

**Maine Historical Society
IMLS-Museums for America 2008**

Narrative

I. Statement of Need

Overview The Maine Historical Society is seeking a Museums for America grant for \$149,620 to undertake a comprehensive inventory of its Museum Collections, a vital step in the evolution of our institution. The Collections are among the richest in the state—including more than 15,000 objects that document the history of Maine, New England, and early America—and serve as the foundation for core activities across our institution including research, exhibits, public and school programs, publications, and a robust online program. The project—which is identified as an essential activity in our 2006-2009 Strategic Plan—will modernize and address longstanding inconsistencies in our Museum Catalog; enable us to continue to move forward in our effort to adopt collections management practices that meet or exceed museum standards; help us establish physical and intellectual control of our museum collections; and support a series of strategic initiatives designed to ensure the effective management and continued growth of our institution.

Museum Collections and Catalog Initially concerned with preserving materials related to the founding generation, MHS's collecting focus has continued to evolve and now attempts to match objects with stories of particular Maine people, places, and communities. Particular strengths of the collection include: **Personal Artifacts** including clothing and accessories, children's toys, tools, medical instruments, and early 20th century tourism souvenirs. **Fine & Folk Arts** including 18th- and 19th century portraits and miniatures, 19th- and 20th century landscapes and seascapes, ship models, quilts, samplers, and graphic arts. **Native American artifacts** including pre-European contact tools, shards and other archaeological specimens from Maine, as well as 19th century baskets, carvings, clothing, and items created for the tourist trade. **Decorative arts** including ceramics, glass, metalware, furniture, and textiles. **Militaria** including badges, medals, firearms, swords, 19th century militia flags, and uniforms. The **Wadsworth-Longfellow House** and its contents, which document 19th century domestic life through the household possessions of the Longfellow family.

The museum collections have grown continually since MHS was founded in 1822. Not surprisingly, the majority of the collections were amassed in an era prior to best practices, accreditation, modern notions of cataloging, standardized record-keeping, or widely accepted principles of sound collections management. Like many other museums, we have spent much of the past twenty or so years trying to digest, process, care for, and nurture a vast collection of disparate materials and objects. In the early 1990s, the first basic inventory of the museum collections was conducted. MHS staff and volunteers gradually converted paper-based collection records into a computerized database (dBase III), and entered basic information for nearly every object in the collection. The system established a basic level of control for the collections for the first time, but data entry was not standardized and the resulting catalog records were and remain inconsistent and often inaccurate. In 2000, MHS upgraded its collections management software to PastPerfect. Records from the previous system were converted, though many still have not been corrected. A spot check of our museum catalog today reveals that catalog records are inconsistent in scope, completeness, and terminology, and that only a small minority are accompanied by a digital image. This has serious practical and philosophical consequences for our institution: our collections are the cornerstone of our mission, program, and identity, and yet we do not currently have comprehensive, readily-available, accurate information about them. The limitations of the museum catalog makes it difficult for staff—and outside researchers—to plan research effectively, make informed decisions about potential acquisitions, promote scholarship, and to otherwise use the collections to their full potential.

With the guidance of our Strategic Plan, we have made considerable progress in our stewardship of the museum collections in recent years. We have greatly improved the housing, storage, tracking, handling, and general care of the collections, making the most of the staff, facilities, and resources that are available. In 2003, a Collections Policy was developed and approved by our Board of Trustees that brought our current standards

more clearly into focus and influenced Trustee thinking about the institution. (**See Collections Policy: www.mainehistory.org/collectionspolicy**) In 2004, a Conservation Plan was prepared that established priorities for collection care and recognized the need for the proposed inventory of museum collections. (**See Attachment 1: Excerpts from MHS Conservation Plan.**) The development of a Collecting Plan—a document that will be key to defining the future needs and focus of our institution—is another high priority but a task that we can not undertake until we have completed the proposed inventory. These efforts have both prepared us for the proposed project and demonstrated how critical it is to our ability to manage the collections effectively. By far the highest priority related to our museum collections—as indicated in our Strategic Plan—is the need to conduct a complete inventory of the collections, standardize the museum catalog, and to institute practices and policies that ensure that that information is reviewed regularly and kept up-to-date.

