

Why History is Difficult to Sustain (History As A “Developing World” Country)

Historian David Lowenthal famously wrote “The Past is a Foreign Country.” (1) We would like to suggest that the past or, more precisely, the field of history, is more like a “Developing World” country. By this we mean a place apart from the rest of the cultural world, working with less public interest and fewer resources than other disciplines, and with special circumstances that make life more difficult for history organization leaders. All cultural non-profit organizations face multiple challenges to survival in today’s competitive business climate. History organizations face these, but also face an additional set of challenges unique to organizations that work in the realm of preserving and interpreting history.

The 2008-2009 recession hit history organizations especially hard and, although the economy has since largely recovered, history organizations have continued to struggle. Some are permanently weakened, operating at reduced levels, with their prospects for long term sustainability in question. Others have achieved relative stability and learned to operate in the “new normal” environment of reduced resources. The resilience of history organization leadership is extraordinary, and these survivors keep plugging along, but relative to other non-profits and cultural organizations, the history field is lingering in a state of malaise.

The Oxford dictionaries define “malaise” as a “general feeling of discomfort, illness, or uneasiness whose exact cause is difficult to identify. (2) In the history field we have existed with this feeling of discomfort and uneasiness for years and are used to working in an area that we love, but which we recognize has characteristics that keep it from thriving. For a variety of reasons too complex to discuss in this essay, history organizations make do with fewer resources and less attendance than do the disciplines of art, science, and natural history. But while these disciplines have had their own struggles, they have bounced back and today are thriving in comparison to most history organizations.

If it is true that heritage has a certain amount of popular interest (which opinion polls generally confirm), then why do many history organizations struggle for attendance and resources, and why is history almost always at the bottom of the cultural heap?

This essay will address some of the reasons behind the malaise, and then offer some practical advice to organizations that are struggling. In other essays we will explore the characteristics common to history organizations that struggle for sustainability, as a way of helping other organizations avoid perilous situations. We will also explore the characteristics of organizations that appear to be financially and structurally sound and offer some examples of new ways of doing business for history organizations.

The following is an abbreviated, history-centric review of the past 60 years.:

- The post-World War II era was often a good time for history organizations, as many communities commemorated their fading pioneer generation and founded historical societies and historic house museums. The Bi-Centennial period of the 1970s and early 1980s was an especially exciting period with national museum organizations encouraging local communities to preserve and interpret their own history. (3) For many museums, attendance peaked during this period. Many of these history organizations were public-private partnerships set up with

considerable capital and operations support from cities and counties, as well as private individuals and foundations.

- Long-term sustainability was not yet a concern, and many organizations aggressively acquired as many collections, property, and buildings as they could get their hands on. Floated by public support and good attendance, few organizations worked to build endowments or set up long-term operations funding for programs and exhibits.
- The economic hard times in the 1980s saw the beginning of cutbacks from government funding sources. Increasingly, private funds were drawn in to support operations and there was greater recognition of the need to be more engaged with their community. Spurred on by American Alliance of Museums publications like *Museums for a New Century*, (4) many museums began to emphasize expanded education programs as a way to build audiences.
- In the 1990s many history museums, led by the examples of large museums like Colonial Williamsburg, Old Sturbridge Village and Conner Prairie, retooled into living history centers with an emphasis on interactive programming to build audiences and support. This trend was followed by many historic house museums and villages, but also influenced traditional history museums and historical societies. Many such organizations began to believe that they could survive largely on earned income and, like their larger counterparts, they vigorously expanded their programs and physical plants during this period.
- After the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, a few well publicized museums saw a spike in their attendance. Most history museums actually saw further declines in attendance and further reductions of government support due to the relatively brief, but startling, recession that followed,
- The long-term effects of deferred maintenance begin to dramatically show up post-2001, as buildings first restored in the 1960-1980 period began to more rapidly deteriorate and museums had to choose between funding programs and funding building repairs. In the museum field, a series of articles sounded the alarm about the future of history organizations, even asking if there were too many organizations, especially house museums (5)
- The recession that hit with full force in late 2008 dealt another serious blow to these museums. Private donations dipped, followed by corporate sponsorships and funding from private foundations. These blows were often followed by cuts from state, county and city funds beginning in 2009 and continuing for the next two years.
- In many ways, history organizations have never recovered from this most recent recession, even though other parts of the cultural economy have stabilized and even grown. Government funding has never returned to previous levels. Many foundations shifted their emphasis to social issues. Most organizations have adapted to operating at reduced levels.

