21ST CENTURY MUSEUM COMMUNITY: 
Using Collections & Technology to Strengthen Relationships 
with Individuals, Schools, and the Public

Maine Historical Society Presentation Handout

Introduction and Context

Maine Historical Society (www.mainehistory.org) is located in Portland, Maine, and serves as the state historical society and the de facto City of Portland historical society. Founded in 1822, MHS includes a physical museum, a research library, the historic Wadsworth-Longfellow House (the boyhood home of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow), and a nationally recognized statewide online museum, Maine Memory Network (www.mainememory.net).

Maine Historical Society's mission:

The Maine Historical Society preserves the heritage and history of Maine: the stories of Maine people, the traditions of Maine communities, and the record of Maine's place in a changing world. Because an understanding of the past is vital to a healthy and progressive society, we collect, care for, and exhibit historical treasures; facilitate research into family, local, state, and national history; provide education programs that make history meaningful, accessible and enjoyable; and empower others to preserve and interpret the history of their communities and our state.

Maine Historical Society (MHS) has placed renewed effort in recent years on making its collections and mission more active, participatory, representative, and part of people's daily lives. This is particularly evident in its varied on- and off-site educational and community programs, which make use of the Wadsworth-Longfellow House, the exhibit gallery, and Maine Memory Network.

This presentation focuses on two specific MHS programs: Local History, Local Schools, and the Maine Community Heritage Project, details of which are outlined in this document.

A. Local History/Local Schools

In 2005-2006, MHS piloted a museum-school partnership program, known as Local History/Local Schools (LHLS), in order to develop a more in-depth museum education experience for area students and to establish stronger relationships with schools and teachers.

The program provided Portland Public Schools students in grades 3-5 the opportunity to work with an MHS educator in a series of classroom and museum visits, based on the current museum exhibit. The middle elementary age years are well suited to project-based, experiential learning, and in Maine, students study local and/or Maine history during grades 3-5. Local History/Local Schools was developed with the goal of meeting state learning standards in multiple content areas (e.g. Social Studies, ELA, Visual and Performing Arts).

The program involved classroom visits by MHS staff, and on-site trips to the museum by students, and culminated in a community celebration at MHS, where final student projects were displayed and shared with families and friends.

In its pilot year, Local History/Local Schools served four Portland Public School classrooms—approximately 100 students, and four teachers. With each succeeding year, interest in the program has grown. It has now expanded to four sessions per year, and is offered to public schools in Portland, South Portland, and Scarborough. As of 2011-2012, Local History/Local Schools served more than 550 students, 30 teachers, and 12 classrooms. Despite broad interest in expanding it beyond the immediate area, it has been held at this level due to staff and funding limitations.
LHLS PROGRAM DETAILS

- Each Local History/Local Schools unit is based on MHS’s current museum exhibit. For the past several years, the exhibit has remained up for nearly a year (late June to late May of the following year), which meant that the curriculum for each school year LHLS program remained consistent. Starting with the June 2014 exhibit, however, the museum gallery will open a new exhibit every six months, so LHLS will be divided into separate fall and spring curricular semesters.

- Education staff works with the museum curator in the beginning stages of the curriculum development, discussing major themes and concepts in the exhibit, specific content that should be relayed to students, ways of working with specific objects, etc.

- Research and curriculum development currently take place during the summer. This includes:
  - A 1.5 to 2 hour pre-visit lesson that takes place in participating school classrooms. This introduces the project to the students, provides historical context, opens a discussion about what “history” is and how we analyze it, and relates the exhibit to students’ daily lives. The session includes hands-on inquiry activities, and uses digital resources from Maine Memory Network (www.mainememory.net). The three-part inquiry process used is based on resources provided by the Library of Congress (http://www.loc.gov/teachers/usingprimarysources/) and is broken into three stages: observation, reflection, questioning.
  - An inquiry activity in the gallery when classrooms visit the exhibit at MHS to reinforce the pre-visit lessons and allow students to experience up close the artifacts and stories displayed at MHS.
  - An exhibit-related art project for students to do while at the museum. This takes place in the adjoining lecture hall and reinforces the content and themes of the exhibit, while allowing for student creativity and hands-on learning.
  - A follow-up lesson and activities for a second classroom visit at the participating schools. These build on the earlier discussions and museum visit, and set the groundwork for the final project. This may also include digital resources.
  - A final project relevant to what teachers are already doing in their classrooms. (This is custom-developed each session to meet teacher needs and interests.)

