



May 2, 2016

The History Trust

We are writing to put a proposal before the community and the boards of local historical societies and museums. We propose the creation of the “History Trust,” a wholly new organization created from the mergers of equal partners. The History Trust would unite the region’s historical organizations, combining their assets, creating a single governing board, and operating as a new non-profit organization with a unified organization of volunteers and employees.

In proposing the History Trust, we take lessons from the founders of Acadia National Park, who recognized the need to protect the exquisite qualities of Mount Desert Island by placing private properties into a public trust, the Hancock County Trustees of Public Reservations. Like the extraordinary lands that became the national park, the region’s historical archives are irreplaceable and vulnerable public resources that should be protected and shared with the community by responsible stewards.

There are at least 22 small historical societies and museums within 15 miles of Somes Sound. In many, building maintenance has been deferred and the structures and contents are vulnerable to fire and climate. A dwindling number of heroic but aging volunteers will not be able to carry out their work indefinitely and there aren’t enough young people here to replace them. The loss of these historical archives would be irreparable. But if the records were cataloged, preserved, and digitized they would be of immense value to the present and to future generations.

Here are some of the advantages of this organizational model:

- A unified organization would diminish the parochialism and imagined borders that keep historical societies and museums from collaborating and providing unfettered access for the community to its own history.
- Under a unified governance structure, priorities for the History Trust could be established to meet the long-term strategic requirements of protecting the region’s historical collections, such as the creation of a single catalog and fire and climate-protected storage space. Although member institutions would trade local autonomy for shared governance, their local geographic identity would be respected and maintained.

- By combining human and other resources that are currently replicated several times over, the History Trust could provide paid and volunteer staff for executive leadership, curation, collections management, information systems, marketing, education, financial management, protection of historic properties, and the fundraising and grant-writing expertise that will be required to protect the region's historical treasures.
- The formation of a single governing board for the History Trust would reduce the pressure on community volunteers to serve on multiple historical society and museum boards. Currently, over 100 volunteers serve on the region's historical society and museum boards.
- The many boards of directors that currently govern the separate organizations could be re-organized into advisory boards and committees, providing guidance to the governing board of the History Trust, keeping their focus on the historical resources of each contributing locality, and considering region-wide needs for such areas of expertise as collections management, finance, and development.
- The History Trust would answer the secular prayers of donors, who wish there were fewer non-profit organizations in the community. Philanthropists and major granting organizations would respond favorably to unified plans for cataloging and preserving collections.

The historian David Lowenthal wrote, "Linking the living, the dead, and those to come as a continuing community, we become responsible for the past in its entirety." The History Trust would give us an opportunity to think more broadly about our sense of community and to work proactively to fulfill our responsibilities as stewards of history.

We can become responsible for the past in its entirety, linking not only people and place across the region, but connecting the past and the future. We invite the boards of directors of the region's historical organizations to join us this summer to discuss the concept of the History Trust and develop a plan for making it happen.

Bill Horner, M.D., President

Tim Garrity, Executive Director