To a large extent, it could be said that the above points apply to non-profits, but there are a number of factors unique to history organizations that have contributed to a continuing malaise.

Large Numbers of History Organizations But...History Has A Limited Audience

History organizations far outnumber any other type of cultural organization in Texas, and nationwide. The populist nature of history encourages people to form non-profit organizations to preserve and interpret their local history far in excess of any other type of cultural organization. According to the Texas Historical Commission, there are more than 900 such organizations just in Texas. The Institute for Museum and Library Services in 2014 concluded that there were over 34,000 museums in the country, with more than half of those classified as history museums.

On the surface this would seem to indicate popularity. Opinion polls generally reflect that people value heritage and heritage sites, and heritage tourism is frequently cited as proof of people's inherent interest in history. Most Texans are very proud of Texas heritage and may cite their interest in the Alamo, San Jacinto, and the History Channel as proof of that interest. Many people are interested in their own family heritage as well. People like knowing that their community heritage has been preserved, and they like the idea that they can go visit it at holidays and when relatives are visiting from out of town. Very little of this translates into active interest or support of Texas history museums and other history organizations. Heritage is "there" but it is not compelling. Nor does it, in most people's minds, require much ongoing attention or care taking.

The sheer numbers of history museums, historic house museums, and historical societies, splinters a relatively small potential audience, confuses the public and funders, and pits organizations against each other in competition for board members, volunteers, community support, school field trips, and funding. The large number of history organizations is an issue that other disciplines do not have to deal with. Rural counties that may have one art museum, and no children's museum or science museum might have as many as a dozen history organizations. These organizations may have distinct missions, collections and historic properties to care for, and feel completely justified in maintaining separate organizations, but the relatively low level of attendance and financial support that most live with attests to the difficulties of so many organizations fighting for a relatively small audience.

Important Collections Supported By Too Few Resources

History leaders have often voiced their concern that there are too many small historical organizations caring for too much important material and competing for too little support. Concern for the status of Texas history was great enough even in the 1980s that the Summerlee Foundation chartered the first Summerlee Commission in 1989-90 to assess the state of history collections, organizations, and the teaching of Texas history in schools. This study confirmed that the largest number of historical collections are held by rural historical organizations, the very organizations that tend to have the fewest resources to care for these items.

(6)

A decade of anecdotal conversations, professional conference presentations and numerous articles in professional journals all tell the same tale: attendance for history museums, especially historic house museums, is down. Attendance has been down for years at the large historic villages like Colonial Williamsburg and at small museums around the country as well. It is incredible to think that attendance for most history museums peaked in 1976, and most have been in decline since. (7) Recent

studies of the arts have also noted similar trends with most art museums, ballets, operas, and symphonies, indicating that long-term demographic shifts of leisure time pursuits are underway. (8) The widening of this malaise is little comfort to history organizations, however, as history continues to lag significantly behind these other areas in attendance and funding.

History organizations in larger communities have fared better, and many are even accredited by the American Alliance of Museums. These museums have access to resources that are simply unavailable in smaller communities. In the twenty five years since the first Summerlee Commission, even smaller organizations have made important headway in the care of their collections. General awareness of professional standards for caring for collections is also much higher than in 1990. Although there is greater awareness of professional standards, resources needed to provide adequate physical storage and hire professional staff is still lagging in most areas. In the smaller communities that lack prominent corporations, wealthy individuals or foundations, resources for history museums are very modest and generally take a back seat to other community needs. The urbanization of America continues, but literally thousands of museums remain behind in rural areas where they often face a lack of needed resources.