- After approximately two months, the classroom visits, museum visit, and classroom work done by students and guided by teachers, culminate in an “opening” celebration at MHS for families and friends where student work is displayed. MHS staff members give speeches at the opening and there is time to view other student work and visit the exhibit. Student work is then displayed in the museum for a period of time, until the next session’s group of classrooms finishes their work.

- All lessons are based on objects, use inquiry as a means of developing student understanding, are interactive, and essentially are an experience. This is what sets the unit apart from regular units of study in schools: MHS has the advantage of being an out-of-school learning environment which in and of itself is an experience students will remember. They encounter objects, documents, and stories they otherwise wouldn’t encounter, and connect those artifacts and stories to their own lives. Thus, a meaningful experience takes place.

- The current cost of the program is approximately $5/student. Each classroom has contact with MHS four times. MHS provides bus subsidies to cover student travel to the museum, which has been a considerable factor in the program’s success.
LHLS PROGRAM BENEFITS

Schools
- Connects local schools, teachers, and administrators with MHS staff and resources. Establishes stronger, and repeat, relationships between MHS and local schools. Many principals support the program and encourage their teachers to take part.
- Enhances regular curriculum and units of study in the elementary grades.
- In a time of budget cuts and staff reductions, allows schools to participate in a meaningful learning experience that connects with the greater community and is affordable.

Teachers
- Introduces teachers to MHS educational resources—both on site and digital.
- Provides teachers with professional development: the opportunity to work with MHS staff and educators enhances their abilities to incorporate Maine history into their units of study.
- Enhances regular units of study with specific content and methods inherent in MHS museum exhibits.
- This is a voluntary program: teachers who participate are recognized for making extra effort to provide exciting and meaningful educational experiences for their students.
- Teachers from the same school often work together on the details of their students' final projects, and teachers get ideas of how to incorporate content in different ways by viewing other schools' and classroom work at the final celebration.

Students
- **Makes history relevant.** Students learn content and methodology connected to MHS exhibits, and they express their understanding of this through their own artwork and final projects.
- **Personalizes history.** The best way to teach the story of Maine’s past to elementary age students is to start with their own experience with Maine, its people, its communities, and its natural environment. We emphasize that student experiences and stories are just as important to Maine’s story as what we have in our museum exhibits. This is validated by the final celebration with its formal display of student work.
- **Connects students with MHS staff. Encourages intergenerational communication and participation.** Establishing a relationship with adults and professionals other than their teachers and their families is hugely important. Students feel comfortable with MHS staff, and they feel comfortable coming to MHS as a place because they know it—they come to museum, they work in the lecture hall, and they come back again for the celebration. It becomes familiar to them, a place they can go to again and feel confident in visiting.

Families
- Connects families with MHS who otherwise would not view it as an educational resource for their children and themselves.
- Introduces families to the range of MHS programming and resources.
- Encourages family involvement: chaperones, assisting their child with their project, encouraging family activities through the final celebration, etc.
- We’re beginning to see siblings of students who participated in the program in earlier years moving through the current program.

LHLS CHALLENGES
- Four sessions is the maximum load for the program at this time, despite demand for more. To add more sessions, MHS needs additional educators on staff and more funding. We are working to establish funding sources that will help defray museum educator costs so we can serve more classrooms.
- Space can be an issue with the final celebration and display of student work. The celebration is held in the MHS lecture hall, which is at full capacity at around 75 people. Limited gallery space outside the main gallery means that student work can compete with other short-term MHS exhibits. We would like to be able to display student work longer and more prominently than it is now. If we are able to add more sessions in the future, space will be an increasing issue.
B. Maine Community Heritage Project

PROGRAM HISTORY

Created in 2002 by Maine Historical Society, Maine Memory Network (www.mainememory.net) enables historical societies, libraries, and other cultural institutions across the state of Maine to upload, catalog, and manage digital copies of historical items from their collections into one centralized, web-accessible database. It is one of the first of its kind of online statewide museums. As of 2013, MMN has more than 50,000 individual historic items online, as well as hundreds of online exhibits, a number of local community history websites, a comprehensive history of the state of Maine, and numerous other resources.