A Defining Moment for MHS This project comes at a pivotal moment in the evolution of our organization. In the 1970s and 1980s, full-time staff with a specific focus on museum collections were hired for the first-time, and initial efforts were made to apply professional standards to the collections. By the early-1990s, MHS had articulated a vision to establish a *museum*, purchased an adjacent building to house it, and began an aggressive exhibition program. In the past decade, we have further professionalized our staff, begun to revamp collection policies and guiding documents, improved storage conditions, and established a vibrant museum program that gives researchers, scholars, students, the public, and partner organizations meaningful opportunities to see and interact with the collections.

More recently, MHS has come to serve a much broader audience, and to play a far-reaching role in the state. In the past, geography, a narrower programmatic focus, and limited resources had made it difficult for MHS to reach and serve audiences outside of Southern Maine and to truly fulfill our statewide mandate. (Maine is primarily rural, and the state’s 1.2 million people are dispersed over an extremely large geographic region.) In our exhibit program, we have reached out to curators, collectors, scholars, and historical organizations across Maine and beyond, and participated in statewide cultural initiatives like the “Maine Print Project” and “The Mirror of Maine.” (**See Attachment 4: List of Recent MHS Exhibits.**) We have reached out to Maine’s small but vibrant ethnic communities through collecting initiatives, public programs, and support of research. As one of the seven statewide cultural organizations that comprise the Maine Cultural Affairs Council, MHS plays a prominent role in advocating for historical organizations and helping establish cultural policy.

The development and launch of the Maine Memory Network (www.mainememory.net) in 2001 has done even more for our ability to reach and serve diverse audiences in every corner of the state. Maine Memory is a statewide digital museum that enables MHS and any collecting organization in the state to share items in their collection through one centralized website. To date 180 organizations have become “contributing partners” and uploaded more than 13,000 items. (Approximately 50% of those items were contributed by MHS, the vast majority of which come from our library collections.) Maine Memory has established high standards for digitizing both archival materials and museum objects, publishes clear guidelines for contributors, and has remained at the forefront of the field in terms of setting standards for accessibility, use of metadata, and other emerging issues related to digitization. In addition to providing *access* to collections, Maine Memory provides numerous interpretive resources and educational opportunities. In fact, Maine Memory has been recognized nationally by IMLS, NEH, and others for its innovative approach to providing access to historical material, interpretation, and engaging communities in the preservation and exploration of local history. Maine Memory provides a prominent and well-established venue for the public to see, learn about, and interact with the museum collections, and has given us the ability to reach and truly serve teachers, students, researchers, and members of the public in every corner of Maine (and beyond).

While we are proud of the progress we have made, MHS still faces significant issues: we have outgrown our collections storage, processing, exhibition, education, and public program spaces. Our current facility—which was not originally a museum—is not environmentally controlled, nor is it adequate for many basic museum functions (e.g. movement of and access to collections). We see numerous opportunities to expand programs,

extend partnerships, acquire collections, and reach out and better serve the state, but we have limited staff and resources to pursue those opportunities. There is substantial interest within MHS in developing a core exhibit, creating additional gallery space, and, potentially, replacing our current museum building. With a strong Strategic Plan in place, we are beginning a vigorous planning process to address those issues. We recognize that continued growth needs to be carefully planned, sustainable, and grounded in our core mission and strengths—our collections in particular. This project will enable us to undertake that process with purpose and self-awareness.

Strategic Planning Located on a one-acre campus in the heart of Portland’s business and cultural district, the Society is organized into four major areas: the MHS Museum, the MHS Research Library, the Wadsworth-Longfellow House, and the Maine Memory Network (www.mainememory.net), our nationally-recognized, statewide digital museum. A 34 member Board of Trustees, thirteen standing committees and eleven subcommittees advise and support the society staff of fifteen full-time and twenty part-time in its work. In 2000, MHS began a rigorous self study and strategic planning process designed to clarify the problems, aspirations, and priorities of the organization. This work created our current Strategic Plan which starts with a broad and ambitious vision for the future supported by a number of interrelated strategic goals designed to achieve it. Revised in 2006, the Strategic Plan charts continued improvement, outreach, and accomplishment in every department of the organization. **(See Strategic Plan Summary for overview and mission statement.)**

The Strategic Plan identifies seven key Strategic Objectives designed to ensure the growth and vitality of the institution. The first, listed under the category of “Collections: Preservation, Access, Acquisition,” establishes clear priorities related to the Museum Collections:

Dramatically improve the stewardship of MHS’ collections by providing the highest possible professional standards of physical care, conservation, and storage; by initiating cataloging procedures that facilitate access to and use of the collections; and by adopting strategic collecting practices that enhance quality and breadth, foster strong relationships with donors, and encourage cooperation with other collecting institutions in Maine.