History and the Broken Model of the Public -Private Partnership

The model of public-private shared responsibility for the restoration and/or relocation of historical properties helped to establish many history organizations in the past 60 years. These arrangements generally provided tax support for public financial support coupled with private management of the property as a public museum. Although these partnerships worked well for many years, they are failing in community after community as cash-strapped local governments gradually curtail and sometimes abandon their end of the bargain. This situation has doomed many historical organizations to a cycle of poverty that resembles this scenario: a historical property is saved, restored, and opened to the public with great enthusiasm and fanfare, but with little thought for long term care and financing. The initial thrill of the grand opening soon fades, and the reality of day-to-day operations and repair cycles sets in. Public funding gradually declines and private funding to fill the gap is hard to find. “annual maintenance” gradually turns into “deferred maintenance,” which eventually leads to monstrous repair bills that are beyond the capability of many house museums to raise. The result is the sad condition evident with many historical properties. (9)

The decline of public funding exposes the underlying flaw in the business model of almost all history organizations that base their operations in historic structures: most of the emphasis has been on securing the building, restoring it, and opening it “for tours.” The public believes that most museums pay for operations with admissions income, which is simply not true for almost any museum, and especially not true for history museums. In rare cases, a history museum is famous enough and draws several hundred thousand visitors a year and can largely fund its operations from admissions. In Texas, this is largely true for the Sixth Floor Museum in Dallas. The Alamo has traditionally funded its operations through gift shop sales (it does not charge an admission fee) and the Bob Bullock State History Museum has a business model that largely funds its operations through admissions, IMAX theater ticket sales, and facility rentals. An ordinary local history museum will simply not be able to survive with admission income and the occasional wedding rental. Too many museums are set up with

a business model of “build it and they will come.” Except under unusual circumstances, this assumption does not work.

Over Expansion---A Tendency For Many History Museums

History organizations already set up with flawed business models often compound these troubles by taking on too much. With little attention paid to long-term maintenance needs, many over expand because they can't resist the temptation to take on another building that needs saving. Even a “free” building will become, over a generation, a huge obligation, and many organizations take on too many buildings, blinded by the relative ease of obtaining acquisition and restoration funds. Just as some larger history organizations have seen that new visitor centers and expanded galleries do not necessarily increase attendance, smaller organizations generally learn that adding one more building or significant large collection item like a railroad car or a farm wagon does not increase attendance. Over expansion not only includes the over acquisition of property and buildings, it includes accepting too many collections and archives that often require additional staff that cannot be supported long term.

The Generational Effect and Losing the Cause

The special circumstances of history organizations come into sharper focus when examined through the lens of institutional life cycles. A great many history organizations were founded by a group motivated to preserve a building or site and sometimes by an individual with a collection of historical materials (or a house). Beyond the simple desire to commemorate something, this urge to preserve is often done in response to physical and demographic changes that seem to threaten the loss of a generation's shared heritage. Examples around the country abound, many of them in Texas. Museums established for these reasons benefit from the passion and hard work of their founder(s) and those around them. The founding generation has a cause that is very powerful to them, and they will work night and day to accomplish their mission. Such passion works well to raise the initial money needed to establish the museum, save the building, and sometimes even secure a commitment for local government funding. The cause fuels the energy at this point, and there is real drive and motivation.

Over time the transition begins to the next generation of leaders. With the building now saved and the museum open, the board, volunteers and/or staff then shift emphasis to cataloging the collections, installing changing exhibits, hosting school field trips, and raising annual funds. At this point, the mundane running of a museum has become the cause, but that cause is really more of a need, and fulfilling that need rarely generates the passion associated with founding a museum.