The philosophy behind Maine Memory is that community members of all ages across the state of Maine are the true owners of Maine history and the best people to tell the story of Maine. By training individuals at the state’s many local historical societies, museums, archives, and other repositories of historical collections to do the work of selecting, researching, digitizing, cataloging, and story-telling themselves, Maine Historical Society empowers Mainers to choose the artifacts and stories that best represent their communities.

Maine Memory, and all of its outreach and community programming is inherently active, participatory, representative, and part of people’s daily lives.

The Maine Community Heritage Project (MCHP) was developed in response to successful, though informal, projects pairing schools and historical societies for Maine Memory Network projects starting in about 2004. Demand from other communities who wanted to collaborate with Maine Memory Network (MMN) necessitated more formal procedures, better support, and new technical tools. Historical societies were hungry for access into the schools and schools were eager for experiential learning projects that put students in real-world, community-oriented situations, and that connected clearly to Maine Learning Results. In response, Maine Historical Society and Maine State Library applied for and received in 2007 a three-year Institute of Museum and Library Services (www.imls.gov) National Leadership Grant to develop and pilot MCHP.

Response to the program was immediate and substantial. Approximately 50 communities applied for 16 slots during MCHP’s 2008-09 and 2009-10 project years. The final teams chosen to build websites within MMN dedicated to the history of their communities were geographically and population diverse. Their completed websites (www.mainememory.net/our_partners) include a narrative history of the community, five or more exhibits on special topics, student sections, hundreds of digitized images, and more. Diverse communities with far-ranging interests, backgrounds, resources, and goals were able to use the MCHP, and their resulting websites, to address specific local needs and issues.

Due to the overwhelming success of the MCHP, Maine Historical Society and Maine State Library were able to secure a second National Leadership Grant in 2010 to create the Community Mobilization Program (www.mainememory.net/grants), which offered a broader menu of grant options to communities who wish to participate in Maine Memory Network in both large and small ways. The Maine Community Heritage Project remained an option under this new program through the 2012-13 academic year.

PROGRAM ACTIVITIES

Local teams led a community-wide engagement with their town’s history, identified and shared resources, developed substantial technical, project planning, and collaboration skills, deepened local partnerships, and created a substantial website that provides a centralized place for their community to access its history. Key project activities included:

• Participating in MCHP Orientation in July and a mid-year training (January) at MHS;
• Attending monthly team meetings and regular work sessions;
• Embedding the project into a school’s or schools’ curriculum;
• Conducting an inventory of local historical resources;
• Digitizing 100-150 historical items from local collections and uploading them to Maine Memory Network;
• Writing an illustrated narrative essay that introduces key themes and topics in the history of the community (approximately 3,000 words);
• Creating five online exhibits that draw on historical documents, photographs, and artifacts to explore specific topics in local history;
• Pulling this material together into their new website; and
• Organizing several community-wide events

During the first iteration of the program, Maine Historical Society provided grants of $7,500 to $10,000 to teams to support the project. In succeeding years, the grants were smaller due to changes in funding and many teams actually finding it difficult to fully spend those higher amounts. Funds were used to purchase equipment (laptops, scanners, digital cameras), cover someone’s time on the project (e.g. extra hours for a librarian; substitute teachers to allow the team’s teacher to work on the project), bus transportation for students, food for meetings and events, preservation materials, miscellaneous services (e.g. a local historian to write narratives), etc.

LOCAL TEAM

Work in each local community was planned and coordinated by a local planning team. Each planning team included at least one representative from a local library, historical organization, and school. Each team designated a team coordinator to serve as its point person and to help coordinate project activities. The planning team met monthly for 10 months, often with MHS staff in attendance, to coordinate project activities, monitor progress, and discuss opportunities and issues, and to facilitate communication with MHS. Maine Historical staff helped teams organize their work, identified specific project tasks, set priorities, defined specific roles and responsibilities for team members and other local participants, and assisted in all phases of the project.

