

“Sustaining the Future of Massachusetts History”
2008 Massachusetts History Conference
June 9, 2008

- Good morning.
- What a pleasure it has been to be back in Massachusetts these last two and a half years after an absence of almost 13 years. I was getting used to warm, sunny springs.
- I have been in this business of history and culture for almost thirty-five years, yet when faced with imparting wisdom on the future of our field, in this state, it was a challenge. So let me present some of what I have learned – much the hard way – over those three decades and how I see it applying to the future. My particular focus will be historical societies.
- Let me throw out a few key points:
 1. A knowledge of history is rapidly becoming nonessential to the educated, informed citizen. It is going the way of Greek and Latin, displaced by knowledge considered more essential – certainly technology. History is seen as arcane and esoteric, besides you can find all you need to know on Wikipedia.
 2. Funding for any not-for-profit entity will become ever increasingly difficult.
 - Government has other priorities and we seem to have found no great champion for our time, like Sid Yates, to carry the battle. We can't seem to get our act together to advocate effectively.
 - Corporations rarely give because they want to support the community. They want maximum return on the dollar.
 - Foundations quickly tire of supporting basic needs. They are continually onto new challenges.
 - There are just too many of us, and more being founded daily. The pie is being cut in ever thinner wedges.
 3. Meeting the professional standards and trends that have evolved over the last decades has diluted our ability to adequately accomplish much of it.
 - When I began in the mid-70's conservation of collections was the rage, followed by education, followed by community outreach and engaging exhibitions, followed by technology. And I am sure I have missed a few.
 - Each layer bringing new demands and “unfunded mandates” if you were going to meet the standards.
 4. In seeking financial support we have allowed ourselves to be shaped by the criteria of funders; especially governmental agencies:
 - Quantity is more important than quality.

- We all desire to serve a diverse audience, but it is often a challenge given the type of institution we are.
 - Tourism is more important than community enrichment.
 - Of course, aspects of each of these have a place within our institutions, but they should not be a primary judge of whether we are of value.
5. To achieve all of these mandates we have become stretched, taking on roles for which we are ill prepared, or lack the means to adequately support.
- Historical societies are rather unique in their belief that they must be a combination of several entities to accomplish their mission.
 - To collect, preserve and make available are killing us.
 - Very, very few of our institutions are great libraries, archives, museums, educators and publishers all at once. Not to mention merchandisers and marketers.
- At the beginning of the 21st century, we find ourselves beleaguered.
 - How do we take back our institutions from all those forces buffeting us, establish a meaningful, sustainable role within our communities and re-calibrate our value?
 - A few thoughts. Some radical, but these are not times for sitting back and letting circumstances dictate our future. Some old hat.

1.) Role Within the Community

A.

- We need to revisit the basics and establish how we are of value to our communities. – The public value of history.
- Surveys tell us we are valued, but historical societies do not see this reflected in the number of users or amount of support.
- We are not seen as vital to the life of a community as is the public library. Over the past twenty years their value to their communities has grown immensely as they sought to better serve their patrons.

B.

- But, public libraries sought to serve a broader audience they needed to make choices.
- I suggest we take a look at what libraries are not doing as well as they used to. Here is where we find our value. They have become dispensers of information, have bent in the direction of popular culture, and provide training, but not always learning.
- Rather than seeking an intellectual level that seems to be continually on the retreat we should elevate the discourse to stimulate a higher standard.
- The audience will certainly remain more limited than that for the public library, but I would argue quality is more important than quantity for an historical society.

C.

- We need to become more about ideas than artifacts.
- So much of our energy and budget is spent on inadequately maintaining collections or displaying them in exhibitions few want to see. We should rethink this allocation of our resources.
- The first historical societies were gatherings of those who appreciated the past, wanted to learn more and imparted knowledge. The overhead was low and impact direct.

D.

- Historical societies could return to their roots and become a forum for historical discourse in their communities. Rather an athenæum, mixing amateur research, with student essay contests and presentations by professionals.
- Become a convener for a dialogue on challenges facing your community, our state or nation. Our value is in our ability to bring the perspective of the past to these debates.

2.) Focus

A.

- In order to become sustainable and continue to serve as a vital resource on history we need to focus.
- Decide your strength and concentrate your efforts on satisfying that aspect of your operation.
- Pare away the rest. We cannot sustain institutions that are “all things to all people”.
- I have been privileged to run two institutions that have been strong because they are focused. The Concord Museum because it is not a library/archive. The MHS because it is not a museum.
- Running the multi-headed Maryland Historical Society was often a nightmare of conflicting priorities.

3.) Audience

- Determine your target audiences.
- I would offer the two most important audiences for most of us are school age, and over 40.
- Forget the in between, and in most cases families. There is simply too much competition for their time and attention.
- At the MHS, we call our primary audience ICAs – Intellectually Curious Adults. These are individuals, most well educated, who have an affinity for what we are about, but do not now how to connect and bond. Over the last year we have made a concerted effort to reach out to ICAs with gratifying results.
- You will find many, or most, ICAs among the aging populace. Do not ignore the demographics. Senior citizens are a prime audience, not the young.

