

Connecticut State Library

Memorandum re: Museum of Connecticut History

March 3, 2025

Executive Summary

The State Library agency and the Museum of Connecticut History staff are committed to expanding Museum services through the modernization of collections practices and an enhanced visitor experience, which include addressing multiple accessibility factors. However, Museum team operates under multiple long-standing realities (lack of direct funding, insufficient staffing, and the need to work through a lengthy period of languor toward the visitor experience) which can hamper the forward progress everyone so desires. With support and in time, the Museum will be a jewel in Connecticut's museum landscape once again.

Overview of the Museum of Connecticut History

Per statute (CGS § 11-6a), the State Library is home to our state history museum, the Raymond E. Baldwin Museum of Connecticut History and Heritage, which records and interprets nearly 400 years of colonial and state history and Connecticut's role in the development of the nation. It has been collecting, exhibiting, and interpreting objects related to Connecticut's political, industrial, and military history since 1910. The Museum consists of the beaux-arts style Memorial Hall and adjoining exhibit areas. Currently, approximately 1,100 items of the Museum's 44,000 item collection are on public display.

The Museum is staffed by four professionals: an administrator and three curators, responsible for collections management, loan, research, and digitization requests, exhibits, and educational and public programs. Three of these staff members have joined the Museum since January 2023. And although the staff size increased from three to four when one employee was transferred in from another State Library unit, the Museum remains the smallest unit within the agency.

Prior to January 2023, more contemporary Museum operations were focused on growing the collections rather than on the public visitor experience. For example, visitors noted that no major updates to the exhibits occurred for several decades. A new Museum Administrator was hired in January 2023, specifically tasked with undertaking an ambitious initiative to strengthen and reaffirm the Museum's place in the Connecticut heritage community. As part of that process, the new Museum team is deliberately realigning the balance between their work as stewards of the historical objects in our care and providing our diverse Museum visitors with meaningful experiences. Already, the Museum team has

made great strides to revitalize and modernize operations and exhibits (see list of accomplishments beginning on page 5) but much foundational work remains.

State Funding for the Museum of Connecticut History

Like most of the agency's statutorily mandated responsibilities, Connecticut does not directly fund the Museum, instead indirectly providing support through personnel, the facility, and routine supplies. In recent decades, collections acquisitions were funded by interest earned on past sales of some out-of-scope items. Conditions regarding the use of these funds are limited only to direct collections care and cannot be used for other expenses such as personnel, exhibits, signage, marketing, etc.

Two of the State Library's three FY26-27 budget requests are tied directly to supporting Museum operations. \$18,292 in one-time funds would provide some funding for an updated inventory of Museum collections. And by allowing the agency to retain a \$700,000 holdback in our Personal Services appropriation and increasing our Full Time cap from 53 to 58, the agency could hire additional Museum staff and other necessary personnel. We continue to urge the Committee to support all three of our requests.

Commitment to Accessibility

In late 2023, the State Library undertook its first strategic framework process in several decades. Working together over the next year, agency staff and leadership engaged with dozens of stakeholders from across the state to envision the future of the State Library, using creativity and Strategic Foresight to navigate uncertainty and complexity, and thus positioning the agency to become more adaptive, resilient, and transformative in its development of an aspirational future for the State of Connecticut and for the numerous communities it touches. The State Library engaged the Connecticut community in an in-depth community needs assessment which led to the development of three community-focused goals: raising awareness, expanding accessibility, and deepening collaboration.

The Expanding Accessibility goal states: "We recognize and value the complexities of providing accessibility in order to expand inclusion. We acknowledge that libraries, archives, and museums can be intimidating, because of our history and the real and perceived barriers that were and that remain. Accessibility means ensuring our physical and virtual spaces are open to all – people of all cultural, ethnic, and racial backgrounds, people with mobility disabilities, people who speak languages other than English, people who are blind or low vision, people who are deaf or hard of hearing, people who are neurodiverse, aging communities, children and families, and people with lives and schedules that cover all 24 hours in a day. As the State Library, we see ourselves as having a role in fostering a sense of statewide community that sees and makes space for all of us."

As an agency, we are committed to projects and initiatives which expand accessibility in its many forms. We also acknowledge that this is ongoing work and must be undertaken and pursued in a thoughtful manner to ensure the best long-term outcome for all.