The planning team often formed the nucleus of a larger team of local participants—historical society members, teachers, students, librarians, retirees, service club members, civically-engaged individuals, and other volunteers—who contributed to the project in a variety of ways according to their time, interest, and ability. Some of these opportunities included mentoring students, helping with research, sharing information and knowledge, transcribing documents, scanning photographs, writing, editing, or participating in interviews.

While teachers were expected, as core team members, to remain involved in the team throughout the year, student participation ranged. Some students were involved in the project for the entire academic year; others were involved for a shorter, defined period of time. This depended on class size, curricular flexibility, grade level, and how many different parts of the project teachers wanted their classes exposed to.

MCHP BENEFITS OF PARTICIPATION

The program created numerous opportunities for students, teachers, local historical society members, librarians, and others in the community to come together, to collaborate, and to share their particular interests, knowledge, and skills.

• **Librarians**: (1) deepened their relationship and interaction with schools and historical organizations; (2) increased their capacity to serve as a key source for information about local history; and (3) continued to develop their technology skills.
• **Staff/Volunteers of historical organizations**: (1) developed close partnerships with schools and libraries; (2) increased awareness of and support for their organization within their community and beyond; and (3) received help digitizing, interpreting, and sharing their collections online.
• **Teachers**: (1) developed skills, experiences, and relationships that enabled them to more effectively engage their community; (2) participated in a project that is aligned to Maine’s Learning Results (MLRs) and easily tailored to meet school curriculum objectives; (3) provided a meaningful service-learning opportunity for their students; and (4) earned contact hours for recertification.
• **Students:** (1) became actively engaged in their community, learned about its history, and play a prominent role in sharing that history; (2) developed and apply research, critical thinking, writing, technology, communication, and literacy skills; and (3) achieved key academic goals and MLRs.

**MCHP CHALLENGES**

• As with any team, **strong personalities** can really impact the success of a project. The team leader should be a positive, well-organized, enthusiastic leader and facilitator, and be comfortable nipping problems in the bud when they arise. Occasionally, MHS had to take over facilitation of teams due to conflicting personalities and agendas.

• If the partnering organizations haven’t worked together before, or had poor experiences working together in the past, it’s harder (but not, by any means, impossible) to build a foundation. While libraries are inherently community-minded, historical societies/archives (particularly small, rural ones) and schools may have less experience working on community projects. Historical society staff and volunteers, by and large older adults, may have not worked in the school system and may have trouble understanding the limitations, requirements, and strict schedules of teachers. Schools, beset by budget cuts, may not have the flexibility to transport students to historical societies, and teachers may have little understanding of the local history and collections. **Overcoming lack of awareness and assumptions from the get-go are crucial** for making the project a success. For a detailed list of what each organizational partner brings to the project (both strengths and challenges), see “Identifying and Working with Partners” in the Project Planning section of Maine Memory Network’s Resources page (link below).

• **Technology** comes easily to young people—a benefit of the intergenerational aspect of the project—but it can be off-putting to some older adults, or anyone involved in the historical organization that is reluctant to “relinquish control” of the collections. The idea of scanning or digitally photographing historic items and making them available online is concerning to some people. They worry that it might make the public lose interest in the real thing, or create copyright issues, or even tempt individuals to break into the museum. Much of this can be overcome with clear guidelines and open communication. While Maine Memory Network does encourage “fair educational use” by teachers and students of items on the network, it does place a digital watermark on each uploaded item, does not allow for high-resolution downloads, and has a print service (www.VintageMaineImages.com) for purchase and licensing of images.

**WHAT IF YOU DON’T HAVE A DIGITAL MUSEUM?**

In today’s world, there are plenty of alternative ways to run an MCHP-like program at your institution even if you don’t have an online museum like Maine Memory Network. Use the historical society’s website, Facebook page, or blog to put up digitized images of items in its collection. If the historical society doesn’t have an online presence, create one for them! This is an excellent service-learning opportunity for a savvy student. This can also be done on a town website, or a website set up by the school. A good, basic, free website-building site is Weebly (www.weebly.com). Come up with clear guidelines for copyright of images, as well as how you will catalog the items, and make sure that everyone’s on the same page.

**RESOURCES**

Multiple resources for community history projects, including teacher guides, and general resources for project planning and doing “good history,” can be found at www.mainememory.net/resources.

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