Can a Regional History Museum Be a Place to Think about the Future?

“If you save the museum but don’t save the Chesapeake Bay, what’s the point?”

John Roberts, emeritus board member, Chesapeake Bay Maritime Museum

Provoked by this question and facing the challenges confronting history museums, particularly outdoor museums, the Chesapeake Bay Maritime Museum in St. Michaels, Maryland, is transforming itself from a regional maritime history museum into an institution that inspires stewardship of the Chesapeake’s cultures, landscapes, and environment. We are using our eighteen-acre site, exhibitions, programs, collections, staff, members, and volunteers to foster learning and conversations about the Bay region’s future, based on the perspectives that centuries of living in this place can provide.

This shift in focus is urgently needed on Maryland’s Eastern Shore and Bay-wide. The region faces tremendous pressures to its environment and cultures, as the Bay’s capacity to absorb pollutants has reached the breaking point, continuing development endangers fragile ecosystems, and new, often affluent residents threaten traditional ways of life. The health of the Bay region is thus more than ever dependent on human decisions and actions. Environmental and cultural sustainability is certainly not a new concern, but the work done thus far by water quality and marine science organizations and heritage professionals has not succeeded in engaging the region’s broad and diverse population.

During the past year, in dozens of discussions with cultural and environmental leaders in the region, we have consistently heard confirmation of the critical role the museum can play—though its exhibits, programs, and site—in highlighting the enduring human connection to the Bay and the urgent civic responsibility to sustain it. Coupled with renewed legislative and advocacy efforts for Bay stewardship and sustainability on the Eastern Shore and Bay-wide, the museum now has an opportunity to play a much more significant role in its community than it has in the past.

continued on page 2
EXPLORING THE MID@LANTIC

Chesapeake Bay Maritime Museum
http://www.cbmm.org

Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission (PHMC)
http://www.phmc.state.pa.us

See also, “Planning Our Future,” the sustainability report prepared by PHMC’s Bureau for Historic Sites and Museums; at
http://www.phmc.state.pa.us/Portal/Communities/AboutPHMC/planningourtomorrow3_4_09.pdf

Johnstown Area Heritage Association
www.jaha.org

For information on JAHA’s long range plans, go to
http://www.jaha.org/AboutJaha/Longrange.html

Jewish Museum of Maryland
http://www.jhm.org

Two thoughtful discussions of sustainability broadly conceived:
Discussion pieces and subsequent commentary from the Workshop on the Future of History Museums, organized by the Nicholas Brown Center for Public Humanities and Cultural Heritage at Brown University in August 2009; at
http://historymuseums.wordpress.com/

“America’s Historic Sites at a Crossroads,” the final report on The Forum on Historic Sites Stewardship in the 21st Century, held in April 2007 at Kykuit; at

See also:
“Impact of the 2007-09 Economic Recession on Nonprofit Organizations,” a report of the Listening Post Project at the Center for Civil Society Studies at the Johns Hopkins University Institute for Policy Studies; at

Useful guides for managing during the current economic crisis:
“Finding Calm in Crisis: A Museum Survival Guide,” annotated links to several useful resources compiled by the American Association of Museums; at
http://www.aam-us.org/survivalguide.cfm

continued on page 1

Program

“The museum needs to tell the real stories about what the Bay could be and what kind of life that would be.”

-Stuart Clarke, current board member

With planning grant funds from the National Park Service’s Chesapeake Bay Gateways Network and the Maryland Historical Trust, we have created a multi-disciplinary team of advisors and regional leaders, including many scientists, ecologists, and land use experts that we have never worked with before. Since program partners are critical to our success, we have reached out to regional environmental institutions, including the University of Maryland’s Horn Point Laboratory, Adkins Arboretum, and the Eastern Shore Land Conservancy, to extend the reach of our efforts and to provide us with additional expertise.

With this advice and guidance we have drafted new interpretive messages that explicitly state that the Bay is facing huge challenges and that the future depends on each of us.

