand theories and methods of historic interpretation

The skills and knowledge that students gain will help them in jobs in non-profit cultural management or in a graduate school application to history, museum studies, or American Studies programs.

Describe why more than one student is necessary for this particular project

Five students would be an ideal number for this project. Students will work as a team to identify themes, research methods and approaches, and to build the digital resource. They will work individually (one student for each room) to research the spaces and their objects. Potvin and Smulyan will meet with the students weekly to provide guidance and to gauge progress. McGrath will join weekly meetings as needed and be available to trouble-shoot digital applications. This project builds upon research conducted by Public Humanities MA student Sarah Dylla into best practices for use of digital platforms in museums and historic places. Dylla will present her findings to the students involved in this project.

Generally describe any previous research collaboration, if any, with undergraduates.

Potvin’s teaching includes significant research and interpretation projects involving undergraduates. In his course on historic house museums, students researched the lives of enslaved persons and of women and children who lived in the Governor Stephen Hopkins House in Providence. The students wrote interpretation plans for the museum based on this research. Another class researched the history of the Cadman-White-Handy House in Westport, MA, and developed a fourth grade curriculum plan based upon Massachusetts educational standards and Common Core Curriculum Standards. As part of Potvin’s course on museum collections and collecting, students studied collections at the Benefit Street Arsenal and catalogued them using a common museum software program. Smulyan has worked with UTRAs for many years, most recently in a digital project that highlighted the research of first
year seminar students about Providence cultural organizations. You can see the resulting website here.