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Newport Historical Society's Essay Contest Winners Going to See *Hamilton: An American Musical*

Rhode Island has been a place of many firsts – innovation runs deep in the Ocean State. It's the first place in the modern world to incorporate the revolutionary principle of religious freedom in its governing documents. That idea and the related concept of separation of church and state went on to sweep the world. Today these principles are included in the U.S. Constitution, the Bill of Rights and the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Just a little more than 100 years later, Rhode Islanders changed the world again – this time by starting the Industrial Revolution in America. What will come next?

At the end of last year, the Newport Historical Society challenged Rhode Island's high school sophomores to imagine the future by thinking about the past. In a contest entitled *Writing your Way to Hamilton: Big Ideas for a Changing World*, students were asked to be inspired by Rhode Island's history and write an essay describing what is happening or could happen in their communities that might change the world.

Ten winners will be heading to NYC in April to see the award-winning *Hamilton, An American Musical*. *Hamilton* is an appropriate prize, as it represents individuals, many of them quite young, who allowed themselves to recognize that the world was changing and to think in new ways, and thus helped move that change forward and establish this great nation.

Submissions from all five of Rhode Island's counties focused on several broad themes, demonstrating the deep concerns of young people in our state: the environment and energy; tolerance and diversity; the value of community; economic development; and the state of their education and the educational experiences. Writers reflected the diversity of our state, were male and female, and represented (as the contest required) public, charter, and other non-tuition schools.

On the environment and energy, students wrote about sea-level rise, wind energy and banning plastic bags. Throughout, these young people exhibit a strong desire for the Ocean State to take a leadership role in changing habits and use patterns in support of the world's environment.

On tolerance and diversity, we learned that Rhode Island's young people are proud of our shared history of tolerance of difference. They wish to encourage a world that recognizes the value of living in concert with others who worship, speak and love in all the various ways that humans express themselves.

On the value of community, students wrote about institutions and individuals that improve lives in their towns, and also touched on the things that are *not* working.

The themes of economic improvement and education wound through many of the essays, but some wrote specifically on how an openness to the world, and rethinking educational methodologies, would focus this State on a fast-approaching future, and potentially set an example for the world at large.

Students cited Rhode Island's history, quoted from Roger Williams and Alexander Hamilton, and researched climate, educational and economic data from national sources to make their arguments about how we should move forward. They considered the roles of individuals, community organizations, and the government. They thought about how, structurally, we work for change. "To produce the desirable changes," one wrote, quoting the federalist Alexander Hamilton, "may therefore require the incitement and patronage of government."

All of the essays were thought-provoking, and from them the judges selected ten winners, two from each county. They are:

Mary Breen	Classical High School
Rebecca Carcieri	Toll Gate High School
Emily Gorman	Barrington High School
Genevieve Laprade	North Kingstown High School
Mollie McGrady	Narragansett High School
Callie Rathbun	North Kingstown High School
George Saban	North Providence High School
Sophia Smerkar	Coventry High School
Athena Vieira	East Bay Met School
Sam Wohlever	Barrington High School

An event celebrating all of the thoughtful young people who entered the contest will be held in the State Library at the Statehouse on April 10th, and two of the winning essays will be highlighted on the Newport Historical Society's website in April.