To bring these messages forward, we have begun to view our exhibitions and interpretive expertise in new ways. We are learning how to teach and inspire stewardship. We are talking more explicitly about changes in population, land and resource use, work and play, and their impact on the region’s health and sustainability. We have opened a Living Shoreline, a reconstructed marsh along the Miles River that reduces erosion, filters the runoff from our parking lot before it enters the river, and provides a habitat for marsh animals. We host an annual Bay Day, which advocates sustainable living on the Bay; and the Chesapeake Folk Festival, a gathering of regional tradition bearers. We are revising several permanent exhibits to include messages about the future of Bay communities, fisheries, forests, and land use.

This fall we are hosting a meeting with our new partners to develop region-wide programs that will allow the public to assess various scenarios for the Bay’s future developed by the Chesapeake Bay Commission’s Scientific and Technical Advisory Committee and consider what decisions – or non-decisions – will result in a given scenario. In the coming year, we will open the exhibit A Rising Tide in the Heart of the Chesapeake, showing how global warming and a rising sea level will dramatically alter life along the edge of the Chesapeake Bay over the next century, as low lying areas become inundated and islands disappear. We are also planning a traveling exhibit on the museum’s historic crab dredging vessel, Old Point, that explores the history of conservation, forestry, living off the water and land, and the future of the Bay region. On board will be a Story Corps-inspired audio kiosk for capturing stories of what people value about the region and their dreams for the future.

Although it is really too soon to tell if we are succeeding, we are receiving encouragement from new sources of grant funding, from our new partners, and from the museum community. Throughout the process, we are convening listening sessions with a wide variety of stakeholders, incorporating learning from each. Through an AASLH-sponsored visitor survey, this fall we will begin to assess
In July 2008, the National Academy of Sciences, with the support of the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS), convened The Future of Libraries and Museums in the 21st Century Planning Meeting in Washington, D.C. The meeting brought together twenty-nine museum and library professionals as well as specialists in new media and innovative learning for two days of wide-ranging discussions of both current challenges and future possibilities facing these cultural institutions.

The Future of Museums and Libraries: A Discussion Guide, developed by IMLS, summarizes these discussions and is intended to spark similar conversations among both professionals within the museum and library fields and diverse stakeholders.

The thirty-two page document is structured around nine key themes addressing issues of identity and role, community relationships and professional collaborations, new technologies, learning innovations, sustainability, evaluation metrics, and work force development. Each theme is discussed briefly, followed by suggested discussion questions and one or two examples of current practice. Pithy quotations from the meeting are interspersed throughout, and a very useful bibliography is appended.

Consider the theme “Shifts in Power and Authority.” The discussion first asserts that “rather than act as gatekeepers to knowledge, museums and libraries can be facilitators and teachers, providing the context, content, and tools that empower people to question, search, inform, and explore the worlds of information, experience, and memory.” It then poses five questions focusing not only on changing modes of delivering services, but, critically, on the relationship “between notions of excellence, authority, and standards and notions of inclusion, access, and acceptance of alternate worldviews.” The example given is the Community-Based Exhibition Model developed by the Wing Luke Asian Museum in Seattle, a radical approach to sharing authority in exhibition and program development.


A search is underway to replace MARCH director Howard Gillette, who will be stepping down from his position at the end of this academic year. Philip Scranton, a longtime advisor to MARCH and Board of Governors professor at Rutgers-Camden, heads the search committee. V. Chapman-Smith, regional administrator for the National Archives – Mid-Atlantic Region represents MARCH’s Advisory Council on the committee, joining other members of the graduate history faculty.

With support from the 1776 Foundation, MARCH organized a series of oral history workshops in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, for members of the Steelworkers Archive and interested faculty and staff at Lehigh University. Conducted over the summer and early fall by Cross Ties editor Linda Shopes, sessions involved discussion of both theory and practice. The goal is to enhance local capacity to develop the record of the steel industry in the region and the community that built up alongside it for future teaching and research. Julia Maserjian, digital projects coordinator at Lehigh, whose Beyond Steel Web site already hosts a number of interviews, and Steelworkers Archive executive director Susan Vitez organized the program.

