Rhode Island Historical Society

2020 Vision

Strategic Plan Update

2020 - 2023
Our Mission

Honoring, interpreting, and sharing Rhode Island’s past to enrich the present and inspire the future.
How We Work

As an important cultural institution in Rhode Island, we use our historical materials and knowledge of the past to explore topics of timeless relevance and current public interest and benefit.

Inside our facilities and around the state, the RIHS encourages broad engagement in the diverse experiences we offer.
RIHS Strategic Approach

The Strategic Planning Committee took a new approach to planning in 2014. Instead of a deeply detailed plan, the group proposed broad categories the RIHS should address. Within those categories are large, but more specific goals that move us forward to develop and deploy our collections, knowledge, connections, and expertise to build relationships among people, organizations, and communities to enhance understanding and empathy, and to instill a pride of place.
Our Vision

As the sole Rhode Island history organization whose purview encompasses the entire state, we seek to:

- Demonstrate excellence and share expertise in collections management and educational programming;
- Cultivate a collaborative network to advance and revitalize the history and heritage sector in Rhode Island;
- Deliver high-quality programming to our current audiences, while expanding reach to underserved groups, through increased attention to our facilities and more effective use of technology;
- Exemplify mission-based financial sustainability, economic transparency, community engagement, and ethical leadership at all levels of staff, board, and volunteers;
- Consistently communicate our mission and actions through traditional and new media; and
- Advocate for history education in Rhode Island’s K-12 schools as a way to develop empathy, 21st-century skills, and pride in Rhode Island.
Divisions

COLLECTIONS
The Collections Department of the RIHS focuses on the organization's reference, archival and artifact collections. Our collections are of central importance to scholarly audiences and key to the development of educational resources. Its charge is to increase the discoverability and visibility of and access to those collections (both in person and online), in accordance with the best practices of museums, research libraries, special collections, and archives.

THE GOFF CENTER
The Goff Center interprets Rhode Island's history in audience-appropriate and engaging ways through multiple formats, at all of our sites, and online. Goff Center staff and volunteers create content-based interpretive tools in multiple formats, and strive to be innovative, relevant, and accessible to all. The Goff Center team seeks to increase diverse representation of voices, create inclusive spaces and means of understanding for audiences of differing needs, and develop equitable learning opportunities.

MUSEUM OF WORK & CULTURE
The Museum of Work & Culture shares the stories of the men, women, and children who came to find a better life in Rhode Island's mill towns in the late 19th and 20th centuries. Besides reflecting its surrounding community, it also engages and energizes the community both within and outside its walls. The MoWC staff and volunteers pursue innovative, captivating, and intriguing ideas to entertain and educate the public. They are dedicated to removing barriers to access so all visitors can see themselves reflected in the stories they preserve and share.
Divisions

ADVANCEMENT

The RIHS Advancement Department supports all aspects of the RIHS work by cultivating, building, and sustaining relationships to create a broad community of RIHS supporters and stakeholders. The Advancement team communicates strategically to build awareness, demonstrate relevance, and garner support for the RIHS’s mission and work. The Advancement staff translates personal, organizational, and corporate relationships into philanthropic and in-kind support for the RIHS to ensure its long-term well-being.

FINANCE & ADMINISTRATION

The Department of Finance and Administration maintains high-quality, easily understandable financial reporting at the staff, board, audit, membership, state and federal levels. This highly skilled team oversees all aspects of human resources and payroll, and maintains positive and active vendor relationships. The Finance and Administration team seeks to respond quickly and accurately to queries from staff, board and vendor while maintaining strong security measures and staying abreast of the changing state of regulations.

BUILDING & GROUNDS

Because of the historic nature and public face of the RIHS’s physical locations, the Buildings & Grounds staff strives to maintain, preserve, and improve the properties of the RIHS, while helping to execute the needs of the RIHS programs and rentals by ensuring access, set-up and clean up of the sites.
The RIHS Board of Trustees approved this Strategic Plan in the winter of 2015. The staff used the remainder of that Fiscal Year to gear up for the first year of the new plan. One of the ways in which we did this was to create a new type of annual goal setting and evaluation that is more clearly based on our strategic goals; i.e., there are institutional goals, departmental goals, and individual goals for each person, and there is a clear linkage from the overall plan to departmental leadership, and from the department heads to their supporting staff.

Using this approach, not every goal is addressed the same way every year, nor is each goal necessarily addressed in every fiscal year. The staff, with its limited resources, must decide where effort can be placed, and because meeting goals often take specialized skills, if an employee is absent (ill or on leave) for part of a year it is possible that no one else will be available to complete non-essential projects.

In the fall of 2019, the Executive Committee empowered the staff to update and amend our strategic plan, which was scheduled to sunset on December 31, 2020, rather than empaneling a new committee and creating a new plan. This was done for two reasons, (1) the bones of the plan are still considered valid and useful, and (2) to allow the staff to direct their time to planning for the 200th anniversary of the RIHS and 25th anniversary of MoWC.

In this document, each strategic area is introduced with a statement of an opportunity or challenge that the RIHS is committed to engaging in the next three years. In bold, we call out the Organizational Strategy call to action. Below that, bulleted, are three Organizational Strategies. Each year, the senior staff will create their list of Programmatic or Operational Strategies for the next Fiscal Year. They will then meet with their teams to develop annual goals and objectives on which their work will be measured.

You will also see a special section in each area devoted to ideas for our 200th anniversary. Because of the importance of this milestone, we are using it as a rallying point to meet or address challenges and opportunities in ways that highlight our competitive advantages, but at this stage, these are merely ideas and will need additional vetting.
For nearly 200 years the Rhode Island Historical Society has collected artifacts and archives that document the activity—and serves as the basis for interpretation of the activities—of the people of Rhode Island. Our history is a renewable resource; we create more of it every day. We must acknowledge the fundamental and perpetual nature of our collecting as the only state-wide history organization in Rhode Island, while recognizing that our financial and spatial resources are finite.

Because our collections are the basis of the work of the RIHS, we will:

- Refine the scope of our collecting, through both accessioning and deaccessioning, by continually evaluating current intellectual, social, and pedagogical values and trends.
- Increase discoverability of, access to, and engagement with our collections.
- Provide training and resources in the areas of collections care and content knowledge to our staff to support programs, educational initiatives, exhibitions, and communications.
By the 200th anniversary we will

- Develop a Collections Development & Management Plan.
- Reinterpret the Museum of Work & Culture’s Merci Boxcar Exhibit.
The State of Rhode Island’s history is not only of local interest, but also of national and international significance. Unfortunately, the state does little to promote teaching its children the story of Rhode Island and the discipline of history. We at the RIHS believe that the study of history is fundamental to civic engagement, the development of empathy, and critical thinking. We are uniquely poised to work with a variety of stakeholders, both in the state and at large, to promote not only the study of Rhode Island’s history, but history writ large.

To strengthen history education in our state, the RIHS will:

- **DEVELOP HIGH-QUALITY, CONTENT-BASED CURRICULUM AND LESSON PLANS FOR PRE-K THROUGH 12 EDUCATION.**

- **SERVE AS THE STATE AFFILIATE, OR REPRESENTATIVE, FOR NATIONWIDE HISTORY EDUCATION PROGRAMS AND INITIATIVES.**

- **BROADEN CAPACITY TO ENHANCE HISTORY EDUCATION TO COMMUNITIES OF ALL ABILITIES AND BACKGROUNDS.**
By the 200th anniversary we will

💡 Explore the need for a printed version of Encompass, the digital textbook.

💡 Launch a teacher advisory group.

💡 Expand multilingual offerings at MoWC.
While we hear stories in the media about American’s lack of historical knowledge, we know that in Rhode Island, many people are dedicated to preserving and sharing their stories. In 2012-2013, thanks to the support of the Mellon Foundation, we mapped the state’s history and heritage sector and found more than 460 active history and heritage organizations in the state. The organizations have collections and even historic structures, but many do not have the financial support and training to fulfill their missions as they wish to.

**To Support Rhode Island’s Expansive History and Heritage Sector, we will:**

- **BUILD CAPACITY THROUGH FOSTERING A CULTURE OF CO-CREATION AND ACTIVE COLLABORATION WITH PARTNER ORGANIZATIONS.**

- **SPREAD THE WORD ABOUT PARTNER ORGANIZATIONS BY USING OUR NETWORKS TO ENHANCE THE VISIBILITY OF LOCAL ORGANIZATIONS ALL OVER THE STATE.**

- **WITH OUR PARTNERS, PROVIDE PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT TRAINING SESSIONS FOR H&H SITES THROUGHOUT THE STATE.**
By the 200th anniversary we will

💡 Organize a day-long symposium focused on Rhode Island history for professionals and volunteers in the state’s H & H sector.

💡 Curate a collection of a single artifact from each city & town for exhibition and possible publication.
Rhode Island’s history was not created by a single group of people, no handful of individuals. Therefore, we ardently believe that all persons, all groups, should have the best possible access to these stories. Recognizing that it is impossible to meet every need, we will remain aware, flexible, and nimble, ready to find new solutions, access new technologies, and eliminate possible barriers to sharing of Rhode Island’s stories.

To better serve all of our users, the RIHS will:

- **OPTIMIZE SPACES AND ACCESSIBILITY AT ALL LOCATIONS, BOTH INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL.**

- **EXPAND THE SCOPE OF STORIES WE TELL, THROUGH OUR OWN WORK AND ACTIVE PARTNERSHIPS, TO BETTER REFLECT THE EXPERIENCES OF ALL RHODE ISLANDERS.**

- **ENHANCE AND EXPAND THE ARRAY OF POSSIBLE IN-PERSON AND ONLINE EXPERIENCES FOR USERS/VISITORS.**
By the 200th anniversary we will

💡 Raise approximately $400,000 to revitalize the landscape surrounding JBH, in homage to the 1900 Olmsted Brothers plan, ensuring improved access and longterm sustainability.

💡 Continue the rolling reinterpretation of the John Brown House Museum.
What do you know? Who needs to know it? Have you told them? The RIHS acknowledges that the responsibility for sharing what we do rests on our shoulders. Media outlets change, as do technologies, and our audiences’ needs. We also recognize that we are seen as an authority on history, and as such, our communications are expected to be executed with the highest level of accuracy possible, without unduly delayed responses. With the flood of information often overwhelming our members, we must be thoughtful and strategic about how we communicate about our work and our needs.

To better communicate our efforts consistently and broadly, the RIHS will:

- **BUILD AN INTERNAL COMMUNICATIONS INFRASTRUCTURE TO ENSURE AN ACCURATE AND TIMELY INFORMATION EXCHANGE.**

- **DEVELOP AND DEPLOY A STRONG COMMUNICATIONS PLAN.**

- **CULTIVATE RELATIONSHIPS WITH EXTERNAL STAKEHOLDERS AND MEDIA OUTLETS.**
By the 200th anniversary we will

Seek local and national coverage, such as RIPTA buses, billboards, and RI PBS documentaries, even reaching out to programs such as CBS Sunday Morning and Jeopardy.

Branding the MoWC’s 25th anniversary.
For many years, museums have experienced diminishing public and private support. This presents challenges to the field in general, and the RIHS specifically. While we cannot control the actions of all of our funding sources, we make sure that we are honoring all of our donors’ gifts and seek to develop an agile business model, ready to take advantage of opportunities as they arise.

The RIHS is committed to financial growth, stability, sustainability, and transparency:

- **Work toward an optimal expense ratio to ensure long-term stability and sustainability of the RIHS.**
- **Increase annual revenue to keep pace with the ever expanding operational needs and costs of a 21st-century non-profit organization.**
- **Provide education to the staff and board about non-profit financial best practices and economic conditions in the field.**
By the 200th anniversary we will

- Establish statewide presence with an expanded membership base by developing a recruitment campaign and other initiatives.
- Create a planned giving program that focuses on the impact of bequests for the next 200 years.