

Summary

Somerset County History Roundtable

June 12, 2010

On June 12, the Heritage Trail Association held its second annual Somerset County history roundtable. Participants were from history-related organizations and libraries throughout the county. The objective was to focus on of the one specific high-priority issue identified the previous year – “preserving the written word.”

The previous roundtable had recommended, as a first step, undertaking a comprehensive survey of existing collections held by the county’s local libraries and non-profit, history organizations. The goal was to determine the size and scope of the current holdings, create a resource locator, and evaluate the need for preservation resources. So far, applications for grant funds to undertake this project have not been successful.

To provide additional insights into creating an archive, three participants – one from the Monmouth County Archive, one from the Plainfield Public Library special collections, and one from the Mary Jacobs Library – were invited to share their experiences in building successful programs at the county, town, and branch library level.

Twenty participants, representing municipal, non-profit, and library organizations attended. Each was given an opportunity express their concerns and offer suggestions on how the history community can work together to better preserve the county’s written history. From the statements and discussion that followed, the group identified the following issues:

What to Collect

Historical collections may include books, pamphlets, manuscripts, diaries, maps, and photographs, as well as letters, postcards, documents, and miscellaneous papers. In addition, other categories of historic artifacts that are suitable for preservation and display are often associated with the same collections.

In Somerset County, many libraries, historical societies, and private individuals have interesting collections of historic materials containing unique information about local history. While some are kept in proper facilities, many are at risk either to deterioration, fire, or dispersal. The collections in private hand are at particular risk following the death their current owners. If the collections pass into hands that do not share the same interest in history, they will be lost. Far too often, photograph collections, historic papers, and even family bibles containing important information about local history end up going to out-of-state collectors, flea markets, or dumpsters.

Currently, Somerset County does not have a suitable repository to take in these orphan collections and to evaluate their importance and condition. Organization that currently maintain collections invariably face space, funding, and personnel shortages. Without a well-defined and well-publicized preservation program, along with the associated facilities and expertise to evaluate the collections, the county will continue to lose many of its valuable historic resources.

Space

Finding suitable space to store and maintain historical materials is a primary challenge. For long-term preservation historical materials must be stored in facilities that are climate controlled, fireproof, and secure. At the same time, the space must be located in a facility that is conveniently available to the general public. Space that meets these requirements is limited and expensive, and even where it is available, the storage of historical materials must compete with other potential uses.

In addition, archival collections tend to grow over time as materials accumulate. In planning an archive, adequate provision must be made for future expansion. When the Franklin Township Library opened its new facility, the space set aside for its history collection was twice the size of its previous allotment. But, by the time the facility was open, the space proved inadequate as additional materials had already been added leaving the collection capacity constrained once again.

Funding

In general, funding will always be the critical element. Budget pressure at all levels of government will likely continue for years resulting in program cutbacks rather than expansion. Historic preservation tends to be low on the priority list even in good time. Starting a new program will be extremely difficult.

New Jersey PARIS grants have provided much needed funding for county archives, but the funds are only available to government agencies and can be used for only for government related materials. The New Jersey Council for the Humanities provides limited grant support for archive related projects, but not for on-going site management. Grants for site management are available through the New Jersey Historic Trust, but these are limited to historic sites that are on the Register, and not archive facilities. County preservation grants funded through the Open Space Trust Fund are only for historic site preservation and not for documents preservation.

While private funding might be available to support an archive program, the economic downturn has left many private endowment funds under even more pressure than public funds. For a start-up program without a proven track record, securing initial funding through private sources will be difficult.

Unfortunately, time is not on the side of historic preservation. As documents deteriorate and collections are dispersed, the likelihood pulling together a meaningful collection of the county's remaining historical documents and artifacts fades with time. Without a well-planned program with firm commitments for space and expertise, it is unlikely that even a basic archive program will be able to secure funding in the near future.

Changing Technology

Rapid changes in digital technology have had several impacts on the archive issue. A high-resolution scan of almost any paper document, including maps, letters, and photographs, can be stored in a database to create a permanent, secure record. In addition, the image can be provided to remote users via the Internet at virtually no cost. If the preservation of original document is not mandated by its inherent value, rarity, or historic significance, the archival cost reduced by discarding the original.

Depending upon the size, quality, and purpose of the image, the scanning process can be both labor intensive and expensive. In fact, producing scanned images of a large document may be more expensive than the long-term storage cost of the original. If the content of the scanned image is converted to text using an OCR, the resulting file may contain errors requiring a user to refer back to the original document for validation.

Control and ownership of the scanned document may also be an issue. If the material is still under copyright protection, sharing the image with online users is a problem. In addition, an archive may wish to maintain control of the content or the image and be able to determine how it is used and by whom.

Perhaps the greatest contribution of the digital age has been in cataloging. A detailed description of each item in a collection can easily be prepared. When combined with compatible catalogs of other collections, a researcher can quickly determine the availability, location, and status of items contained in a large number of collections.

Goals and Recommendations

It is the general recommendation of the roundtable that a small working committee be formed to continue pursuing several specific objectives:

- Secure grant money to undertake a comprehensive survey of the county's existing historic archives.
- Work with volunteers and the county libraries to develop an online, union catalog of historic materials.
- Develop a plan for establishing an archive facility that would be used for accumulating, preserving, and evaluating orphan collections as they become available.