



101

Ideas for New Revenue
at History Organizations



AASLH



WHAT COULD YOU DO WITH A LITTLE MORE CASH FLOW?

It has been AASLH's role for the past almost eighty years to gather fresh ideas from successful programs and practices and share them with members. By necessity, all corners of the profession develop innovative ways to deal with financial, programming, community, and other challenges that arise daily for history organizations of all sizes. Individual institutions, however, get so busy that they can miss the solutions already discovered by their colleagues.

AASLH presents here 101 ideas for generating new streams of revenue supplied by colleagues from around the history field. We thank the many AASLH volunteers and members who shared their ideas for this document. In particular, we thank the State Historical Administrators Meeting, a group of state history leaders which meets annually to exchange ideas and discuss major issues, for starting this project off with the first batch of tested tips. We also thank members of the AASLH Council and Historic House and Small Museum Affinity Group Committees for their contributions to the project.

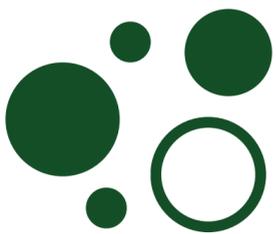


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LET US COUNT THE WAYS . . .

1. Establish a “suggested donation” admission program in place of a free admission program.
2. Start a pre-school program at your site; many of the families involved will join your organization at the “family” level of membership.
3. Do a special 18th-, 19th-, or 20th-century “date night” event where couples try period-authentic courtship rituals, dances, and writing different types of love letters to their partner. Eighteenth century? Seal the letters with wax for couples to open later. Schedule the event early enough in the evening that couples can go out to dinner afterwards.
4. Make classroom and auditorium space available for rent to other nonprofits and businesses in your community.
5. Find a local winery to create a special edition wine for sale at your site and share the returns.
6. Install coin-operated lockers. You can buy them online in a stack of various sizes. Twelve lockers rented for \$.50 each, three times a day, six days a week, over fifty weeks a year is \$5,400.
7. Partner with Ancestry.com to digitize your records and work out a deal for residents or members to have limited-time free access.



8. Create a simple form to send to special event rental clients who are owed their full security deposit after the event that gives them the option of donating it in whole or part as a tax-deductible contribution.

9. Create an opening reception for trustees and advisory council anytime there is an exhibition, and line up local businesses to be the sole sponsor to cover full cost of the event. Include special incentives for the sponsor including signage, employee tickets to the event or exhibit, and logo placement on exhibit literature.

10. Establish digitization agreements with a variety of major library resource vendors, including ProQuest, ProjectMuse, JSTOR, Newsbank, Cengage, Ancestry, Family Search and the Google Books Project, which in many circumstances includes both the royalties and complimentary licensee for new electronic resources.

11. Can you rent out your facility every Sunday to a church group that does not have its own building? One site does this and generates \$35,000 annually. Lots of church congregations across the country are interested in renting space.

12. Have a full-service conservation center and run it on a pay-for-itself basis.

13. If your organization does not offer planned giving, research the topic and begin offering it as another option for donors.

14. Host a classic movie night in the museum or on the lawn. Charge admission or make admission free and charge for snacks that fit the movie theme.



15. Offer a Civil War bus tour, which is always popular for history buffs.

16. Bring in a consultant to assess all of your retail operations and help you to segment your offerings based on the specific customers at each retail location. One organization that did this tailored its products to customers and is on track to increase revenue 45% this fiscal year.

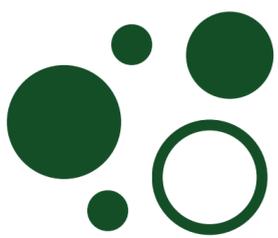
17. Establish your own online store on your website for history-related items, especially ones unique to your organization or locale.

18. Create and sell a small boat cruise tour, with your (and neighboring) historic sites as the places along the route.

19. License and continue to sell visual materials on your website and through a non-exclusive licensing agreement with Getty Images, which generates new revenue.

20. Pay for scanning equipment with a grant or other funding for a specific large project, and subsequently, use that equipment to handle additional smaller scanning projects for other agencies or entities, and charge them a fee for doing so.

21. Have a tiny museum, tiny kitchen, tiny whatever-room or whatever-location concert, modeled on NPR's Tiny Desk concert idea, featuring local musicians in a cozy space. This uses your location's uniqueness and broadens your audience, by featuring a special experience.



