

Summaries Historical Societies and Chambers

May Balsama, Executive Director, Souhegan Chamber of Commerce, NH.

The fabric of a community has many threads: roads and houses, vistas, schools, museums, historical societies, conveniences and services....

It is this fabric that helps to create community atmosphere – that feeling that nurtures a commitment to the area and subsequently to business. Local institutions do not just hold artifacts – they hold the vision of what is, what was, what shaped the community, what gives character, history, a foundation. Our communities are unique. Everyone has a McDonald's, or a Starbuck's. Our communities have village greens, bandstands on the Oval. The First Mill that sparked the Industrial Revolution. The oldest Artillery Company in the country.

That makes us attractive to people coming and more importantly, staying. The community vision gives residents and businesses alike instant roots, an immediate sense of belonging.

So for purely selfish reasons, it makes sense for a Chamber to promote the historical societies, the libraries, and museums. They are part of an ethos that fosters the image of a good community with good resources – good neighbors – good clients and consumers. We all want to foster surroundings that compliment our objectives and give neighbors, and employees what they need to be happy and stay.

Recognizing that the communities we serve have common concerns and needs, the Souhegan Valley Chamber of Commerce called the societies together to share resources, programs, and support for one another. For the first time they understood that they were not alone in their efforts in their respective communities. That was powerful in and of itself. We helped to create opportunities to draw attention to what those wonderful volunteers were doing in service to their towns. Everyone agreed to support opening at the same time on an agreed upon Saturday and Sunday as the Souhegan Valley Historical Societies Weekend. The Governor proclaimed it as such and that gave more weight to the effort. The response from the media was overwhelming! The exposure was good for the societies and for the Chamber.

Was there a big turnout? Not really, but that was only a part of the impetus for the weekend event which was: to get the word out about these organizations and their exhibitions.

We also created an award for an individual that has contributed to the preservation, stewardship and celebration of the area's rich history. In 2007 it was presented to Fritz Wetherbee and in 2008 to Edna Worcester for her many years of work on behalf of the Lafayette Artillery Company. We presented Honorary Memberships to NH Chronicle, and to WMUR TV for their dedication to bringing the stories, large and small, to the audience that keeps alive the unique heritage and culture that is NH.

We found some ways to create a buzz – and at very little effort or cost. Our Chamber believes we all benefit from the success of each other by sharing in the contribution of each to build our villages.

Deb Belanger, Executive Director, Greater Merrimack Convention and Visitors Bureau, MA.

Tourism is the third largest industry in the State of Massachusetts generating over 12 billion dollars in revenue annually.

The Greater Merrimack Convention and Visitors Bureau (GMVCVB) is one of thirteen officially recognized Regional Tourism Council established by the Massachusetts Legislature to market the region as a premier travel destination.

Its primary mission is to enhance the economic fabric of the Greater Merrimack Valley by marketing the region as a destination for meetings and conventions, trade shows, special events, group tours and leisure travel. Managing the Regional Tourism Council, the GMVCVB executive director and a professional staff work in concert with the other councils and the Massachusetts Office of Travel and Tourism (MOTT) to promote the Commonwealth and increase the number of overnight visitors to the region.

A nineteen (19) member Board of Directors is elected annually and meets monthly to set policies and long-range objectives for the organization.

The GMVCVB is a private, not for profit, membership-based organization responsible for the promotion of the Greater Merrimack Valley as a travel destination. Membership is by application and is available to businesses as well as other not-for-profit organizations interested in the promotion of tourism.

The Greater Merrimack Convention and Visitors Bureau, supports local historic events and societies:

- Runs a full service visitor center on Rte 495 between Exits 32 and 33.
- Helps to plan group tours, meetings, conventions, or sports events
- Promotes wide range of regional experiences: museums, local historical sites, recreational sites, festivals, restaurants, retailers, accommodations, etc.

Heritage Tourism is defined as leisure travel or business where "a visit to a historic site" is indicated as the purpose of a trip.

- Compared with all Massachusetts tourism, 81% Heritage tourists included at least one heritage site or activity during their trip. The 3 million heritage travelers spent \$2.5 billion dollars, which is considerably more than all other tourists; they come from out of state (90 percent for the heritage group versus 79 percent of for all Massachusetts tourists.), and therefore represent a significant portion of all tourist data.
- Massachusetts's heritage travelers account for: 53,000 jobs; \$1.2 billion in income; \$1.8 million in gross state product; \$559 million in taxes (including state-local); and annual in-state wealth creation of about \$1.5 billion.
- Massachusetts heritage day-trippers and overnight visitors averaged an estimated \$2.5 billion annually over the 1998 through 2000 period.

GMVCVB is committed to helping its members through marketing support, travel industry updates, hospitality support, and tourism products.

These towns in Freedom's Way are also in the GMVCVB: Ashby, Ayer, Bedford, Boxborough, Carlisle, Concord, Dunstable, Groton, Lexington, Lincoln, Littleton, Maynard, Pepperell, Shirley, Stow, Sudbury, Townsend, Westford, and Woburn.

Dennis Fiori, Executive Director, Massachusetts Historical Society

This speech was delivered by Dennis Fiori to the Massachusetts History Conference a few days prior to the Freedom's Way meeting at Fruitlands. With his permission, it is available for discussion purposes.

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.
3. Meeting the professional standards and trends that have evolved over the last decades has diluted our ability to adequately accomplish much of it.
4. In seeking financial support we have allowed ourselves to be shaped by the criteria of funders; especially governmental agencies – we should not let their criteria be the judge of who we are.
5. ...we have become stretched, taking on roles for which we are ill prepared, or lack the means to adequately support.
 - 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.