In June thirteen students joined the ranks of successful graduates of the Bard College Clemente Course in the Humanities, administered by MARCH and headed by Diane Turner, director of the Charles Blockson Afro-American Collection at Temple University. The fourth annual Clemente course, aimed at those in the Camden area with limited income who aspire to college but need a bridge academic experience to get there, began this fall, with funding from the New Jersey Council for the Humanities.

MARCH initiated a history camp for at-risk Camden youth this summer, drawing upon local civic resources to train high school students in historical methods. Exercises included instruction in mapping, an historical scavenger hunt, and examination of archival resources at the Camden County Historical Society. Students competed for cash prizes for the best portfolios of their work. Welcome New Jersey, a workforce development organization, recruited the students with the intent of linking history lessons with life skills instruction. The program was made possible through contributions to the New Jersey Council for the Humanities in memory of Mark Rosenberg, a member of the council’s board of trustees who died last year. As a member of the council, Rosenberg had been stirred by a site visit he made to a Clemente humanities class under MARCH’s direction.
In light of the dramatic impact of the current economic downturn on museums and historical organizations, MARCH asked the executive directors of three institutions in the mid-Atlantic region to share with readers how their organizations are dealing with the funding crisis. Their comments, below, are in lieu of the usual Going to the Well and Regional Roundup features in Cross Ties.

Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission

Like many historical and cultural organizations, the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission faces major reductions in its state funding. But even before the current economic crisis, PHMC was doing more than its diminishing resources could sustain. As a large and complex state agency, PHMC has broad responsibility for the stewardship of the state’s historical and cultural resources that include the built environment, archives, archeology, collections, and museums. Under any circumstances, focusing and prioritizing is a difficult exercise.

Still, it is clear that with budget cuts that could be as high as forty percent, just cutting expenses will not be sufficient. Similarly, we cannot immediately grow ourselves out of this situation with new sources of revenue. Sustainability for our organization means not just surviving an economic blip, but learning to live with a new reality and being able to understand how we will be different, while at the same time envisioning how we can be better and stronger. Not being the same will require creativity, risk taking, and experimentation. Although those activities seem counter intuitive to what an organization under stress should be doing, change theorists would argue it is exactly what needs to be done.

To that end, PHMC is thinking strategically. It is reviewing the governance structures that define our responsibilities and relationships to the public, to colleagues, and to state government in order to provide more clarity and flexibility. We are asking not only what we must do, but perhaps more importantly, what we should do. We are looking at new relationships and partnerships at the local, state, and national levels that can enhance and extend our ability to fulfill our mission more effectively. Finally, we are thinking in more entrepreneurial ways about new sources of funding and revenue that can help support our mandated responsibilities as well as provide resources to support new ideas.

Jewish Museum of Maryland

Like other nonprofits, the Jewish Museum of Maryland (JMM) was caught in a financial avalanche in late 2008. For the JMM, the timing was especially challenging, since we were just beginning to plan special programs for our 50th Anniversary year in 2010, and suddenly we were confronted with an unexpected and unbudgeted $200,000 operating deficit for FY2009 (ending in June 2009).

In the last months of 2008, we cut operating costs by five percent; in January 2009 one staff member left and the position was not filled; and early in 2009 we cut all staff salaries by an average of five percent. We also convened joint meetings of our Board Finance and Development committees so that they could share information and ideas.

Our lay leadership was determined to preserve the integrity of our staff and program to the maximum extent possible, even if this entailed commitment of half our reserve funds in FY09 and the balance of our reserves in FY10, the current year. This approach gives us time to plan prudently for FY11 and to ratchet up our fundraising efforts.

We are still at risk, and we began FY10 with three full-time staff projected to be laid off at the end of 2009. But, one-time stabilization and special project grants have come in that will help us keep our staff intact for a bit longer, and we have also redeployed some of our staff to preserve their jobs and strengthen our development. Meanwhile, the market continues its steady rise, helping to restore confidence and capacity among our donors.

Our response to the crisis has been to make haste slowly, carefully, and thoughtfully. Recent strategic planning points the way toward an emphasis on community services on- and off-site and more systematic, integrated fundraising. Over the next few years, we will continue to re-vision and recast ourselves, and to seek large, multi-year gifts and grants that will help to provide budget relief. So far, we have avoided doing ourselves lasting injury through preemptive layoffs or drastic reductions in services, thus preserving our human resources and reputation for excellence, important assets in a time of scarcity.

Johnstown Area Heritage Association

The Johnstown Area Heritage Association (JAHA) was working to complete a $9 million capital campaign when the bottom fell out of the economy late in 2008. While we had been successful with regional and national foundations, corporate and individual contributions fell far short. Still, we completed most of the planned projects, including a heritage-themed children’s museum and an iron and steel gallery and multi-media program, by relying on financing. Our current efforts are focused on maximizing income from these new facilities and restructuring our debt.

continued on page 6
AROUND THE REGION

Gretchen Sullivan Sorin, director of the Cooperstown Graduate Program and Professor of Museum Studies, has been named the winner of the Mid-Atlantic Association of Museums’ 2009 prestigious Katherine Coffey Award. The award recognizes Sorin’s commitment to excellence, community outreach, and public education and honors her lasting contributions to the museum field.

The Valley that Changed the World, an hour-long documentary film chronicling the development of the petroleum industry in northwest Pennsylvania, has been accepted for national distribution on public television by the National Educational Telecommunications Association. The movie was produced by Iris Samson and Pierina Morelli for WQED Multimedia in Pittsburgh. It is a project of Oil 150, a seventeen-month celebration commemorating the 150th anniversary of Edwin L. Drake’s discovery of oil near Titusville, Pennsylvania, on August 27, 1859.

The New York State Archives has put technology to work in two new programs that advance its public service mission. Its RSS news feed brings subscribers up-to-date information about Archives events, new acquisitions, resources for state agencies and local governments, and additions to its Web site. To subscribe, go to http://www.archives.nysed.gov/rss/news.xml. In collaboration with the Archives Partnership Trust, the Archives has also developed La Escuela Electronica/The Electronic Schoolhouse, a bilingual Web site for teachers focusing on the Latino/a experience in New York. Using photographs, letters, flyers, broadsides, and other material dating from 1861 to the present, the site combines historical records with technology to promote the development of critical thinking, reading and writing skills, and an understanding of historical content and context. The site is organized by topics such as immigration, civil rights, women, and education that connect to the New York State Education Department’s core curriculum and learning standards and assessments for K-12 education. It includes two introductory videos, in Spanish and English, explaining how teachers can use primary resources in their classrooms and the institutions that care for these unique materials. To visit the site, go to: www.archives.nysed.gov/projects/escuela.

The Museum of Chinese in America opened a new 14,000-square-foot facility on September 22 at the edge of New York City’s Chinatown. Designed by Maya Lin, the museum’s new home, located in a former machine shop, includes multiple galleries as well as research and performance spaces. Founded in 1980 as the community-based New York Chinatown History Project, the museum has evolved from the preservation of local memories to the presentation of the complicated history of the Chinese in America. That story is conveyed in the new facility’s permanent exhibit, With a Single Step: Stories in the Making of America, curated by historian and museum cofounder John Kuo Wei Tchen and curator Cynthia Ai-fen Lee. The opening coincided with the appointment of a new director, S. Alice Mong, an active member of the Committee of 100, a Chinese American leadership group known for high levels of civic engagement. For more information, visit www.mocanyc.org.

Ford’s Theatre National Historic Site in Washington, D.C., notable as the place where President Abraham Lincoln was fatally shot on April 14, 1865, reopened in July after a two-year renovation. Exhibit space has been greatly expanded to encompass Lincoln’s presence in Washington from his first inauguration in 1861 until the time of his death. The box where he was assassinated has been converted to a permanent exhibit, and work has begun on the conversion of a building across the street into a learning center devoted to Lincoln’s legacy. The facility continues to be an operating theater, but it is now much more fully a museum as well. For more information, go to http://www.nps.gov/foth/index.htm.

New Jersey History resumed publication this fall after a several year hiatus. Founded as the Proceedings of the New Jersey Historical Society in 1845, the journal now appears solely online, published and hosted by Rutgers University Libraries in partnership with the New Jersey Historical Commission, Kean University, the New Jersey Historical Society, the New Jersey Digital Highway, and Rutgers University Press. Volume 124, no. 1 is available at http://njhlibraries.rutgers.edu. All material is licensed under a Creative Commons agreement, allowing duplication without restriction as long as proper attribution is given. For further details contact editor Peter Mickulas at peter.mickulas@gmail.com.

To accommodate the special feature on coping with the current financial crisis, the regular Regional Roundup and Projects to Watch columns have been combined into this one column, Around the Region.
how we are doing at sustaining the interest of our current audiences and funders.

The challenges facing the Chesapeake region are serious and complex. Environmental writer Tom Horton has put it quite simply, “The damage humans have done to the Bay and its watershed is nothing short of staggering.” But this view is a contested one; despite the forty-year effort of the Chesapeake Bay Foundation and other environmental leaders, Horton’s view is not accepted or even acknowledged by many. The people who have lived on and visited the Chesapeake Bay over the years are diverse – with varied opinions about which of the Bay’s natural and cultural resources are most important and worth preserving and about how to do so. We believe what will bring them together is a better understanding of those varied experiences and perspectives. For example, the Museum’s Chesapeake People program has for the past eight years introduced newcomers to those who have long made a living on the water and the land. Recent exhibitions, including Above the Bay, showing current aerial views of the Bay paired with the same view fifty years ago, and At Play on the Bay, presenting the transformation of the Bay from a place of work to a place of recreation and retirement, provoke discussion about the need for managing change. All of these conversations provide a much greater understanding of the issues locals and newcomers alike are facing, broadening everyone’s perspectives.

With this new initiative, we anticipate that discussing varied values as well as sharing varied dreams of the Bay’s future, some measure of common ground can be discovered. We want to participate in the writing of a new Bay story, one that includes the Chesapeake Bay as a cultural landscape with people and nature thriving, with healthy opportunities and protections for both.

Melissa McLeod, Ph.D., is Director, Breene M. Kerr Center for Chesapeake Studies at the Chesapeake Bay Maritime Museum.

One of JAHA’s greatest assets has been its strong long-range vision. For more than fifteen years, our goal has been to create an integrated visitor experience on the topics of industrialization, immigration, and life in southwestern Pennsylvania’s industrial communities. This strategy includes numerous community development goals tied to heritage tourism and historic preservation. With the completion of recent capital projects, JAHA’s planned network of attractions and historic districts – the Johnstown Discovery Network – is finally in place. We can now market this network as an integrated tourism destination, rather than promote individual museums.

We are also working to increase the use of our facilities by local audiences. This has involved a redefinition of what we consider to be appropriate heritage programming. Our new Johnstown Children’s Museum presents our themes in interactive exhibits that have been a big hit with families. The children’s museum has also prompted us to get into the birthday party business – a new source of income. We also now rent some of our facilities for outside events and have an outside caterer and a liquor license. We salvaged the interior of the West End Polish Citizen’s Club, which was bankrupt and being sold at auction, and moved it to our heritage center for use as a rental and event space. JAHA now plans to hire a COO who will run earned income and annual giving programs, as well as a sales person to promote rentals and special events.

After focusing for years on implementing our long-range strategy, JAHA knew that we needed to shift from development mode into operating mode, and the recession has only made sustainability issues more urgent. If our plans to increase earned income and support are successful, we will emerge as a stronger and more sustainable institution.

Sharon Ann Holt is Executive Director of the Sandy Spring Museum in Montgomery County, Maryland.


“Tactics for Leading through a Financial Crisis” by Alan Friedman; at http://www.noycefdn.org/documents/AlanFriedman--LeadingthroughaFinancialCrisis.pdf

Between Will and Way: History Museums Seek their Audiences

A remarkable group of thoughtful and experienced history museum professionals gathered last August at the John Nicholas Brown Center at Brown University in Providence, Rhode Island, to examine the future of history museums. Two days of open-ended, exploratory discussions affirmed a shared sense that history museums matter mightily for lifelong learning and civic engagement in a free society. The importance of history institutions makes their widespread failure to thrive a real puzzle. Presentations revealed that a lot of good work is being done without yet generating much momentum. Most of the group agreed that the public audience deserves and will reward more innovation than the profession is prepared either technically or conceptually to offer.

Steven Lubar, Center director and Brown professor of American civilization, and Kym Rice, assistant professor and director of the Museum Studies Program at George Washington University, organized the event. Lubar and Rice risked allowing the group to set its own evolving agenda. They solicited working papers in advance, generated a matrix highlighting common themes in the papers, and proposed discussions around those themes. Participants elected which groups to participate in, and which, if any, they wanted to lead. As the conference unfolded, initial groups dissolved and new groups, reflecting new themes, emerged. This structure allowed the gathering both to challenge itself and to follow developing threads instead of having to drop them arbitrarily to follow a pre-set agenda. It is a great model for a brainstorming session, and Lubar and Rice deserve commendation for genuinely “sharing authority.”

Breakout groups did choose very significant topics. A circle of thinkers about civic engagement asked whether the content of programs was nearly as important as the process of their creation. History museums could serve society by staying committed to open-ended civic processes that encourage social transformation. Another group considered the role of performance in interpretation, digging deeply into possible clashes between academic authority and open-ended performances. The question of whether most “interactive” activities invite audiences to participate or just insist that they comply raised the question of museums’ fear of rousing visitors’ emotions. The potential value of eliciting and recognizing emotion arrested enough attention to spawn a session of its own.

Some participants considered what museums can learn from vernacular historians—collectors, genealogists, re-enactors, and other interpreters of the past of whose work professionals tend to be wary. The discussion framed these practitioners as “rogues and renegades,” though on what basis they, who draw a huge audience, are made rogues by us, who draw a much smaller one, did not come up. The discussion did not, therefore, explore our willingness to protect our professional identities even at the price of losing audiences.

While “the audience” figured in most conversations during the gathering, it was oddly mythologized. Like nineteenth-century American manufacturers waxing lyrical about the vast market of China, public historians seem more comfortable dreaming about some huge audience that surely exists out there than with accepting that reaching a larger public will require us to change. The discipline to take a path back to the public even if it leads out of our comfort zones is hard to find.

My own sense is that a serious commitment to serving the actual audience -- not an imaginary audience conceptualized as versions of ourselves -- must include a critique of our own complacency about the value of our work and the professional isolation and prestige that cushion us from public opinion. The most potent discipline for our complacency is to link mission success to revenue. Designing mission activities that pay for themselves and feed the revenue stream does NOT require us to pander, abandon history, or exclude people who cannot pay. Far from it. The linkage means only that professionals have to listen to what the public is communicating with its dollars. Simply put, what the public is willing to spend for membership and admission is a better barometer than our own insider judgments of whether museums are meeting real social needs.

Corollary to this principle is a second, equally important one. If we believe, as the group gathered at Brown certainly did, that historical knowledge remains critical for civic health, social development, and individual and community stability, then it is our job to persuade the public to believe that too. Linking revenue to mission means demanding of ourselves that we get out and promote the sound reasons for treasuring history that we all carry within us – that we do the work of drawing the audience to us. It means that we stop behaving like wall flowers at the civic dance, hoping to avoid embarrassment by staying out of sight. We must become the social butterflies, out there on the floor confidently promoting the values we believe

continued on page 6
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