The Survival Issue
When faced with a challenge, what are the options for survival?

One museum found a way to preserve the museum’s underlying purpose by merging with a like institution.

In some respects, the merger between Portland Harbor Museum (PHM) and Maine Maritime Museum emerged out of a crisis. PHM could not find a suitable, affordable place to store and display its collections, and the recession exacerbated financial difficulties that plagued the museum from its founding. As the former director of PHM, I now realize that the merger was a better resolution than anyone had a right to expect.

When I arrived at PHM in 2004, the museum resided in its “temporary” home of seventeen years—a somewhat dilapidated structure that the museum rented for a nominal sum from a community college in South Portland. In some respects, the location was ideal. Adjacent to both Spring Point Ledge Light and the waters of Casco Bay, many people considered the view from the museum’s “front yard” to be among the finest in Greater Portland. Unfortunately, just a few years after my arrival, the museum needed to begin looking for a new home; the college wanted its building back.

By 2008, PHM anticipated that the college might terminate the museum’s tenancy at any time. (We no longer had a lease.) A board member offered the museum temporary space in Portland’s downtown shopping district. Although far from a perfect solution, the new location, which the museum began to occupy in the summer of 2008, provided a refuge. Expenses associated with this “expansion” created cash flow issues—PHM had no endowment or substantial savings—but the board anticipated that a productive fund-raising event and annual appeal in the fall of 2008 would improve the economic outlook.

Looking back now more than two years later, it is both easy and convenient to blame the museum’s 2009 financial struggles entirely on the recession. Without question, the economic downturn substantially affected the museum’s ability to raise money at a critical time when we were trying to launch a new location. On the other hand, it must be acknowledged that the recession merely intensified the museum’s already existing problems.

The crisis of 2009 did not represent the first time that PHM had encountered financial difficulties. People
involved with the museum told me that, in the years before I arrived, PHM never seemed to find its footing. During my early tenure at the museum, we made considerable gains in several areas – improving exhibits, increasing the professionalism of the staff, and expanding our outreach. Nonetheless, without an endowment or savings, we always seemed to be just one step away from insolvency. In challenging times, we invariably persuaded some generous donor to rescue us, but – even with the progress we made in other areas – the possibility of closing never seemed to be very far away.

In August of 2009, as PHM continued to cope with cash flow issues, I asked the board for permission to approach Maine Maritime Museum about a possible merger. Most of the board members responded enthusiastically to the idea. They were primarily interested in ensuring that Portland’s maritime history and the museum’s collections were preserved. They wanted to perpetuate the mission. The possibility of a merger offered a viable alternative to a board that deserves tremendous credit for its steadfast and unselfish commitment to protecting the museum’s underlying purposes.

When I first mentioned a merger to Amy Lent, Maine Maritime Museum’s director, she expressed a willingness to present the idea to her board. Portland is Maine’s largest city, and just 35 miles from Maine Maritime Museum. Respecting what Portland Harbor Museum was trying to accomplish, Maine Maritime Museum had not attempted previously to engage the people of Portland. A merger would provide Maine Maritime Museum with an entryway into this new market. After this initial conversation, matters progressed quickly. The merger became official approximately nine months later, on June 1, 2010.

In retrospect, I wish that I had advised the board to look for a merger partner sooner. From its founding in 1987, capable people had been involved with PHM, but no one had succeeded in solving the museum’s location issues. When it became apparent that our donor base was insufficient to support the purchase of a suitable building, I should have explored other options immediately. If you see remarkable similarities between your museum and PHM, I humbly suggest that you try to get ahead of the curve.

From an entirely selfish perspective, I should have asked more questions about the museum’s location issues during my interview in April 2004. For example, I might have reconsidered my interest in the position upon learning at the time that the museum had to renew its lease from year to year. It would have saved me from some sleepless nights. Having participated in the merger, however, I am a better director now than I otherwise would be. I am sure that many directors who have worked through these types of issues have similar mixed feelings.

The merger demonstrates the value of collaboration. By their very nature, museums are programmed to resist the type of disclosure and compromise that most alliances require. Membership lists are closely guarded; the staff and board view their institution as self-contained. But in reality, we overestimate the threat from competition. In almost every collaborative situation, we stand to gain more than we lose. Ultimately, successful partnerships always benefit both parties.

The merger also reinforced my sense that museum people are both unique and wonderful. Throughout 2009, I derived tremendous benefit from the friendship of colleagues. Monthly dinners with two museum directors in Portland, occasional lunches with other Maine directors, and regular contact with friends from NEMA provided a welcome respite from the insular environment that often restricts a director’s point of view. It was not mere coincidence that one of those “other Maine directors,” Amy Lent, played such a critical role in the merger.

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As should be apparent from this story, Maine Maritime Museum could have chosen another route to gain a foothold into Portland – by simply competing in the Portland market, and hoping for PHM’s eventual demise. Instead, Amy and her board chose to help a rival simply because they could achieve the same end in a more altruistic way. I contend that this remarkable predilection pervades the world of museums.

So, how did all of this turn out anyway? Recently, in The Rhumb Line, Amy Lent wrote about her museum’s Port of Portland exhibit: “In a first for MMM, the exhibit will be on view in two locations: Bath from December 17, 2011 to May 13, 2012, with highlights of the full exhibit on view in the Portland Public Library’s beautiful gallery space during the month of December. We invite you to visit the exhibit in both locations and experience two quintessential Maine maritime cities – Portland and Bath.” This passage demonstrates that sometimes a crisis is precisely what we need to point us in the right direction.