22. Open some of your historic sites for family camping.

23. Do a regular analysis comparing your services to other entities in your area or state to be sure you are not undervaluing things such as space and event rentals and admission prices for walk-ins and school groups.

24. Work with area scouting groups to offer badge workshops and/or modify existing programming to align with Scout badge requirements. Scouting Councils might be able to handle all workshop promotions and registrations.

25. Establish behind the scenes tours—people love the greater access and it makes them feel special.

26. Make your rental space available (for a fee) for legislative or other government office receptions, particularly if the location is convenient, historically inspiring, or visually stunning.

27. Make two lists: one of things your team and/or your institution excels at; one of topics in which your community and/or the field needs training. Identify the overlap and cultivate the skills to train others in that area, and begin offering workshops or one-on-one training for a fee.

28. Create a series of historically inspired social events, focusing on history of food and alcohol. In many cases, you can use historic recipes from your archives to recreate drinks and dishes for modern enjoyment.

29. Work with your state to create a commemorative license plate that generates revenue for historical projects.

30. Offer antique car rides for a fee.

31. Start a preservation program to advise businesses on archiving their papers, photographs, and records, and then offer to store them for a fee.

32. Shift marketing dollars from traditional media, such as billboards or magazines, to online, which allows one to target audiences and reach outside of one's area, state, and country to fans of local musicians, food types, writers, political leaders, etc. One site doubled its online revenue over the past year using this strategy.

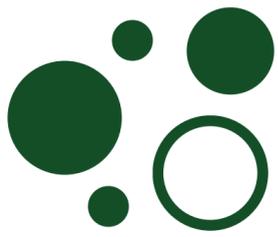
33. Create a state history textbook for the grades in your state that focus on state and local history and sell that to schools. We recommend including a Spanish-language version. Corporate support can help fund the development, along with ongoing financial assistance from individual supporters. An electronic version can be licensed for classroom use on a sliding scale (size of the district, number of students, etc.) – typical fee is \$10/student/year.

34. Launch a proprietary beer based on a recipe associated with your historic site using old-fashioned brewing methods.



35. Organize a simple “date night” for couples with open exhibits, and served alcohol and chocolates. This not only can be profitable but it generates new members.

36. Have 21-and-up after-hours events combining history, unique hands-on activities, discussions, and drinks, music, or games. Ticket sales and sponsored or in-kind support from local partners will turn a profit. Give people a place other than a loud sports bar to gather in your community.



37. Hold high school proms at your facility. Surprisingly proms can be less messy and intrusive than weddings!

38. Do a summer outdoor concert series on the lawn (\$5/guest), or try a limited-entry indoor “unplugged” concert series using an inside venue (\$25/guest, only 30 tickets).

39. Open your site for wedding rentals (even if it is just the barn or lawn).

40. Offer archaeology tours by the state or local archaeologist. For one site that did this, the events sold out repeatedly. People love to participate in and do archaeology in the field.

41. Organize a “Wine, Eats, and Artifacts” event built around a spectacularly interesting piece in your collection around which you can tell a deeply moving story. People are hungry to have this intimate connection to the past

42. Rent spaces in your institution’s parking lot for other special events to use. Partner with an outside parking company to handle the logistics.

43. Put together corporate retreats (including programming, not just renting space) for local businesses. Those folks don’t mind paying a premium for a unique experience. This might be a way that one of your board members can contribute, by shepherding their business contacts this direction.

44. Add your gift shop to Shopify.com, BigCommerce.com, Magento or another ecommerce provider.

45. Reexamine a long-ago program that made money, or almost made money, for your institution and recondition it to be more inclusive and relevant to people in your community today.

46. Require that book printing be sponsored, so money has to be raised in advance of the book’s publication. Books are easy to attract sponsors for, and then these sponsors can be on your radar for other fundraising needs.

47. Merge multiple vendors into one contract to lessen administrative headache and increase profit margin for vendor and you.

48. Make the time to finally focus on a capital campaign, which bring in much larger one-time gifts and bequests.

49. Honor a select number of business leaders in your state or community each year in a program named after people or events significant to the history of your locale or community. Have a gala event for the induction with sponsors (including friends of the inductees) covering costs.

50. Build your endowment by allowing individuals to support staff positions, just like named chairs in a university setting. This creates a source of revenue for the endowed position allowing the institution to reallocate funds previously spent on this position to other areas.

51. Sell ad space on the scrim/mesh covering on construction on buildings being done for renovation or new construction. These very large, very visible spaces can be prime real estate for major sponsors, corporate funders, and other advertisers.



