

Strategic Plan

2015-2018



Mercer Museum



Fonthill Castle

Operated by the
Bucks County Historical Society

Adopted by the BCBS Board of Trustees
October 20, 2014

Bucks County Historical Society Strategic Plan 2015-2018

Executive Summary

The Bucks County Historical Society (BCHS), which operates the Mercer Museum and research library as well as Fonthill Castle (Mercer's home), is building on the extraordinary collections and concrete edifices of Henry Mercer. The BCHS completed a major transformation at the Mercer Museum with the opening of its new wing in June, 2011. In spite of the downturn in the economy the Museum was successful in completing its \$12.5M capital campaign for the 13,500 square foot expansion. The new facilities have enabled the Museum to provide experiences to meet the needs and expectations of our audiences with a modern changing exhibition gallery and learning center. The Mercer is presenting a range of traveling and in-house exhibits, and projections for growth in attendance have been met.

This Strategic Plan builds on all previous planning and input from constituents. The previous Strategic Plan (2011-2014) focused heavily on opening the new wing of the Mercer Museum and experimenting with the new facility both programmatically and operationally. With many lessons learned with the new Mercer, the organization has the opportunity to now look broadly at all its assets, particularly Fonthill. The 'Mercer Mile' extends from Fonthill Castle, Henry Mercer's home, to the Mercer Complex and beyond to encompass the off-site collection storage facility at the Hart property.

The Board of Trustees has adopted this Strategic Plan which commits us to presenting relevant and enjoyable experiences to a diversity of visitors, preserving our collections and facilities, achieving organizational sustainability, and utilizing our physical assets to best meet the long term needs of the institution.

Specifically, within the period of the plan the BCHS will:

- Complete Master Plans for the Fonthill Castle site and all other BCHS properties.
- Present a range of temporary exhibits at the Mercer Museum to reach a wide audience and provide a sense of change and excitement.
- Achieve fiscal sustainability through the establishment of an exhibition fund and the continued growth of the quasi endowment, the Unrestricted Funds Trust.
- Celebrate the Mercer Museum Centennial in 2016 and use the occasion as a catalyst for widespread attention on the museum and the Mercer legacy.

BCHS does not operate in a vacuum, and external factors affect the growth and success of the organization and its museums. From competition for scarce dollars to the pressure to keep up with new technology, the BCHS will need to continue to adapt to changing times. During the period of the plan revenue from the Unrestricted Funds Trust is still required to meet the operating budget. However, the long range budget indicates reduced dependence on these funds achieved through new revenues from expanded programming and major donor initiatives.

Mission

It is the mission of the Bucks County Historical Society to educate and engage its many audiences in appreciating the past and to help people find stories and meanings relevant to their lives- both today and in the future.

Vision

Inspired by the vision and creativity of Henry C. Mercer (1856-1930), the Bucks County Historical Society is a dynamic, educational organization that operates the Mercer Museum and Library, and Fonthill Castle. The organization involves its visitors in meaningful explorations of the past through active engagement with its dramatic buildings and historical collections. We encourage our visitors to view history from multiple perspectives and multiple disciplines, and in relation to their own lives. The organization recognizes that it must offer innovative and participatory experiences in order to involve diverse segments of local, regional and national audiences. Our museums and library strive to offer the most exciting, engaging and unique history experiences in the Delaware Valley. The organization pledges its commitment to the highest ethical and professional standards.

Goals

I Enhance audience engagement with our museums and library through participatory, relevant, and enjoyable experiences thereby strengthening our recognition as an important community partner.

II Maintain enlightened stewardship by practicing responsible custodianship, committing us to the long-term care, preservation, and comprehension of the collections and facilities with which we have been entrusted.

III Attract and keep empowered and committed people by fostering an environment that encourages change, innovation, and respect for diversity while providing necessary human, physical and financial resources.

IV Achieve organizational sustainability by sufficiently increasing the endowment and ongoing fundraising to support operations and maintain high standards of programs.

V Utilize the organization's physical assets to best meet the long term needs of the institution in accordance with accepted museum ethical and professional standards.

Strategic Plan Priorities (2015-2018)

Collections & Interpretation

Interpretive Exhibits & Programs

- Host a total of 12 engaging traveling and in-house temporary exhibits as primary driver of change and repeat visitation at Mercer. (See list of exhibits below).
- Investigate and explore alternative (non-label) methods for engaging audiences and delivering content for certain core exhibits, e.g. via tablets, enhanced audio guides, cell phone apps, etc.
- Develop and implement 2-3 alternative interesting/fun experience areas (“oasis spaces”) in original museum.
- Receive designation as a Smithsonian Institution Affiliate museum, enabling collaboration on exhibitions, loans and programming initiatives; leverage cachet of the designation.
- Celebrate milestone/centennial anniversary of the Mercer Museum through a series of programs, tours and events to generate attention on our National Historic Landmark.