Several Action Plans were identified and deemed “essential” to achieving that objective. The first calls for us to: (1) “Conduct a complete inventory and sound scholarly assessment of the Museum Collections, addressing condition, relevance, housing, and conservation need.” The knowledge gained during that process is intended to then serve as a foundation for: (2) “Completing a comprehensive, integrated, web-accessible catalog of all MHS Collections;” (3) “Reviewing and updating the Collections Conservation Plan;” (4) “Assessing and addressing the unprocessed backlog in the Museum;” and (5) “Developing a collecting priorities plan.”

II. Project Design

Scope of Activities During the two-year grant period, the project team will undertake a systematic review of each object in the museum collections. The review will consist of: examining the object; evaluating its general physical condition; making remedial housing improvements; updating its database record in Past Perfect; updating its object file; and making a digital image of each object. The immediate goal of the project is to ensure that our museum catalog is thorough and complete, and that we have an accurate, standardized record for every object in the museum collection. That information will support core institutional activities, and be made broadly accessible to our staff, researchers, and the public through an online version of our Past Perfect collections database and through the Maine Memory Network (www.mainememory.net). The project will also produce key, longer-term benefits: it will refine and institutionalize our knowledge of our collections, and guide us as we revise our collections policies, conservation plan, and plans for capital improvements.

The project will be carried out by two temporary project staff (the inventory team) working closely with MHS permanent staff. Both will be experienced or trained to handle objects, work with collection records, and enter accurate and standardized information into the collection database. The **Inventory Project Manager** (full-

time, IMLS funded) will be responsible for reviewing and assessing each object, updating catalog and object file records, coordinating day-to-day project activities, and ensuring that project routines are consistent and meet institutional standards. The **Inventory Project Technician** (full-time, IMLS funded) will support the Inventory Project Manager by retrieving and returning objects to storage, re-housing items as needed, entering catalog data, and taking digital photographs of each object. **(See Attachments 4 and 5: Job Descriptions)** Project staff will meet with the MHS Curator (Project Director), Registrar, and Curatorial Assistant weekly to monitor progress, make adjustments to the workplan, address procedural and storage questions that arise, and, critically, ensure that knowledge gained about the collections is institutionalized.

Workplan The inventory team will work methodically through the museum collections, moving from storage area to storage area, concentrating on related collections types. This will lead to a qualitative understanding of the collection and support the production of a summary overview of collections strengths—an important outcome of the process. Museum collections are stored in eleven dedicated storage rooms in three building on the MHS campus, plus nine furnished rooms in the Wadsworth Longfellow house that hold collection objects. Collections records are stored in the curatorial offices. As information is retrieved, files will be updated. An area for processing collections is currently set up adjacent to the Curatorial offices and will serve as the primary workspace for the inventory team. However, in order to reduce the overall movement and handling of individual items, the inventory team will be equipped with a laptop computer and portable photographic equipment (including camera, lights, backdrop) that they will be able to use to set up in temporary work areas when they are working in collections in other buildings.

The following activities will form the core of the Project:

(1) Inventory: Working item by item, and from collection group to collection group – every object in the collection will be inspected and inventoried. All location codes will be verified. If needed, objects will be permanently numbered and tagged.

(2) Input standardized data: The electronic records for each object in the collections database will be reviewed, and information updated, corrected and standardized where needed to ensure consistency and accuracy for all records. Using standard cataloging procedures, the electronic record for each item in the collection will be brought up to a museum standard. Object files will be reviewed and updated. The process will provide a complete inventory. **(See Attachment 6: Museum Collections Cataloging Guidelines, and Attachment 7: Sample Past Perfect Catalog Record, Barrell Family Pitcher, ca. 1804)**

(3) Assessment: Each object will be evaluated in relation to the MHS mission and collecting interests. This will clearly define depth and extent of holdings, and recognize strengths and weaknesses in the collection. This activity is a critical step in the process of developing a Collections Plan. This activity will be guided by the MHS Collections Policy. **(See: www.mainehistory.org/collectionspolicy)** Any non-related items in the collection will be identified. A summary and narrative description highlighting the various parts of the collection will be written.