4.) Simplify

A.

- Pare away those encumbrances that are not necessary to achieve your focus or engage your target audience. Narrow your delivery systems.
- Determine what you can honestly, realistically support given the economic environment in which we operate.
 - Most of us operate at a barely sustainable break even in the best of times.
 - In the worst we cut back the already minimum and hope for someone to come to the rescue. Those life rafts are getting more difficult to find with each cycle of boom and bust.
- We need not to get to the point where we can actually reserve a bit of surplus for the worst.

B.

- As an example, if you own a historical structure that is eating you alive as it crumbles around you, and is not essential to your focus, sell it with covenants to insure its integrity.
- Find more efficient space. Do with less.

C.

- A realistic assessment of your collections is an important step.
- Of course, disposing of collections has consequences. Any approach you take will raise questions and opposition. For an historical society it is important to view collections research material. Artifacts should be treated as a three dimensional archive, not necessarily as exhibit material.
- If your collection is a burden donate the material to an appropriate repository with the ability to provide care.
- I will say more about collaboration in a moment, but consider working with a group of sister institutions to create a joint repository. I believe there are foundations that would support a practical, well designed approach to this sort of collaboration.
- Let me offer another approach. Consider depositing your manuscript material at the MHS. We have many collections on deposit and have for decades. They are mainly church records, those of clubs and other types of not-for-profits. We are seeking material that fits the parameters of our collecting policy and is of enduring historic value. Recently we took a collection of 17th and 18th century documents from the Marshfield Historical Commission on deposit. Marshfield was concerned about safety and accessibility.
- The MHS inventoried, processed and catalogued the documents at the collection-level in the MHS on-line catalog. If the size of the collection warrants a finding aid one will be created and also placed on our website.

- Marshfield's records are held in acid free folders and boxes in excellent environmentally controlled storage, and are available to anyone, free, in our reading room.
- Our interest is in making as much material as possible available to researchers. We don't have to own it.
- We would welcome your inquiry and are pleased to serve our field in this way.
- The most drastic option is de-accession through a public sale, especially questionable material.
 - The funds that result can be used to fund an initiative in support of your focus.
 - I can feel the eyebrows being raised all over the room. – “Isn't this unethical, it doesn't follow the rules?”
 - I would follow generally accepted practices for de-accessioning, but create an endowment with the funds, the interest of which would support your greatest need. The corpus is held in perpetuity so that it may eventually fund the purchase of collections material. The funds gained from the sale of artifacts have not been spent on non-collection operations. I am sure this will not pass muster with those who police our practices but it may be time we challenged current thinking.

The Virtual Historical Society

- Unencumbered by structures and collections, but intent on stimulating the study of history and promoting its value, consider becoming virtual.
- Establish a meaningful website.
- The best examples are Monticello's new research center and the Wilson Presidential Library.
 - Neither possess original/primary research material. They are placing the material of others online.
- The applications are endless.
 - Link to your manuscript material in the MHS online catalog or into the online catalog of the institution now housing your collection.
 - If you maintain a collection, digitize the most important paper-based material.
 - Open a chat room on local history.
 - Post an abridged history of your community, or region, with a bibliography.
 - Online exhibitions
 - Curriculum enhancement material geared toward teachers, or directly for students on local history.
 - The opportunities are endless.

Collaboration

- Collaboration has to become a larger part of everyone's operation.
- Not only will it help you develop a sustainable organization, as previously mentioned, but it provides the clout needed to leverage support from funders, whether they be government or foundations, to meet the big challenges (not the same old programming ideas): increased operating funds, joint facilities, major educational ventures, and technology.
- The effort to obtain Federal Formula Funding needs your support and can only be achieved by collaboration.
- I know collaborations take time and energy, but I have seen the results and they are worth the investment.
- Collaboration should also be a starting point for consolidation and merger. There are simply too many of us with over lapping missions and audiences.
 - Not only can we not thrive, ultimately we may not survive.
 - Merge when the institutions are solvent and relatively equal in strength not when one is verging on failure.

Conclusion

- There is a bright future for Massachusetts history if we establish clear value to the public and adopt more sustainable operating models.
- We need to re-affirm our role as a center of learning and vital community discourse.
- Focus our precious energy and resources on our most effective delivery system and pare away those aspects of our operations that are sapping strength.
- While seeking the support of the largest audience possible, expend the most energy on target audiences.
- Seriously consider becoming, at least in part, a virtual institution. Embrace technology.
- Give collaboration the time and energy it deserves to help us all meet the big challenges.
- Face the fact that there are simply too many of us to all to thrive. Consider consolidation or merger.
- There is little new in these thoughts, but we can no longer avoid the obvious.
- Again, the future of history in Massachusetts is in the hands of those who establish value and embrace change and innovation.

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