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Characteristics of Unsustainable Organizations

Carol Kammen's 2009 article, *An Abundance of History*, summed up the issue well: "There are many thousands of history museums across the country. Many are in precarious position for a variety of reasons that have been well documented in numerous articles over the years: lack of funding, lack of new leadership to replace aging board members, the overwhelming burden of caring for deteriorating physical structures, etc. Some museums are surviving, but others are in long-term peril."

In another essay we will explore the hallmarks of successful history organizations, but the purpose of this chapter is to identify characteristics that history organizations in peril seem to share. To help clarify the issues, we will profile a typical (and mythical) example of a history organization that is in peril.

The Jones House of Everyman County was built in 1885 and belonged to Ezekiel Jones, of the Jones cotton gin family. The Jones family settled the county as pioneers, and prospered enough to own and operate the county's first cotton gin and to build a large house not far from the town square. The last descendent of the Jones family lived in the house until the early 1970s, and after she died with no heirs, the house sat empty for a few more years until the county bi-centennial committee decided to adopt the house as its official project.

The Jones House was not particularly architecturally significant, and its main distinguishing characteristic is that it was older than almost all other surviving houses in the county. In addition, it was associated with an important local family. Over \$300,000 was raised to acquire and stabilize the house, and the Everyman County commissioners agreed to help fund the operations of the house, believing that the county "at last" had something that would help to bring tourists to Everyman County. Since only a few pieces of original Jones family furniture remained, the rest of the house was furnished with "period" pieces and odds and ends collected from the community that fit the appearance of photographs taken in the house in 1903.

With great fanfare and huge attendance, the house was dedicated and opened to the public during the summer of 1976. For the next few months, the house enjoyed continuous visits and the help of dozens of volunteers. The future seemed bright.

But by 1980, reality was setting in. Attendance quickly dwindled to only 2500 annually. Most county residents had seen the house, and few saw the need to keep coming to visit. And, town leaders quickly found out that no one from outside Everyman County had ever heard of the Jones family and were otherwise not really interested in getting off the interstate to come visit an ordinary house built in 1885. County Commissioners, feeling the squeeze of a declining budget, began to cut back on their annual contribution to the museum. By 1985, they ended their annual subsidy.

Also by the early 1980s, the house was beginning to cost more money on an annual basis. First the air conditioning had to be replaced. Then the front porch needed some repair

and repainting, and workmen discovered that termites had infested the whole front of the house. A simple repainting turned into a project that cost more than \$10,000. The next year a roof leak damaged the ceiling and wallpaper in the upstairs bedroom. A canopy bed “on loan” from one of the museum’s board members was also damaged. And on it went.

In the early 1990s, Jones House leadership decided that a modest expansion was necessary in order to attract new audiences. A consultant suggested that they purchase a former bank building across the street from the house and convert it into a changing exhibit gallery and museum store. This, the consultant said, would be the key to raising the museum’s profile and attracting new visitors, possibly making the museum financially self-sufficient. As in the 1970s, the board found it relatively easy to raise the \$500,000 needed for this project, and they tackled the project with new energy. They never did get around to raising the \$1 million dollar endowment fund that was supposed to accompany the \$500,000 building acquisition and renovation. Unfortunately, the museum now had to hire additional staff for the new building and operating expenses now included a significant increase in their electric bill. Worse, they found that their attendance did not increase at all; meaning, they had almost doubled their operating expenses without being able to generate any new income to support it. A late attempt to raise the endowment fund, now couched in desperate terms, fizzled.

By the 1990s the original board members were beginning to die out and the remaining board members found it difficult to recruit new members. For one thing, leaders in the beginning years had not encouraged “outsiders” to join the board. For another, being a board member was no longer perceived as “fun.” Meetings were largely spent talking about maintenance issues, fund raising events, and personnel issues. Everyman County itself seemed to be changing around them. The local population was gradually becoming more diverse, and the local school district now had a majority of Hispanic students. A new generation of civic leaders was now in charge of things, and they had little or no connection to the county’s pioneer past, and little interest in the museum. At a recent meeting, board members actually discussed whether they could find another organization to take over the house, or even possibly to close it down. In any case, as one board member put it, “No one seems to care whether we stay open or not.”

Jones House Lessons

The Jones House of Everyman County illustrates several difficulties, detailed below, that history organizations commonly encounter. These difficulties, taken together, can spell trouble for an organization’s long-term sustainability.

In general, **unattached or stand-alone history museums**, are most vulnerable. By unattached or stand alone, we mean history museums or historic houses organized as separate 501 © 3 organizations and not part of a larger organization or affiliated with a larger museum or university. Many historic house museums, whether in small towns or large cities are stand-alone history museums. Because their history is mostly local, stand-alone history museums usually do not compel enough tourist traffic or even local support to fund their own operations

without significant support or affiliation with larger organizations. Like the Jones House, there are literally thousands of small history museums and house museums that fit this category.