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:

1.) Define Historical Society's Role Within the Community

- A.
 - revisit the basics and establish our value to our communities.
 - We are not seen as vital to the life of a community as is the public library.
- B.
 - 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.
 - 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 and rethink how we allocate our resources.
 - So much of our energy and budget is spent on inadequately maintaining collections or displaying them in exhibitions few want to see.
- D.

- Historical societies could return to their roots and become a forum for historical discourse in their communities. Our value is in our ability to bring the perspective of the past to these debates.

2.) Focus

A.

- 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”.

3.) Audience

- Determine your target audiences.
- I would offer the two most important audiences for most of us are school age, and over 40.
- 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...

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.

B.

- Do with less. 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.

C.

- A realistic assessment of your collections is an important step.
- 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.
- ...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.
- Consider depositing your manuscript material at the MHS. We have many collections on deposit and have for decades. We are seeking material that fits the parameters of our collecting policy. Recently we took a collection of 17th and 18th century documents from the Marshfield Historical Commission on deposit.
- The MHS inventoried, processed and catalogued the documents at the collection-level in the MHS on-line catalog.
- 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.
- 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 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 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
 - 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 students
 - 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.
- Collaboration should also be a starting point for consolidation and merger. There are simply too many of us with overlapping missions and audiences.

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.

William Veillette, Executive Director, New Hampshire Historical Society

While the data was taken from local New Hampshire societies only, the responses seem very applicable to the Massachusetts Societies also. Keep in mind the suggestions made by Dennis Fiori, in the previous presentation. It is interesting to review the actual data and compare them with his thoughts and ideas.

Profile

Members of historical societies report the following:

- 72% have lived in NH more than 20 years
- 69% have college degrees (vs. 29% for the overall population)
- 61% are over 40 years old (vs. median age overall of 37)
- 59% are female (vs. 51% overall)
- 9% have their primary residence out-of-state (vs. 19% for NH Historical Society members)

Interests

When asked why they joined their local society, members stated they were interested in local history (68%), wanted history to be preserved (41%), and wanted to support the preservation of historic buildings in their town (31%).

The focus of the New Hampshire Historical Society tends to be more on state than local history (although one could argue that all stories are ultimately local), and it has traditionally not been directly involved in historic preservation.

Programs

When asked on a scale of one to five which programs they considered most important, local members chose historic preservation (3.71), collections of photographs/documents (3.27) museum exhibits (3.10), and lectures (3.08). On line catalog collections and museum store discounts ranked lowest, which was probably because hardly any local societies offer such service. And, curiously, school programs and social activities ranked high in satisfaction, but relatively low in importance.

Collaborations

Local historical societies named the New Hampshire Historical Society and the New Hampshire Preservation Alliance as organizations that should closely collaborate and maintain close ties.

Public Media

Local historical society members are big supporters of public television and radio suggesting opportunities for joint programming.

Local Leadership

The leadership of local historical societies was also surveyed.

The “average” local historical society:

- Is an independent, nonprofit organization that receives no government spending
- Is a registered 501 (c) (3)
- Has 100 members
- Receives the majority of its revenues from membership dues and “fundraisers” such as merchandise sales, etc.

- Occupies either its own building or a municipal building rented for a nominal amount or free.
- Is run by a working board of directors that typically has no term limits and does all the work of their society,
- Is concerned about an aging membership and lack of new volunteers.
- 67 % is generally optimistic about the future.

Strengths

Of the four programs that their members had deemed most important, local societies reported that they were reliable in providing lectures (94%) and museum exhibitions (81%). They were less engaged in historical preservation activities (43%) and cataloging their collections (24%)

Weaknesses

The activities in which the local societies felt there was the most room for improvement were:

- Membership development (80%) and fundraising (65%)
- Public awareness of local history (78%)
- Collections storage (77%) and collections care and management (74%)
- Cataloging collections (65%)

Membership Development & Fundraising

Although membership development was recognized as the weakest activity, only 1% of local historical societies identified it as a project on which they were currently working.

Public Awareness

When asked what the New Hampshire Historical Society could be doing to get more people throughout the state interested in history, a strong plurality suggested school programs. This was curious since:

- The society has been offering school programs since 1964. Although there is room for improvement, the market is mostly saturated
- Members of local societies consider school programs to be of low importance
- Only 1% of the leaders of local historical societies are working on educational projects.

Collections Storage, Care and Management

A high percentage of local historical societies identified building and space needs as a major project on which they were working, although they also state collection storage and care is a weakness. This suggests a collaborative collections storage facility with other large collection institutions.

Cataloging Collections

A high percentage of historical societies indicate that their collections are cataloged, although there is reason to believe the catalogs represent inventory rather than complete catalog records.

Web sites

Most local historical societies do not have web sites, and fewer use web sites as an option to make collections accessible through an online catalog.

Exhibitions

While the vast majority local historical societies exhibit their museum collections, only 10% indicated that they were currently working on an exhibition as a major project. This implies that exhibitions are relatively static and unchanging. Mounting and changing exhibits is labor intensive.

Conclusion

The next phase of our [New Hampshire Historical Society] initiative will be for the supporting organizations to perform the due diligence needed to create implementation plans, project budgets, performance measurements, and funding plans for their proposed programs to support local historical societies. In the short run, we are confident that enhanced services and statewide presence will increase the membership and financial stability of the local societies as well as the supporting organizations. But. We also believe that this process of discernment will help knock down barriers in all regions, build camaraderie, and create a sense of shared purpose.

Additional documents:

1. Graph comparing when towns were incorporated, town histories written and societies incorporated.
2. Survey of Members of Local New Hampshire Historical Societies, full report
3. Results of survey – 53% of societies responded.