Perkins Access Project

Starting in 2023, the State Library and its Connecticut Library for Accessible Books (CTLAB) is partnered with Perkins Access on the pilot program “Transforming Libraries and Museums: Collaboration for Accessible Exhibitions, Collections, and Programs”. This program centers around making library and museum exhibits accessible to visitors who are blind or visually impaired. The first cohort included thirteen Connecticut organizations (four public libraries, four art museums/galleries, three historical museums, a children’s museum, and an aquarium) and covered web accessibility, image descriptions, and live descriptions, as well as independent access to descriptions and multimedia. The objective was to teach participants how to write effective descriptions of images and objects for museum/library tours and digital assets. The Museum of Connecticut History was one of the participants and participation led the Museum to consider ways it can make its space and its collection more accessible, both on-site and digitally. In alliance with the agency’s “Expanding Accessibility Goal,” the Museum has included the creation of an Accessibility Plan to its unit-specific Strategic Framework goals. The second, current cohort is an additional nine Connecticut organizations, including another long-time partner, Talking Books CT/CVSBH, a volunteer organization which produces free audio recordings of Connecticut books for CTLAB and, by extension, all National Library Service for the Blind and Print Disabled patrons across the world. All Talking Books CT’s recordings meet the recording standards published by the National Library Service.

Perkins Access is a division of Perkins School for the Blind, America's oldest school for the blind and visually impaired (founded in 1829). Perkins has an annual operating budget of nearly \$70 million, endowed funds approaching \$300 million, 750 employees, and carries out a vast array of programs and services to the blind and visually impaired community: education of students, training of teachers both domestically and internationally, advocacy, accessibility consulting, manufacturing and distribution of assistive technology, and information dissemination. Perkins Access guides organizations towards sustainable and impactful solutions to ensure users with disabilities have independent access to all information, services and experiences. The Perkins Accessibility team is a diverse group of some of the most well-regarded talent in the accessibility industry and has an in-depth understanding of accessibility standards including the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973. Perkins Access team members have written recommendations to related federal disability policies: Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the U.S. Federal Access Board’s Telecommunications and Electronic and Information Technology Advisory Committee (TEITAC).

CRIS Radio Grant

On December 6, 2024, a representative of CRIS Radio emailed the Museum Administrator, offering to create an audio tour of 28 recordings for the Museum. The recordings would be funded by an ARPA grant and valued at \$14,000. According to CRIS Access, “The museum’s role is to provide the transcripts, and CRIS Radio provides everything else, including signage.” CRIS Radio needed an answer to the offer by December 31, 2024 to report grant expenditures. After internal consultation, the State Library declined the offer on December 19, 2024, stating: “The Museum of CT History and the CT State Library are very grateful for your generous offer to provide audio tours to the museum. Unfortunately, at this time, we will have to decline your invitation. The museum has several infrastructure projects in the works, and with our limited team, we simply do not have the bandwidth to take on any new projects at this time. We sincerely appreciate your kind invitation and value the work you are doing for museums throughout Connecticut.” The State Library received no response to this message.

As documented herein, Museum staff has actively been engaged over the past two years in planning for new and improved exhibits, the move of its collections management database to one with a public interface, and exploring other types of content (such as StoryMaps) that will allow for increased accessibility.

Although this particular offer from CRIS Radio would have provided 28 recordings seemingly for free, it is paramount to note the offer does not reflect the staff time involved, additional fees, or the costs associated with any future recordings. According to the offer we received, all the agency had to do was “provide the scripts”. As we learned during the Perkins Access pilot, writing these scripts requires significant thought and attention. Staff estimates each 3 minute recording would take 5-10 hours to research and write. Due to an enormous backlog of collections care and delayed maintenance of exhibits and storage areas, the timing is simply not right to begin an audio tour project immediately. Second, there is an annual “maintenance fee” (\$75 per recording – a total of \$2,100 each year – and not mentioned in the formal offer sent) for CRIS Radio to host and stream the recordings on their server. Finally, should the agency create additional recordings in the future, each recording would cost \$500 plus the annual maintenance fee; CRIS recommends these recordings be no more than 3 minutes each, or a cost of \$166.66 per minute. For the State Library, even these seemingly modest costs – and less modest commitments of staff time – must give us pause.

Conclusion

Museum staff is conscious of its monumental task in making updates to the Museum. They are being careful and deliberate about how many projects they can take on at one time without compromising quality. When they take on a project such as an audio tour, staff wants to be sure that they can allocate the time and care necessary to achieve a quality,

lasting product. The fear is that, by rushing into a project before properly equipped, the result will be something that is transitory, and may have to be redone at a later date.

When ready to proceed, the agency will not only utilize the valuable lessons learned from Perkins Access but will fully assess all potential vendors, partners, and tools following state procurement and accessibility requirements. For example, as a state agency, we have access to many tools and products which provide audio recording and content streaming for free.

Museum of Connecticut History Activity

January 2023 to January 2025

January 2023

- New Administrator (Jennifer Matos) was hired, ending a 14-month period during which the Museum was without an administrator.
- A second Museum Curator 1 (Christine Pittsley) was brought on board after her transfer from another State Library unit.

February 2023

Museum staff participated in a program called “Uncovering the Hidden History in Your Town,” a four-part program and learning cohort to help museums / historical societies make slavery and freedom an integral part of the local colonial story. The team began research on Connecticut Governors and their roles related to slavery and abolition, as well as the history of Black Governors in the state.

March 2023

The Colt Whitneyville-Walker revolver that was stolen from the museum in 1971 was reclaimed by Jennifer Matos and State Librarian Deborah Schander at an FBI Repatriation Ceremony in Philadelphia on March 13, 2023.

April – October 2023

Museum staff offered the public program “Hiking Through History:” seven different tours at locations throughout the state (Windsor Locks, Hartford, Norwich, and Ashford) to an audience of approximately 200 people total.

July 2023

The Museum ran a program, *Digging Into History: On the Road with Rochambeau*, from July

11-24, 2023 with 29 French and American students. Planning for the program began in 2020. Students worked together to excavate an archeological site occupied by the French army during the Revolutionary War, through an organized effort between the museum, State Archaeologist Dr. Sarah Sportman, the Friends of the Office of the State Archaeologist (FOSA), Bolton Heritage Farm, Bolton Historical Society, and Central Connecticut State University.

August 2023

In cooperation with the Director of Insurance & Risk Management, Department of Administrative Services, the museum contracted with ArtCare Conservation NYC to conduct a conditions assessment of *Portrait of George Washington* by Gilbert Stuart, a historically significant painting in the museum's collection. The resulting examination report and treatment recommendation helped Fran Zeman of Appraisal Resources Associates to conduct an updated appraisal of the painting, which was completed in October 2023.

September 2023

The Museum was accepted into the American Alliance of Museum (AAM)'s Museum Assessment Program, conducting an Organizational Assessment with the goal of creating a solid foundation for long-term health and impact, emphasizing thinking, acting, and planning strategically; organizational alignment and capacity; leadership and organizational structure; and risk management and organizational culture. Peer Reviewer Cindy Gardner, the Museum Division Director at the Mississippi Department of Archives & History, conducted a Site Visit September 26-27, 2023 and issued an Organizational Assessment Report in December 2023.

October 2023

New Museum Curator 2 (Beth Burgess) was hired, filling a position that had been vacant for 3 years due to a pandemic-related retirement.

December 2023

The Museum was accepted into the Foundation for Advancement in Conservation (FAIC)'s "Collections Assessment Program," an opportunity for museum staff to work with professional consultants toward a general conservation assessment to improve collections care and establish a prioritized set of recommendations. Consultants Kathy Craughwell-Varda and Daryn Reyman-Lock conducted a Site Visit December 11 and 12, 2023. Their report and recommendations were provided to the museum in March 2024.

April – October 2024

Museum staff offered the public program "Hiking Through History:" seven different tours at locations throughout the state (Windsor Locks, Granby, Hartford, Enfield, Stonington, and

Milford) to an audience of approximately 200 people total.