As the museum's first generation of super-committed leaders begins to fade away, the museum enters a very difficult period. A relatively successful museum will now recruit the next generation of leaders and even hire professional staff. This new generation of leaders might do well for a period of years, but subsequent generations of board members and volunteers often struggle. These leaders are now two generations removed from the original “cause” that propelled the museum into existence, and the perceived relevance of the museum to the community is no longer strong. The average citizen is glad that the old depot has been saved, but otherwise they feel little connection to it.

Now the struggling organization enters the last stage of its life cycle. Should we acknowledge the fact that some history museums should be allowed, perhaps even encouraged, to close gracefully? Museums that have served their purpose, preserved the history of their community but have not successfully transitioned leadership to a new generation, have not built a contemporary constituency, and are not being supported financially by the current community may be candidates for closing.

The entire non-profit cultural world has gone through an extraordinarily difficult time, but history organizations have a special set of obstacles to confront. History organizations are probably too numerous, and too clustered in rural areas lacking resources to support them. They have often been founded with little understanding of the difficulties inherent in preserving and operating historic properties on a business-like basis. They are fighting losing battles to keep their properties from deteriorating further, and to find a next generation of leaders willing to take on these causes. Despite these difficulties, history lovers in local communities continue to plunge headlong into new preservation projects. With so many of these organizations struggling for funding and attendance, it is especially important that community leaders be aware of these special circumstances so that future problems can be avoided or mitigated.

Footnotes:

1. David Lowenthal, *The Past Is a Foreign Country*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).
2. Oxford Dictionaries, http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/us/definition/american_english/malaise
3. David E. Kyvig and Myron A. Marty, *Nearby History: Exploring the Past Around You*. (Nashville: AASLH, 1982).
4. *Museums for a New Century: A Report of the Commission on Museums for a New Century*, Washington: American Association of Museums, 1984.
5. Several publications in the past decade analyzed the struggle of small history museums to survive, and most cited similar factors: lack of money and lack of attendance. The first "Kykuit" Conference in 2002, described in Gerald George's *History News* article, "Historic House Museum Malaise: A Conference Considers What's Wrong," helped open a field-wide discussion of the special problems of house museums. (George, Gerald. "Historic House Museum Malaise: A Conference Considers What's Wrong," *History News*, Autumn 2002.)

Kenneth C. Turino and Carol B. Stapp published the article "Does America Need Another House Museum?" in *History News*, published by the American Association for State and Local History in 2004. In 2009, Turino wrote another article for *History News*, published by the American Association for State and Local History entitled, "America Doesn't Need Another House Museum" in 2009.

More recently, Ruth Graham questions in August 2014 whether we have too many historic house museums in an article in the *Boston Globe* entitled, "The Great Historic House Museum Debate."

6. The Report of the Summerlee Commission on Texas History, LaPorte, Texas, Summerlee Foundation, 1992.

7. Cary Carson, in an article in *The Public Historian* in 2007 wrote that, while "no national organization keeps statistics on museum attendance, " "...without reliable, comparable numbers, the *perception* goes unchallenged that paid attendance at history museums has plunged in the last five years." (Carson, Cary. "The End of History Museums: What's Plan B?" *Public Historian*, (November 2008).

Writing in the Final Conference Report for the National Trust's *Forum on Historic Site Stewardship in the 21st Century* in 2007, The National Trust for Historic Preservation's James Vaughan added: "Over the past decade much has been written about declining attendance at our nation's historic sites. At a time when the market for heritage tourism, cultural tourism, and eco-tourism is rapidly expanding, historic sites are drawing fewer and fewer visitors". (Vaughan, James. "Introduction: The Call For A National Conversation," *Forum Journal* (22:8), 5-9).

8. National Endowment for the Arts Survey of Public Participation in the Arts, NEA Research Report #57, September 2013.

9. Gary N. Smith, "House Museum Partnerships with Local Governments: A Broken Model?", *History News*, Spring 2011.