

A Community-Focused Strategic Plan for the Bucks County Historical Society “Supporting a Dynamic Community”

Here is something that is unique, an educational institution that no other town possesses and if our citizens are not proud of it today, their children and their grandchildren will be. Here is a rare and remarkable tree in good condition just planted: watch over it, guard it, save it, prune it, and water it until it spreads its noble shade not only over this little town and this state...but over this whole nation.

Henry Chapman Mercer

Mission and History

Founded in 1880, the Bucks County Historical Society (BCHS) is dedicated to preserving Bucks County history and promoting the importance the past plays in contemporary life. As one of the oldest and largest county historical organizations in Pennsylvania, BCHS’s duties as a fledgling organization had its roots in marking historical sites, presenting papers, and accumulating memorabilia. By 1897, BCHS member, historian, and archaeologist, Henry Chapman Mercer (1856-1930) recognized the need to collect and preserve the non-mechanized material and tools of daily life in America before it was all swept away by the Industrial Revolution. To understand the mission and history of BCHS, one needs to understand Henry Chapman Mercer.

Mercer was born and raised in Doylestown, PA and was a renaissance man in the truest sense. He was a world traveler, archaeologist, ceramicist, collector, historian, builder, author, artist, and dog lover. Between 1908 and 1916 he designed and built three unique concrete structures: **Fonthill Castle**, his home in which he lived among his showcased tilework, and entertained guests; the **Moravian Pottery and Tile Works**, where he designed and created his distinctive hand-crafted products; and the **Mercer Museum**, where he displayed his vast collection of early Americana. Part of his legacy to his community is the three buildings he left in the public trust.

When Mercer died in 1930, his will designated ownership of the Moravian Pottery and Tile Works to his assistant, Frank Swain. After several changes of ownership over the decades following Swain’s death in 1954, the Moravian Pottery and Tile Works was eventually shifted to the care of the Bucks County Department of Parks and Recreation. Mercer bequeathed Fonthill Castle to the Trustees of the Mercer-Fonthill Museum as a museum for the study of tiles, prints, and decorative arts. This bequest included the 69 acre Fonthill grounds as a park, bird sanctuary, and arboretum for the community to enjoy, while educating themselves on native species of trees, plants, and wildlife. He left the Mercer Museum in trust to the Trustees of BCHS with the intent his collection be used for the education of the public on the tools that built the nation.

BCHS Mission Statement

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

History is relevant to everyone. Pin points on a map only rise to the meaning of “PLACE” when people in strong, resilient communities share memories and stories that connect them to one another.

Over the next three years, BCCHS will become a “Connector” organization, and move towards multidisciplinary education and commitment to serving the community to ensure the Mercer Museum and Fonthill Castle become as deeply rooted in the hearts of people as the iconic buildings are prominently established on the landscape.

Themes

The Mercer Museum and Fonthill Castle will provide meaningful experiences that will help guests:

CONNECT with the collections, the buildings, and their places in history.

CONSIDER the relevance of the stories, objects, people, and experiences of the past to their lives today.

CONVEY their thoughts and understanding of historical events, people, experiences, and places to others.

Strategic Framework

A Strategic Planning Committee met on Saturday, April 28, 2018 at 8:30 a.m. to begin the process of writing a new strategic plan. Led by Trustee Steve Wray, and made up of trustees and senior staff members, the committee laid out a plan for further action. The central question that drove scenario planning sessions using the “Future Forward” model from the Greater Philadelphia Cultural Alliance was, *If the Mercer and Fonthill disappeared tomorrow, would anyone care?*

Staff prepared a SWOT analysis prior to the meeting. At the meeting, the trustees performed another SWOT analysis, and the notes were compared. All were concerned with a) the financial sustainability and the ability to maintain assets, b) connecting community awareness to community investment in both the Mercer Museum and Fonthill Castle, and c) then elevating that connection/support. All agreed there needs to be clarity on the role/identity of Mercer Museum and Fonthill Castle in the community.

After the meeting, it was decided to continue work during the summer in committees. Four committees were established:

1) Financial Sustainability

Fundraising, locating financial resources, watching investments, identifying and cultivating donors, program revenue, and rental program.

2) Facilities and Properties

Assessing/prioritizing properties, long term facility planning, major capital projects, repair/maintenance plan

3) Community Engagement

Marketing/branding, communication strategy, collections, acquisitions, conservation, program support, volunteers, local businesses and neighbors

4) Organizational Structure and Governance

Succession planning for board and staff, Trustee vacancies, bylaws, contracts, agreements

All committees met over the summer and submitted ideas for the overall strategic plan. From these meetings, staff developed the following four goals and action plan.

Goals

There are 4 overarching organizational goals staff will aspire to achieve through targeted action items.

Goal #1: Achieve Financial Sustainability

A healthy financial base equates to the sustainability of BCHS and ensures that BCHS is the best possible steward for the collections and properties, is a predominant local provider of public programs, and is a trusted and valued community partner.

Goal #2: Support People

Human resources are the organization's most important asset, whether they are employees, trustees, supporters, donors, advisors, volunteers, visitors, or guests. BCHS will strengthen support to foster a healthy environment of respect and open communication that encourages innovation.

Goal #3: Care for Collections and Properties

BCHS has been entrusted to practice responsible custodianship of the collections, which include objects, buildings, and properties. Their care includes conservation, preservation, and determination of highest and best use.

Goal #4: Provide Relevant Experiences

It is crucial to BCHS to make direct and engaging local, national, and international stories—as inspired by our collections-- accessible for communities to enjoy and experience.