(4) Organization: Collections housing will be upgraded where needed, and objects will be placed into standardized containers. In addition, when needed, collections objects will be relocated and arranged with similar items. This will maximize space use, re-enforce a rational arrangement of collections, and use available storage efficiently. This activity will clarify storage needs for the collection as plans for a new facility develop.

(5) Imaging: A digital image of each item will be made and uploaded into the collections database. This will complement object information with a visual record, support study and access, and reduce the need for object handling. **A Note on Standards for Digitization:** The following basic standards have been established for digital images made from items in the collection: images taken from a digital camera will be 30 MB TIF (300dpi @ 9” x 13”) with minimal compression, 24 bit depth, RGB mode. These standards were adapted from the digitization standards developed for the Maine Memory Network. The principle we have followed is to

ensure maximum amount of information captured, and the flexibility and interoperability of file format. A master/archive copy of each item will be captured in TIFF format, labeled by accession number, and saved on our media storage server maintained by the Digital Services department. See next section for explanation of use of digital images. **(For detailed explanation of our standards, please see “Specifications for Projects that Develop Digital Products” and Attachment 8: Standards for Digitizing)**

(6) Online Access: Once catalog records have been updated and digital images have been made, information related to the item will be made available to the public online in two ways. First, the MHS Museum Collections Catalog will be available to the public through Maine Historical Society’s website using **PastPerfect-Online**. A low-resolution jpeg of the item will be generated from the master image archive by the Inventory Project Technician and attached to the PastPerfect catalog record for that item. On a quarterly basis, the MHS Registrar will update the PastPerfect-Online version of the Museum Catalog by doing a batch upload from the local (primary) PastPerfect catalog. The quarterly updates will reflect all changes that have been made to the Museum Catalog since the previous update. **(See Attachment 9: Sample Past Perfect-Online Catalog Record, Barrell Family Pitcher, ca. 1804)**

Second, digital versions of most items in the Museum Collection and related catalog records will be uploaded to the **Maine Memory Network** by the Inventory Project Technician. A full-size JPEG copy of the master file will be uploaded to MMN. The programming that runs MMN will then generate lower-resolution jpeg versions of the file on demand, depending on where they appear in Maine Memory. (Our intention is to include the vast majority of items in the Museum Collections in Maine Memory. We do not plan to include items that are duplicates, that don’t reproduce well, or that are too fragile to handle safely.) The digital image will be accompanied by a MMN catalog record that is developed from the MHS Museum Catalog record. **(See Attachment 10: Sample Maine Memory Network Record, Barrell Family Pitcher, ca. 1804)**

Planning The project design was developed by the MHS curatorial team working with staff from several other MHS departments and Ronald Harvey, a conservation consultant who previously helped us develop our Conservation Plan. **(See Attachment 11: Letter of Support.)** The project is designed to be comprehensive in scope, efficient in its use of staff, to reduce overall handling of objects, and to serve and support key strategic initiatives. Project design reflects our experience conducting two limited surveys of segments of the Museum Collections. From 2002-2005, we conducted a **comprehensive survey of the MHS Costume Collection**. Dating from 1730 to 2007, the Collection consists of 2000 pieces of men’s, women’s, and children’s clothing and accessories, each of which has a documented association to the state of Maine. That survey—conducted by a part-time cataloger working with permanent Museum staff and external advisors—included an assessment and inventory of each item in the costume collection and revision of PastPerfect records. Items that were deemed out of scope were set aside and eventually de-accessioned. The initiative also enabled us to address several groups of unprocessed materials. Unfortunately, we were not able to make a digital image of each item in the Costume Collection—the process of dressing and preparing costumes for photographing is complex and labor-intensive, and we did not have the resources to do so properly. In 2006–2007, in preparation for the proposed project, we conducted a limited pilot inventory of a single collections storage area—Storage Room 6 which we selected because of its manageable size and because we believed it would provide a good representation of the diversity of materials and issues we would encounter undertaking a comprehensive inventory. A single cataloger worked approximately 874 hours, inventoried just over 2,000 records, and made a digital image for each. These two projects established a standard and yielded an inventory of 25% of the collection. Remedial work will need to be done to the items processed in both of those projects—we need to make digital images of the costume collections, and include an assessment component to the items processed in Storage Room 6—to bring the cataloging for those items up to the standards established for the proposed project. Completing that work is included in the scope of this project.