June-August 2024

- There was a major renovation of physical museum space, including improvements to Memorial Hall and two exhibit spaces. The exhibit formerly known as “Connecticut Collections” is now called “Small but Mighty: Connecticut Makes History,” and is divided into three sections highlighting the State’s political, military, and industrial history. Many “new” objects are on display, including a 1920s era Universal stove and refrigerator made in New Britain, CT. The reimagining of the “Colt Firearms” exhibit is now called “The Colt Legacy.” It considers the innovations in manufacturing that took place in the Colt factory and its impact on the industry.
- The Museum began to conduct a new interpretation of CT Governors with help of Trinity College students through the Public Humanities Collaborative. The “Re-writing the Narrative: Connecticut Governors’ Connections to Slavery & Freedom” project included research and writing to create new and improved biographies for CT Governors that better showcase the governors’ connections to slavery, freedom, and equal rights and using digital technology.

August 2024 to present

The Museum was awarded a Planning Grant from CT Humanities for a project called *Connecticut’s Role in the Founding of the United States*. This project allows for the planning of a state-wide exhibit that commemorates the 250th anniversary of the nation’s founding. Museum staff has been working with an Exhibit Planning Consultant, an Exhibit Designer, an Advisory Team of history and museum professionals, and an internal CT State Library 250 Committee for the past 7 months. At the conclusion of the planning process, the Museum will have a robust Exhibit Plan that will serve as a blueprint for the construction of the actual exhibit, which, if funding allows, will open on or around July 4, 2026.

December 2024 to present

The Museum moved its collections management system from the static PastPerfect to Connecticut Collections (CTCo). CTCo is a cloud-based collections management system built on the open-source software Collective Access that allows users to have a database for cataloging and managing collections internally, while also providing the opportunity to share any portion of the collection with the public through a searchable online portal. Through CTCo, the museum’s records will also be digitally preserved long-term through the Connecticut Digital Archive. Work on this migration began in November 2023 and will continue as museum staff reviews and updates collection records, with the goal of making records publicly available in collection groupings.

February 2025

Museum staff renovated and reinvigorated a 25-year old exhibit, now titled *Rooted in Liberty: The Charter of 1662 and the Legend of the Charter Oak*.

Excerpts from Recommendations of the MAP & CAP Assessments

Museum Assessment Program, Organizational Assessment

Conducted by Cindy Gardner, Museum Division Director at the Mississippi Department of Archives & History, on behalf of the American Alliance of Museums.

Final Report Recommendations

Highest Priority

- Collections Stewardship: Determine secure collections storage to house only items that have been accessioned and supplies. Remove tables, chairs, etc.
- Collections Stewardship: Inventory the collection, noting locations and what has not been accessioned.

Medium Priority

- Administration & Finance: Investigate the possibility of one-time or bond money to enhance the collection storage and exhibits.
- Collections Stewardship: Catalog, catalog, catalog.
- Education & Interpretation: Create an onsite program location.

Low Priority

- Collections Stewardship: Update collections software to be uniform, but mainly ensure
- locations are noted in database.

Collections Assessment Program

Conducted by Kathy Craughwell-Varda, Museum Consultant, and Daryn Reyman-Lock, Historic Preservation Specialist, on behalf of the Foundation for Advancement in Conservation.

Final Report Recommendations:

COLLECTIONS

- Migrate CMS from PP5 to CTC Co

- Create a Cataloging procedures manual to ensure staff & volunteers process collections following the same practices.
- Complete a collections inventory to identify unaccessioned materials, locations, and scope of collections.
- Create a Conservation Plan with priorities noted by assessors
- Rehouse collections: use containers, fabric coverings for oversize items, and dividers or small boxes/envelopes in drawers and flat files to prevent sliding.

FACILITIES

- Exhibition spaces should be reviewed and arranged with an eye towards inclusivity standards. These changes may affect the historic structure and should be considered carefully.

Final Report Comments

Collection Management & Registration

Approximately 5-10% of the collections are currently on exhibit. With such a small percentage of the collections accessible by visitors, other tools need to be used to make the collections more accessible (digitization, online collection database, etc.).

Architectural Recommendations: State Library and Supreme Court Building

The Museum exhibition spaces that are to the northeast and southeast of Memorial Hall were arranged in the 1990s and could and should be updated with an eye to the latest Diversity, Equity and Inclusion standards and exhibits situated within both local and national discussions. While that is beyond the scope of this building assessment, the changes may include demolition of the internal partitions and platforms. If so, any new construction that will abut, effect, alter or require any amount of demolition to the historic structure needs to be done not only with museum-quality materials, but also construction materials that will not degrade historic materials used within the 1910 building.