History organizations that are expected to fund themselves without benefit of any funding assistance from city or county budgets, Hotel Occupancy Tax (HOT) funds, or contributed utilities, **are very vulnerable**. History museums like the Jones House should not be expected to fund their own operations unless they are blessed with substantial endowment funds. Very few museums, and almost no history museums, are able to fund their operations entirely from earned income and private philanthropy. Income from admissions and rentals for weddings, often the heart of a small museum's planned income stream, in most cases make up only a small part of a museum's budget, even for larger operations. In the case of the Jones House, they got important funding help at their founding, which gave them a good base of support for their operations, but the county commissioners eventually tired of funding the museum, unfortunately, a fairly typical scenario.

Local museums where **"no one famous was born, no one famous died, and nothing horrible happened there"** will not attract anything but a local audience. Historic houses affiliated with famous people—former presidents and famous outlaws--- will be able to draw a certain number of out of town tourists. Historic houses that belonged to an early local pioneer family, like the Jones House, will not.

The larger issue is that most local history museums display their treasures with little connection to larger state and national historical themes. Unless something of state or national significance happened at or near a historic house, strictly local history, by itself, may not be compelling enough to guarantee survival. If the museum is not fortunate enough to have state or local significance, then it must make the effort to place its history in a larger context. Can the Jones family experience be linked to something of more state or national significance? Was Mr. Jones a part of a national political party or movement? Did his life and career reflect trends current in other regions of the country?

Museums that are dominated by a founder or founding board that does not cultivate the next generation of leaders will find it hard to sustain a board of trustees in the future. Founding boards are amazing organisms. Founding board members have an overriding sense of mission and purpose, often related to saving a historic building or opening a new museum in the old courthouse. They have all-consuming dedication and zeal, are willing to work night and day towards their goal, and will often serve as a museum's main governance and leadership for years, if not decades. But what happens when they grow too old to continue their work, and what if they have not made a conscious effort to recruit the next generation of leadership (as was the case with the Jones House)? This is a vulnerable time in the life of a museum, and a time when many falter.

Museums that **are isolated from their local community** and community leaders will not get the support they need when they most need it. Successful museums are well integrated into community life. History museums and historical societies all too often run quiet operations that don't involve the community, are perceived by others as opaque, and seem to make little impact on the community's cultural life. At the Jones House, the founding board was not interested in recruiting "outsiders" into their leadership during the early, successful, days of the museum. By the time the museum was in crisis,

they seemed to be struggling alone, with little interest from the community in helping them to survive. If they had made more attempts to involve the community in their leadership, to hold programs and events of interest to the community, and to otherwise integrate themselves into the life of their community, the story might have been different.

Museums that “memorialize” their founding generation of ancestors and have stagnant collections, exhibits and programs **that grow out of touch with changing population demographics** will struggle for both visitors and funding. A common characteristic of history museums is that their collections and exhibits commemorate the founding of the community, its local agriculture and business, and its business and civic leaders. Public programs and events usually mirror these themes. As communities across the country continue to change and grow in ethnic and cultural diversity, will these museums change as well and develop an appeal to their present community, or will these collections and programs seem increasingly out of step with the modern community? The latter certainly seemed to be the case with the Jones House of Everyman County, where the collections and programs of the museum were now largely irrelevant to the county’s new citizens. In Texas and many parts of the country, even smaller communities are seeing demographic changes that include significant additions of Spanish speaking citizens. Are local museums making every effort to reflect these new communities?

Museums that over expand, over acquire and otherwise grow beyond what they can expect to keep up with over time will find it difficult to financially sustain their operations. This is a very common problem related to the “founding board member” theme. A fired-up first generation, flushed with success in saving buildings and adding new exhibit wings to their building, but not yet faced with the inevitable repair and maintenance issues that will come, will often over build. At the Jones House, they bought in to the idea that “if you build it they will come,” and took the risky step of expanding their operations and hoping that increased attendance revenue would cover their increased expenses. They unfortunately found that adding an additional structure or exhibit wing usually does not result in increased revenue from visitors. Many examples exist of museums that over expand their physical plants in their formative years, leaving an impossible burden for the next generation of museum leaders.

Finally, **museums that are founded for the “wrong reasons”** will struggle for purpose and community support. Wrong reasons include museums founded by convention and visitor’s bureaus hoping for an economic catalyst. Museum founded for these reasons lack a real “cause” to motivate and unite volunteers, and often create an unreasonable burden of expectations of financial success. Very few history museums can live up to this expectation, unless they are in the “famous” category listed above. Museums founded with funding from a local city or county government, with unrealistic hopes of instant tourism, will quickly find growing frustration from government officials, cutbacks in funding, and even eventual ending of funding.

Communities that are already struggling to support several history organizations might assess their organizations with the above perils in mind. Those contemplating the opening of a new historic house museum or other history organization should keep these in mind and assess their own chances for success.