Evaluation The project team will evaluate progress regularly and make adjustments as needed. On the ground, at the most basic level, the Inventory Project Manager will continually monitor the workplan to ensure that

satisfactory progress is being made. Progress will be measured by: the quality of catalog records, the number of items processed, the amount of time it takes to process individual items and to move through the Collections, and issues related to re-housing items. The Registrar will review catalog records on a weekly basis to ensure their consistency and that they meet standards for completeness and accuracy. The Curator will further monitor progress through weekly team meetings. Finally, the MHS Collections Committee and Board of Trustees, through its regular review of progress on the Strategic Plan, will provide oversight and support.

Outreach Plans Because the Museum Collections are at the core of virtually all of our institutional activities, outreach is an implicit product and benefit of this project. Once the Inventory is complete and the museum catalog is available through PastPerfect-Online and Maine Memory, we will promote information about the catalog broadly through MHS publications (our newsletter, our websites, *The Journal of Maine History*) and through our extensive network of MMN contributors, researchers, and our various professional networks.

Involvement of the Professional Community The goals of the inventory project are fairly straightforward and reflect ongoing attention to museum standards and the needs of our various communities and audiences. The project has been designed with best practices and the characteristics of an accreditable institution in mind to ensure that MHS continues to make progress on its path to the highest level of collections management standards. Museum Staff frequently participate in review panels, conference sessions, and other professional dialogs through IMLS, NEH, AAM, AASLH, and NEMA around a variety of related topics. MHS also regularly hires collections and conservation consultants from organizations like NEDCC to provide expertise and help planning various initiatives. We also work closely with other institutions in the planning of exhibits, bringing our staff into regular contact and dialog with other Museum professional, recent scholarship, current collections care practices, etc. For example, this year we collaborated with the Houghton Library at Harvard and Longfellow National Historic Site in Cambridge, MA on a major exhibit (“Drawing Together: The Arts of the Longfellows”).

III. Project Resources

MHS Executive Director Richard D’Abate is responsible for all aspects of project development and financial management. The majority of requested funds will be used to hire two full-time, temporary employees who will focus exclusively on the Inventory Project. Staffing needs, estimated time needed to complete the project, and overall scope is based on the pilot inventories described above. IMLS funds will also be used to purchase computers that the inventory team will use to enter data, update the Museum Catalog, and process digital images; imaging equipment; and standard re-housing supplies. The inventory team will be closely supported by MHS permanent staff. Estimates of the time it will take to complete the project are based on our experience implementing two related inventory projects. Budgeted cost-share is met primarily through time dedicated to the project by permanent staff. The project is also supported by the major investment we have made in developing our digital services infrastructure—including equipment, software, customized programming, and our expert staff. That infrastructure will be key to making the museum catalog and collection widely available to the public through PastPerfect-Online and the Maine Memory Network.

Maine Historical Society Permanent Staff:

Curatorial Department: **Curator of Museum Collections: John Mayer**, (M.A. University of Delaware-The Hagley Program, Certificate in Museum Studies). John, who will serve as **Project Director**, has over 25 years experience in the museum field as curator in history and historic house museums in the Northeast. He has been on staff at MHS for five years, and is responsible for the care and management of the museum collection. John will meet at least weekly with the inventory team. Primary results of involvement will include increasing collection information, addressing procedural and storage questions. **Registrar, MHS Collections: Holly Hurd-Forsyth**, (M.A., Museum Studies, San Francisco State University). Holly has 13 years experience in the museum field and is responsible for maintaining collection information for both museum and library collections. will oversee cataloging and will meet at least weekly with the inventory team. Primary results of involvement will be training project staff to use PastPerfect, addressing cataloging and data entry questions, and

reviewing catalog records. **Curatorial Assistant** (Position currently open; expected to be filled in January '08) Curatorial assistant will provide technical support to the inventory team in all aspects of the project.

