



**Conducting a Statewide Survey of  
History and Heritage Organizations:  
Best Practices & Recommendations**

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# Table of Contents

<b>Introduction.....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Project Planning.....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>The Survey.....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Technology.....</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>Online Presence.....</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>Survey Results.....</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>Project Longevity &amp; Next Steps.....</b>	<b>10</b>

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## Introduction

In the course of the first grant phase of the Rhode Island History Online Directory Initiative (RHODI) Project, project staff maintained a log of insights about the processes undertaken as well as “lessons learned.” Out of these notes, we have created a set of best practices intended to aid other organizations who are interested in conducting a large-scale survey and/or designing a community directory. While other projects may not wish to replicate the RHODI Project entirely, the lessons learned by RHODI staff may prove useful in the planning and execution of any number of other similar initiatives. More information about the project is available in the RHODI white paper, at [www.rhodi.org](http://www.rhodi.org).

## I. Project Planning

### Identify project objectives

Identifying the overarching objectives of the project early on is essential to the planning process of an undertaking of this size. Due to Rhode Island’s small geographic size, our initial criteria included history and heritage on a statewide level.

As indicated in the original grant, through the RHODI Project, the Rhode Island Historical Society set out to:

“fulfill its mission as a platform for connectivity and participation by using digital technology to increase the history and heritage sector’s visibility, access to peer networks, grassroots support, fundraising capacity, transparency, and the dissemination of messages ranging from education to advocacy.”

Establishing the project objectives prevents subsequent work from veering into too many disparate directions. Throughout RHODI’s initial phase, ideas for additional activities were generated; rather than branch out in many directions from the onset of the project, these ideas were recorded internally. Those that aligned with the project’s mission and survey findings were earmarked to be implemented in subsequent project phases.

### Determine project deliverables

With the objectives identified, determine the actual products that will support the project’s mission. The original RHODI grant identified two primary deliverables:

1. A comprehensive, web-based directory of Rhode Island history and heritage organizations
2. A mapping and needs assessment of these organizations

Knowing what the end products would be, and what purposes they were intended to serve, informed the RHODI staff’s decision-making processes at all subsequent stages of the project. For example, in determining survey questions (see II. The Survey), staff assessed how potential questions would be useful in the white paper or directory; if they appeared not to support either application, they were excluded.



## **Identify the organizations that meet criteria**

The initial list of history and heritage organizations in Rhode Island included nearly 500 sites. Staff worked with the RHODI Advisory Committee to establish two basic criteria for inclusion in Phase I: the organization must hold collections or programs relating to Rhode Island's history and heritage sector and; the organization must be accessible to the public. Upon applying these criteria established, the list of qualifying organizations dropped to approximately 250. Of these, about half responded to the RHODI staff's inquiries and completed the survey. The remaining half appeared to be inactive or were otherwise unable to participate in the first phase of RHODI.

Those organizations that could not be reached during the first phase of the project were still included in the general directory; some have valuable information on their websites even if no one can be reached in person, and others may resume activity or update contact information in the near future. Because the RHODI Project was concerned with increasing access to organizations, keeping all qualifying organizations in the database was consistent with the project's objectives.

## **Identify other emerging categories**

As the list narrowed, categories of organizations emerged. Most organizations fell into the following:

- Archives
- Cultural heritage groups
- Historical/preservation societies
- Libraries
- Living history organizations
- Museums

Many organizations fit more than one criteria (for example, a historical society that has a museum), but all organizations identified primarily as one of the above categories. The categories became useful in the directory as an additional way for users to filter their searches. In the needs assessment, the categories were useful in identifying possible trends - for example, do libraries receive different types of funding than do historical societies?

Standardizing a common vocabulary early on proved to be critical in developing the directory, as well as in quantifying the survey data. As categories emerge organically, define what is meant by "Archive" or "Cultural heritage group" in order to keep classification consistent.



## II. The Survey

### Question development

As much as possible, limiting the survey to questions that will influence the project's deliverables is preferable. Survey participants often had questions about how the data from specific questions would be used; determining this in advance is paramount. A solid grasp of the intent of the questions also prevents the survey from becoming overly lengthy.

**Recommendation:** Keep open-ended answers to a minimum. Use Yes/No or multiple choice questions wherever possible to simplify the process of analyzing data later. Design survey questions with subsequent quantification and purposes for which data will be used in mind.

Because the RHODI Field Surveyors entered data directly into a database, they were able to export fields to Excel spreadsheets for analysis. From these spreadsheets, percentages could be determined and graphs generated for inclusion in the RHODI white paper.

Open-ended questions were quantified by using the coding method - by counting instances of specific words or themes, staff were able to assign the 122 survey responses to broad themes in order to determine response frequency and calculate percentages.

### Conducting the survey

Determine how the surveys will be conducted: in person, over the phone, via email, etc. This decision will impact the technology required for the project.

RHODI surveys were conducted in person, at the site being surveyed. This method was chosen for several reasons. Meeting face to face is beneficial for forming relationships. Organizations are asked to do surveys online frequently; meeting in person allows the survey to take a more conversational shape, and in addition to providing rich qualitative data, also helps to foster a relationship that will benefit future project phases. Additionally, online-only surveys offered by other cultural heritage organizations in the recent past yielded significantly fewer responses than did the RHODI survey.

There are some drawbacks to conducting the surveys in person. The amount of time each survey takes can be substantial. Costs associated with travel (such as mileage reimbursement) must also be taken into consideration.

**Recommendation:** Group each day's surveys geographically to decrease travel time and expenses. The RHODI staff found that it was possible to conduct three surveys in one day when needed; however, the conversational nature of the surveys occasionally made it difficult to keep to a very tight schedule. Allow for time between each survey to avoid cancelling or postponing additional survey visits on the same day.

A hybrid approach may work best in some instances; for example, making the survey available online through email and the website for those who prefer to conduct it electronically; conducting some surveys over the phone; and conducting a sample group of in-person surveys to include the conversation and tour components.



## Contacting organizations

RHODI staff tracked contact with organization staff in a FileMaker Pro database, including the dates of attempted phone calls and emails. This allowed staff to see who had been recently contacted, whether or not a survey had been scheduled, and whether or not the survey had been conducted.

**Recommendation:** Send an email with the project overview prior to cold-calling organizations. Email received a response about 50% of the time; however, in the event that a reply was not received via email, organization staff often remembered the email content when we subsequently called on the phone, making the explanation of the project much more fluid.

**Recommendation:** In the explanation of the project, focus on the outcomes of the survey, not the survey process itself. Explain the goals, anticipated next steps, and deliverables of the project. Let organizations know that are not just completing a survey; they are becoming involved in the early stages of a collaborative project.

## Planning and scheduling

The RHODI survey took approximately one hour to complete, with an additional 15-30 minutes spent touring facilities. In some cases, RHODI staff could conduct three surveys in one day, although it was rare that three organizations located geographically near one another had availability on the same date. In most cases, only two surveys could be conducted in one day.

**Recommendation:** Develop a system for sorting organizations closed seasonally. Some organizations close or have limited hours during the cold winter months, while others close or have limited hours during the summer. Determine what organizations have seasonal access barriers early on, and schedule surveys accordingly to distribute visits evenly throughout the year and avoid scheduling bottlenecks or lulls.

It is also critical to consider time and travel expenses during the project's planning stages. Determining how much of the budget will be allotted to these costs will help to shape how many surveys can be conducted in person. Likewise, estimating time spent on traveling to survey sites will shape the overall staffing and scheduling process.



### III. Technology

#### Determine appropriate technology

Consider the features and limitations of the content management system chosen - what technical skills (long-term and short-term) are required for the implementation and maintenance of the site?

Begin database design/implementation earlier in the project cycle, or work with Excel or Numbers spreadsheet on a shared drive that is backed up.

Google's spreadsheets lack the recovery that a database would have, and if information is deleted, it is permanently lost. If information becomes disorganized, it is also harder to go back to an earlier version of the document. In the case of using a database, we recommend storing the information in some kind of spreadsheet and have it mapped out to the database. In this case, even computers that do not have FileMaker can access the complete data beyond what is included in the online directory.

**Recommendation:** Establish the technology component as early in the process as possible. Design the survey data intake method based on the final content management system to ensure a more streamlined process of transferring data.

#### Determine necessary software

The original RHODI grant narrative named Collective Access as the content management system to be used for the RHODI directory. Collective Access is an open source solution designed for use by cultural heritage institutions for the sharing of digital assets. Because the RHODI directory features profiles of organizations, but no assets, or collection items, the staff amended the choice to use this program, and, upon approval from the granting agency, made the decision to use FileMaker Pro for the initial backend database, then import the records into Joomla to create the frontend website.

Whether to use an existing template package from a service, such as Collective Access or Omeka, or to have a custom website designed will depend upon a number of factors specific to each project. In the case of RHODI, the original grant required that the website produced be created using open-source platforms or coding languages. With either option, an important fact to consider will be the ongoing maintenance requirements of the platform chosen. (See VI. Project Longevity)



## Determine necessary hardware

RHODI staff had access to telephones and desktop computers on-site at the Rhode Island Historical Society offices, where all non-survey work was conducted.

While on the road conducting surveys, staff used iPads purchased for the project, and imported data directly into a remotely-hosted database using the FileMaker application. A wireless keyboard was used, for ease of typing.

The iPads were advantageous in that they were very portable, and allowed data to be entered easily and directly into the database. Purchasing a cellular data plan allowed access even in areas with no wireless connection.

The main drawback to the use of iPads and a remotely-hosted database was that in rural areas with no wireless or cellular connection, the database could not be accessed. Likewise, the wireless keyboard would not connect. In these instances, a plain text version of the survey would be used, and responses would be recorded in the iPad's notebook application, or using pen and paper, and transcribed in the database at a later time.

**Recommendation:** Regardless of the technology being used, have a backup copy of the survey available. A printed copy is particularly useful to have, as it will not be affected by any technical failures.

## Photography

In the course of developing the directory, and promoting the project through social media, photographing sites and collections became an increasingly important part of the survey process.

Photo-sharing through Flickr, Tumblr, and Instagram generated a larger portion of the RHODI audience, both inside and outside of Rhode Island. Tumblr posts in particular attracted attention from larger media outlets such as PBS. Depending upon the goals of the project, digital photographs of a higher quality than can be taken with an iPhone or iPad may make a digital camera a worthwhile piece of hardware in which to invest.



## IV. Online Presence

### Promote the project from earliest stages

**Recommendation:** Establish social media outlets early on in the project, and post project status updates frequently. RHODI posted “Notes from the Field” to provide a glimpse of the organizations being surveyed. Promoting the project early gives the project a public transparency that is useful in building an audience for the website launch, as well as in persuading organizations that may be initially reluctant to participate in the survey.

### Determine social media platforms

Think back to the intended audience: what age groups, educational bodies, or special interest groups make up that population? What social media outlets do these groups frequent?

Because the RHODI audience is broad, the staff made use of a variety of social media platforms:

**Wordpress** - Used for long-form blogging; Notes from the Field, project updates.

**Flickr** - Used for photo storage and sharing; 1 TB of free storage makes for an affordable storage solution, and Flickr’s tags and social features provide an easy way to document and share the project.

**Facebook** - Used for sharing photos and updates, and generally maintaining an additional online presence. In general, Facebook was not found to be useful for larger outreach. RHODI staff adopted a policy of having posts from Instagram, Twitter, and Tumblr automatically pushed to Facebook, so that the existing Facebook audience would have access to original content posted elsewhere.

**Tumblr** - Used for sharing links to website updates, photos, Notes from the Field, and reblogging content from other Rhode Island history and heritage organizations’ Tumblr blogs. Tumblr proved to be the most effective form of outreach to new and broad audiences, and in particular, younger audiences.

**Twitter** - Used for posting photos, links, and quick updates. Particularly useful for reaching out and initiating conversations with other area organizations.

**Instagram** - Used for posting photos of sites visited. Particularly useful for reaching a broad audience. The geotagging function is useful for drawing audience attention to the individual sites themselves.

### The role of a controlled vocabulary

Determine what vocabulary the website will be based upon. In our case we used single-level Library of Congress subject headings. To keep the site balanced and accurate, we chose to keep our level of description broad, not granular.

The inclusion of a folksonomy (user-generated tagging) is another option to consider. While it did not fit the purposes of the RHODI directory at this stage, user-generated tags are a way to source new information about organizations or collections, and to increase audience engagement.



## V. Survey Results

The survey should be designed with data analysis in mind (see Section II: The Survey).

RHODI staff entered data directly into a FileMaker Pro database. To analyze data, individual fields were exported into Excel spreadsheets, where percentages and charts were then generated automatically.

Open-ended questions (such as “What are your top concerns?”) took more time to quantify. Staff used keywording to determine overarching categories, and then assigned each individual response to those categories to reveal themes.

**Recommendation:** When interpreting the data, refer back to the project’s mission - does the data answer questions posed by the project?

In some instances, RHODI staff found that the responses were not what they had anticipated. This data is still useful - it helps staff to better plan next phases according to actual needs, instead of perceived needs.

## VI. Project Longevity & Next Steps

The long-term sustainability of the project should be considered from its earliest stages. The original RHODI grant narrative specified that after the initial granting period, the RHODI website would be maintained and updated by permanent staff at the Rhode Island Historical Society, to prevent obsolescence.

It is also important to consider the ongoing maintenance of social media and other outlets used to disseminate information to project stakeholders. If a project is grant-funded, basic provisions for sustaining the project beyond the grant term must be addressed in the planning stages.

As discussed in III. Technology, the ongoing maintenance of the website must be addressed. This may be as simple as establishing a regular staff member to perform necessary updates and troubleshooting. Long-term hosting costs must also be considered.

### User feedback for website improvements

Upon launching the site, participating organizations were provided with their login information, and asked to contact RHODI staff with any issues - difficulty logging in, editing information, or navigating the site in general. This initial feedback was used to improve the functionality of the site in its earliest stages.

**Recommendation:** Prior to the website launch, save time for usability testing. Pull users from your anticipated audiences to navigate the website, testing its search and browse capabilities, and other relevant features.



## **Draw on survey findings**

The project's next phases should build upon the survey findings. In the RHODI surveys, an interest in professional development in the following areas emerged:

- Collections care
- Digital literacy
- Educational programming and youth engagement
- Visibility and audience growth
- Developing collaborative scholarly programs

Based upon the expressed need, the RHODI staff worked with other history and heritage organizations to develop workshops addressing each of the above areas. The Rhode Island Historical Society has hired a Program Outreach Manager who will develop and coordinate professional development programs and resources for the history and heritage sector in Rhode Island.