52. Sell the processing of family collections. Any digital images created by the historical society gets to keep as part of its overall collection.

53. State historical societies can create a statewide website into which local history organizations can put their digital images and records; digital images can be purchased by the public, and state historical society shares revenue with local organizations.

54. Launch a Business History Initiative that teaches the role of business in shaping the state's or region's history. Companies can pay for sponsorship to be involved.

55. Rent extra space in storage facility to a fine art moving company.

56. Develop a book-reading experience in your historic space keyed to a title that was written or popular during the period of your site. Participants might read Jane Austen for several hours in an early 19th-century setting you establish in your site, or have gin while reading F. Scott Fitzgerald, on a day when the space is closed to the public. Pair with historically appropriate lighting, refreshments, and perhaps a group discussion at the end, and price accordingly.

57. Sell parking passes for your parking lot to a nearby professional firm, restaurant, or other business that needs the spaces on a regular, work-day basis.

58. Allow city park system to turn a block of your land into an urban garden/park area which they will now maintain, and so you save by not having to pay for mowing or other landscaping services.

59. Introduce tours of the historic landscape as a discrete element to combine with the historic house. One site does this in three versions (digital - \$5; walking - \$12; and electric vehicle - \$25) and has created \$25,000 in new revenue in the first two years as well as new opportunities for sponsorship.

60. Improve the visitor experience and the quality and range of options for interpretation with highly specialized tours led by senior staff. These can go for \$50 per person. These are in addition to many free and low price options for general audiences.

61. Design an historically themed escape room at your institution. Sell tickets to this adventure experience wherein small groups of guests must work together to solve the mystery by finding clues and figuring out puzzles.

62. Hire a local artist to paint a scene of a feature of your site, make prints, perhaps with the printmaking donated or sponsored and sell on site.



63. Have your State Historic Preservation Officer (SHPO) lead tours. These specialized events are highly popular.

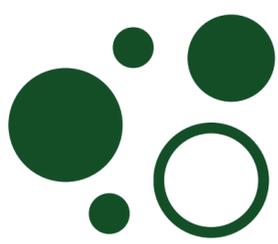
64. Set aside a special corner in retail for donated items from local artists. A single hand-thrown bowl, a dozen hand-sewn colonial dolls, handmade walking sticks, premium priced with a tag that explains that all proceeds are used for interpretation. The offerings change over time, but add a very nice 100% profit boost to retail sales.

65. Is there a local business that has an animal mascot that could be housed in your animal program space? A hotel that has a llama mascot will be paying for a new barn, paying for upkeep and staff time, a management fee, and cross-branding at one urban historic site.

66. Get legislation passed authorizing a new state income tax check-off to support local history. For one state historical society, who administers this grant program, contributions from individual income tax returns grew to more than \$25,000 in year two.

67. Solicit local services (such as a cleaning service for someone's business for a year—something that puts a spotlight on the donor's company) and then raffle it off during one of your institution's events. If service isn't donated, consider purchasing it (at a discount) and then raffling it off at a higher price.

68. Find someone to design a "tropical shirt" that includes drawings of prominent lost buildings in the city that you can use for advocacy and sell to raise funds.



69. Try a "Stay at Home Tea." Rather than attend another fundraising function, donors can use the teabag you have enclosed, make some tea, and send a donation to the museum.

70. Create motor coach tours to historic sites outside your city, county, or state, to destinations such as your state capital, a large museum in your region, or a national attraction like Colonial Williamsburg or New Orleans. One site netted \$50,000 in one year doing this. The focus of the program is mostly history not involving your local community.

71. Leverage your history and the fan base for it that might lie far outside your town: try a Kickstarter, IndieGoGo, GoFundMe, etc. campaign backed up with strong social media efforts. Pick a specific goal and raise the cash with a strong pitch, perhaps as a video, and some incentives (e.g., coffee cup for \$25 gift; \$100 for a private tour).

72. Deck the halls of your site for a holiday light tour.



73. Do an annual distinguished award banquet and give an award to a celebrity, whose presence will draw a crowd. Have an all-volunteer committee make the arrangements and raise the money for expenses. This makes ticket sales all-profit.

74. Encourage in-visit purchases through use of special tokens at a living history site: a “time travel token” can be a \$5 copper coin that guests purchase. Visitors use it to step into the past and interact with the businesses in your outdoor campus, such as a general store or blacksmith’s shop, or for taking a carriage ride. This is an interactive element that puts the focus on guests' engagement with the people and stories of your museum, while supporting in-visit purchasing that doesn't feel heavy-handed or distracting from the sensory-rich environment of your site.