Temporary Exhibit Schedule – Confirmed & Under Development

- 2015 “House and Home”
“Bucks County Fraktur: Recent Acquisitions”
“To Save Our Fellow Citizens: Volunteer Firefighting in 19th-Century” *
“Lego Castle Adventure”; “Under the Tree”
- 2016 “American Adventure”
“Long May She Wave: A Graphic History of the American Flag”
“Under the Tree”
- 2017 “Making It Modern: The Andrews Shaker Collection”
“The Mary Schafer Collection: A Legacy of Quilt History”
“Centuries of Childhood”; “Under the Tree”
- 2018 “Unpacking Collections: The Legacy of Cuesta Benberry, African-American Quilt Scholar” PLUS “Renewing Tradition III: Works by the Friendly Quilters”
“Racing: The Need for Speed” *
“Not the End: Death & Memory in Photographs”; “Under the Tree”
**BCHS mounted exhibits*

Collections

- Maximize storage efficiency and implement expansion of collections storage at the Collection Storage and Study Center (CSSC).
- Implement priority objectives outlined in Mercer Long Range Conservation Plan, as resources and opportunities permit; develop new LR Conservation Plan for Fonthill.
- Develop strategy by appropriate parties for future restoration and ongoing repairs at Mercer and Fonthill; seek grant (IMLS/NEH) for assessment & planning.
- Address remaining lighting needs for museum Central Court, replacing 1970s chandelier; explore feasibility of dramatic or other lighting. Grant project.
- Acquire updated technology (microfilm reader, scanner, etc.) to facilitate researcher access and use of library collections. Investigate feasibility of participating in a mass digitization collaborative (e.g. Lyrasis) for newspaper, manuscript or other collections.

Development

- Implement a Campaign to achieve net result of \$20 million for quasi Endowment by 2020 (currently at \$11 million)
- Implement an Exhibition Fund Initiative to raise \$2.5 million benefitting immediate, short and long-term needs of the Mercer Museum's exhibition program.
- Plan a fundraising event to mark the Mercer Museum's Centennial Celebration and to attract new donors to the institution.
- Utilize crowd funding technique for a major project/initiative at Mercer Museum and/or Fonthill Castle.

Marketing

- Focus Marketing efforts on targeted audience segments with the goal of driving repeat visitation to Mercer Museum & Library and Fonthill Castle; promote exhibitions at Mercer as catalyst to reach new audiences.
- Use newly revised website and social media outlets to project brand and drive engagement with museums.
- Capitalize on the Mercer Museum Centennial to garner national media coverage and celebrate with the community.
- Promote excellence in visitor/guest services. Develop online ticket sales capability to better serve constituents.

Administration

- Implement plan to reach sustainability by closing the gap between the distribution formula and supplemental draw from quasi endowment.
- Provide staff resources for ongoing operations and special project initiatives.
- Conduct succession planning for senior management transitions with the least disruption to the organization.
- Prioritize needs and assess uses of all physical assets. Prioritize restoration/maintenance projects at all facilities.
- Engage in those community partnerships that further the mission of the organization.
- Continually evaluate technology utilized throughout the institution to achieve goals.

Fonthill Castle

Interpretive Programming

- Apply broad thinking to research, develop, test, implement new tours, programs, and technologies that will allow Fonthill Castle to continue to share its stories with a changing and diverse audience. (i.e. Choose Your Own Adventure tour, game based programming, changing special topic exhibits).
- Improve the interpretive/visitor experience by restoring the interior spaces. Reinstall fallen tile and repair wall surfaces, restore the Back Kitchen to a more original appearance.

Fonthill Castle (cont.)

Grounds

- Better interpret and utilize the grounds: Address grounds maintenance with the County. Develop Master Plan for entire site. Restore and/or rebuild original physical grounds features (e.g. bridges, gateposts).

Partnerships

- Community partnerships: Utilize the established partnerships with other groups and organizations to strengthen Fonthill Castle's place in the community and expand our programmatic opportunities (e.g. Tile Works, Nature Club, Doylestown Bookshop).

Strategic Planning Process

The BCHS has recorded a long history of planning and the current Strategic Plan builds on many substantial studies and assessments completed in previous years. The Plan also builds on our experience with operating the new Mercer wing over three years. The planning process has involved both internal and external constituents. Considerable Board member engagement was evident throughout the planning process. A Board Retreat was held on February 22, 2014; Mr. Steven Wray, director of The Economy League of Greater Philadelphia, ably served as Facilitator for the Retreat. Staff prepared department position papers as the core of the packet for the Retreat which focused on the following topics:

- What is going well.
- Where we want to be.
- How we can best realize our potential

The Staff also held a Retreat on March 12, 2014 to consider where we want to be by 2018. The retreats considered all assets and aspects of the organization.

A Visioning Committee of the Board was established in March, 2014 to serve as the long range planning committee. This committee revised the Mission and Goals of the organization for the Plan, developed a Performance Indicator Matrix, and reviewed department priorities for the period 2015-2018.

At each Board meeting following the Retreat Board members participated in an exercise related to the long range planning process. These discussions and presentations were particularly beneficial in Board education and engagement and in advancing the planning process.

Following the retreats staff and committees developed priorities and crafted drafts of plans. The staff Management Team reviewed drafts as well to ensure alignment between departments and functional areas. Revised Mission, Vision and Goals statements approved by the Visioning Committee and Executive Committee were then adopted by the Board. These statements serve as the guiding principles for the organization.