“We are very lucky to live in Stamford.”

This was Claudia Wolen’s simple yet powerful message throughout the Time Travelers’ program at Northeast school in Stamford.

Time Travelers is an interactive activity to show young learners how Stamford has grown since 1699 to the city we all know and love today. Using a large map of Stamford spread on the classroom carpet, a group of 16 second graders gathered around to listen and assist Ms. Wolen as she told the story of Stamford’s history. Students were provided three painted blocks each at random, and worked to place and move their blocks on the map as the story unfolded. This aided the second graders in learning about the shifting of natural resources and expanding population in a fun, accessible way. While examining Stamford’s changes on a broad scale, Ms. Wolen also wove in the specific story of the Hoyt house, Stamford’s oldest, and how this historical landmark has survived the changes in Stamford’s developmental journey.

The key question of the day was: “Is Stamford rural, suburban, or urban?” Throughout the exercise, Wolen had several check-in moments with the students, confirming the points at which Stamford passed through these three stages.

By the end of the exercise, with a map full of blocks ranging from trees and animals to houses and municipal buildings, the students saw the proof before them that, in the diverse Stamford of today, the answer to this question is, in fact, all three.

“As I tell the story of Stamford, I’ll ask you to place your blocks on the map.” At this moment, Ms. Wolen moved through the students one-by-one, handing out three blocks to each
student. Their excitement quickly grew, as the students began comparing their blocks. Some students had blocks of trees, others farm animals, still others with houses small and large, and blocks painted with public buildings such as a school, the police and fire departments, and town hall.

The students wanted to know, who had what? And why? The answer to the latter question became clear as Ms. Wolen’s story of Stamford progressed.

Now the activity could begin in earnest. As Wolen told the early days of Stamford’s Native Americans, it was time to track the use of resources, with the handy aids of the painted blocks. After explaining the Native Americans’ use of Stamford’s natural resources, particularly how the seasons affected their food sources, Wolen called for all students holding the blocks painted with trees to place them inland on the large map of Stamford, symbolizing the woods that were crucial for the Native Americans’ survival.

As the students completed this task, Wolen reiterated her earlier theme of appreciating Stamford, telling the students, “the Native Americans loved to live here.”

After taking a few minutes to paint a broad picture of the Pilgrims’ settling in Stamford for context, Ms. Wolen turned to the iconic Samuel Hoyt, beginning a tie-in to the Hoyt House, Stamford’s oldest house. This property, as Wolen explained to the students, remains a historical artifact available to Stamford’s community today. Wolen asked again for the students’ assistance, as she explained, “Samuel Hoyt built himself a tiny house,” and to symbolize the house and the small, but growing population of early settlers, Wolen tasked the students holding blocks for small houses to place them on the map, alongside the trees. At the same time, students with farm-animal blocks were asked to place them in the mix. As Wolen returned their
discussion to Stamford’s larger development through the stages of rural, suburban and urban, she would later return to the Hoyt house, as an example of the preservation of history.

Now it was then time for Wolen’s first check-in with the students. Looking over the assembled collection of blocks painted with trees, farm animals, and houses, Wolen had the students count up the number of houses, guiding the students toward the conclusion that, at this point, Stamford fell under the category of a “rural” settlement.

With this, it was next time to take the students on the next step of their journey—Stamford’s transformation from rural to suburban. The group began their discussion of Stamford’s early population boom, as Stamford enticed many passengers on the newly established railroad as a promising place to find work. Wolen asked the student holding on to a block with a picture of a train to place it down on the map’s railroad marker. Wolen showed the students just how monumental this development was to Stamford’s natural makeup, as Wolen asked the students to push the tree blocks further inland, as they were used to build more houses, while pushing the animal blocks further inland, and placing all blocks of medium-sized on the map. Finally, Wolen asked the student with a block painted with a school to place it down, marking the construction of Stamford’s first school.

While illustrating the quick rush of these large-scale changes, Wolen again turned to the Hoyt house, and how it was caught up in these rapid developments. Following the death of Samuel Hoyt and his wife, the Hoyt house fell into disrepair, suffering over time from broken windows, stairs rotted, peeling paint and the like. Wolen explained how the house was effectively pushed to the side as the buzzing city and its citizens left the house unnoticed. For a further visual aid for the students, Ms. Wolen showed pictures from the picture-book- *The Little
Red House which is based on the changes through time that occur to a house very like the Hoyt house.

Now came Wolen’s second check-in with the students. In looking over the expansion of these buildings on the map, the group agreed that Stamford had now shifted from the rural to the suburban.

The group was now entering the final of the three main stages of Stamford’s development, growing from suburban to urban. Telling the story of Stamford’s ever-increasing population, it was time for the students to put down blocks to “build” crucial community buildings, including the fire department, town hall, police station, grocery store, a larger school and even more houses and condos to accommodate people moving in. Wolen then pulled back once more, to ask if Stamford was now closest to being rural, suburban or urban—the answer, the class decided, was urban.

Bringing the story of Stamford full-circle, Ms. Wolen asked the students to turn to their neighbor and decide whether Stamford was now truly rural, suburban, or urban. Does the Stamford of today fall so neatly into one of the three categories? In their small groups, the students could be heard enthusiastically telling their classmates what they thought, using the blocks placed on the map to back up their answers.

While the students’ answers varied from group to group, Wolen surprised the class by explaining, “here’s the cool thing: Stamford is all three!” This elicited a big reaction from the children, who looked on as Ms. Wolen pointed to the different blocks, showing how different parts of Stamford tend toward the different categories. As Wolen told the class, “We are very lucky to live in a place that is rural, urban and suburban.” Once more, Wolen succeeded in bringing home the key idea of the day: “We are very lucky to live in Stamford!”
Reaching the end of the exercise, Wolen drew the students’ attention, one more time, to the Hoyt house. Wolen told the students the story of how the Hoyt house was nearly demolished, and how it was saved by a small but powerful group of concerned citizens. Wolen and the children acted out the subsequent events, from “marching up” to the 11th floor of the main government building, to chanting in unison “please save the little house!” Using a car block with wheels, Wolen took the students through the remarkable process of moving the house slowly across Stamford, wrapping up with how the house still stands, repaired and open to visitors today.

After finishing the story of Hoyt House, Wolen had a special surprise for the students: an official invitation to visit the Hoyt House this spring. This future field trip drew a bout of excitement from the students, who will be able to take a short walk from the Northeast School down to the Hoyt House. The students’ enthusiasm reached a near-fever pitch as Wolen told the students about the house’s exciting features, such as being able to play with toys similar to those once used by Samuel Hoyt’s children, to lay on beds like those from this earlier time, and to further explore the renovated house. The students clamored to ask Wolen questions such as, “can we pretend to be one of [Samuel Hoyt’s] children?” “Can our parents come on the field trip, too?” The answer to both questions: yes!

While the group needs to wait until spring to take their field trip to the Hoyt House, Ms. Wolen gave the students their “own little job” to hold them over. Each student received their own Map of Stamford activity, with a collection of cut-outs of Stamford’s neighborhoods to paste and fit in together into their personal Stamford map. By the time they are ready for their field trip, these students will know full well the many puzzle pieces that together make up
Stamford, with its different neighborhoods, resources, landmarks, and how Stamford’s history pulls it all together.