75. Repurpose an offsite historic property, which is outside your mission, to serve as a retreat center and event rental location.

76. Partner with a for-profit tour company for a food tour. They take groups to different sites around town and then end at your site for a tour and a taste of a traditional food item from your town, state, or region. You get a per-person fee for each tour.

77. Start a happy-hour program in which you partner and share the profits with a local restaurant that harvests items out of your historic kitchen garden and uses them on the menu offered at the event. Each program is a different theme, and your organization can connect to a different set of community partners based on the rotating topics.

78. Train local 7th-grade guides to give "For Kids by Kids" tours, a short, 20-min program designed by the student volunteers for other children.



79. Create a historically themed miniature golf course at your site. You can still serve your core audience while attracting a broader one.

80. Buy equipment that scans newspapers to make second-generation microfilm (for institutions that purchased your microfilms the first time (in 1950s-1980s). Digitize microfilm and sell to institutions and patrons.

81. Open at night on Halloween for tours and treats, or maybe a more elaborate special event.

82. Purchase the franchise for the local tourist trolley and use it as an opportunity to create a museum without walls in your community while making more visitors aware of your organization. Place your interpreters on board to offer engaging material.

83. Hire a local artist or clever craftsperson to construct a collection box related in theme to your site or collection. Maybe it has moving parts to grab bills or allows coins to roll through a model of your building.

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85. Scrutinize existing programs and consider if they serve the mission and whether or not they are financially sustainable. Quickly shut down those that score low on both counts to make room for something that will generate revenue.

86. Invite a local artist, school, or another community group to make a t-shirt design related to your site or collection, which you sell online with Spotify, Volusion, Teespring, or any of the many other such .coms. Be sure first to research the sourcing and labor practices of the company.



87. Volunteer your site as a polling place to increase your visibility in the community and draw return (paying) visitors.

88. Create a golf series combined with historical tours, visiting nearby or faraway courses..

89. Cater to quinceañeras, bar and bat mitzvahs, sweet sixteens, and related coming of age events, offering event space for rental as well as historic settings for photographs.

90. Plan a trivia night fundraiser. Sell tickets by the table or individually (individuals are formed into teams). Teams choose a creative name and bring decorations for their table. Add a wine pull raffle, silent auction, craft beer tasting, or other fun activities that increase the total amount of money raised.

91. Encourage members and supporters to purchase through AmazonSmile. AmazonSmile is Amazon's program that donates a percentage of a person's purchase to the nonprofit of their choice.

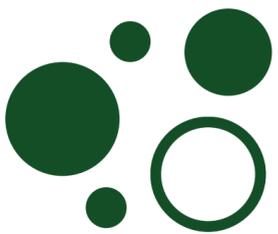
92. Start an annual Christmas or holiday ornament series (for sale) that each year features a different historic structure or event in your community.

93. If your organization does not have an endowment fund, plan a campaign to start one. Identify potential donors including one or two people who are willing to match all contributions up to a specific total.

94. Find a local business to sponsor field trips for Title I schools in your area. Be sure to include admission/program cost as well as the cost of the bus.

95. Do you have unused acreage that you have to maintain at your historic site? Work with your local agriculture extension office to lease it to a local farmer to raise a cash crop appropriate to your site's history. In an urban area? Lease space for community gardens.

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96. Start an annual wall calendar series using photographs from the collection.
97. Create a grandparent membership that allows them to bring up to two or three grandchildren per visit as part of the benefits.
98. Try an “Attic to Basement Tour” that not only opens up the whole museum and its normally off-view spaces to public tours, but that lifts the curtain on questions and challenges your staff are facing. “Why is this artifact displayed but not those ten other similar items? What used to be exhibited in this space 30, 50, or 100 years ago?”
99. Become “home base” for a vintage baseball team. On game days, offer discounted admission and sell refreshments in your museum store.
100. Have extra office space, or can you invest in renovating or creating some extra space? Become a small business or nonprofit incubator and let or sublet workspace to a team smaller than your own.



101. Start a Relevant History coffee talk to catch people on their way to work. Invite a guest historian to help put the days or weeks news in historical context or to lead a conversation that unravels a present-day local issue's historical roots. Keep it to 30 minutes max.

Do have any revenue generating ideas that have worked well at your organization? Let us know! Leave a comment on Facebook at www.facebook.com/AASLH or tell us on Twitter at @AASLH.