Maine Memory Network: Curator, Maine Memory Network: Candace A. Kaner (PhD, Modern American History, Univ. of New Hampshire). Former Assistant Professor of American History, Bates College. Candace will participate in project planning, help facilitate inclusion of digitized items from the Museum Collections in Maine Memory and related catalog issues. (Because her current position is supported by federal funds, Kaner is not listed in the project budget.) **Digital Services Director: Kathy Amoroso** (BS, Univ. of Miami), former outreach and digital image coordinator for the Maine Memory Network; Kathy oversees the planning and implementation of all technical aspects of PastPerfect-Online and the Maine Memory Network. She will provide technical assistance with the imaging process. She will be available as needed for support and consultation but provide intensive training at project start up. **Maine Memory Cataloger: Fran Pollitt** (MLS, Syracuse University) Fran has been part of Maine Memory since its inception and has played an important role in establishing its cataloging procedures, use of metadata, and monitoring MMN policies in relation to trends in the field. She will check items that will be added to MMN's database from the Museum Collections.

Administration: Assistant Director: Stephen Bromage (MA, American History, Univ. of Massachusetts, Amherst). Oversees the Maine Memory Network, Education Department, and Public Programs and coordinates special initiatives. Steve will assist in project planning, support, and monitoring the project as it relates to the Strategic Plan. **MHS Facilities Manager: Steven Atripaldi**. Steven will play a critical, ongoing role: helping refine, adapt, and construct Collections storage spaces to make the most effective use of existing MHS facilities. **Network Administrator: Cindy Murphy**: works closely with the Digital Services Director and supports the computer needs of all project participants.

Project Staff:

IMLS funding will be used to hire two additional staff members. Both will be experienced or trained to handle objects, work with collection records, and enter accurate and standardized information into the collection database. The **Inventory Project Manager** (full-time, temporary, IMLS funded) will be responsible for reviewing and assessing each object, updating catalog and object file records, coordinating day-to-day project activities, and ensuring that project routines are consistent and meet institutional standards. The **Inventory Project Technician** (full-time, temporary, IMLS funded) will support the Inventory Project Manager by retrieving and returning objects to storage, re-housing items as needed, entering catalog data, and taking digital photographs of each object.

IV. Impact

The project will have an immediate and long-term impact on our institution and the community. It will produce a first-rate museum catalog that reflects and provides access to an important but underutilized collection. MHS is one of the best-respected cultural organizations in Maine. Our library collections, in particular, are recognized as perhaps the most valuable archival resource related to Maine history in the state. While many scholars, curators, and other researchers are familiar with the deep and unique resources within our museum collections, the collections are generally less well-known and less accessible to a broader public. Completing the inventory project will make it a better and more widely used resource, enabling us to provide better access through exhibits, the Maine Memory Network, and improvements in our research facilities. The project will enable us to develop a Collecting Plan that reflects our institution's values, goals, and approach to documenting the history of our state. And, importantly, it will generate a self-awareness and confidence that forms a strong foundation for institutional planning, enabling us to make intelligent, grounded decisions about our future.

BUDGET FORM - PAGE FOUR

Section B: Summary Budget

	\$ IMLS	\$ Cost Share	\$ TOTAL COSTS
1. Salaries and Wages	106,575.00	113,370.00	219,945.00
2. Fringe Benefits	30,907.00	32,878.00	63,785.00
3. Consultant Fees			0.00
4. Travel			0.00
5. Supplies and Materials	7,138.00	3,008.00	10,146.00
6. Services			0.00
7. Student Support			0.00
8. Other Costs			0.00
TOTAL DIRECT COSTS (1–8)	144,620.00	149,256.00	293,876.00
9. Indirect Costs	5,000.00	16,693.00	21,693.00
TOTAL COSTS (Direct and Indirect)	149,620.00	165,949.00	315,569.00

Project Funding for the Entire Grant Period

1. Grant Funds Requested from IMLS	149,620.00
2. Cost Sharing:	
a. Cash Contribution	165,949.00
b. In-Kind Contribution	
c. Other Federal Agencies*	
d. TOTAL COST SHARING	165,949.00
3. TOTAL PROJECT FUNDING (1+2d)	315,569.00
% of Total Costs Requested from IMLS	47.40%

* If funding has been requested from another federal agency, indicate the agency's name:

