



## Inspire! Grants for Small Museums

Sample Application IGSM-251891-OMS-22  
Project Category: Institutional Capacity

### Erie Canal Museum

|                         |          |
|-------------------------|----------|
| Amount awarded by IMLS: | \$50,000 |
| Amount of cost share:   | \$4,239  |

The Erie Canal Museum will develop a new interpretive plan as part of a larger effort to tell a more inclusive Erie Canal story. Project activities will include assessing the current plan to identify successes and shortcomings through visitor surveys. The project team will consult with a content developer and exhibit designer to develop a narrative and floor plan for new exhibits that advance the new interpretation. The museum's advisors and community partners will review the plan, and the final version will reflect their feedback. The project will position the museum to expand its interpretation to include more social history as well as being more welcoming for marginalized populations and for children and families in preparation for the bicentennial commemoration of the Erie Canal between 2017 and 2025.

Attached are the following components excerpted from the original application.

- Narrative
- Schedule of Completion

When preparing an application for the next deadline, be sure to follow the instructions in the most recent Notice of Funding Opportunity for the grant program to which you are applying.

### **Project Justification**

*Which program goal/project category and associated objective(s) of Inspire! Grants for Small Museums will your project address?*

This project will address Goal 2, Institutional Capacity, Objective 2.1: Support institutional planning and policy development.

*How will your project advance your museum's strategic plan?*

In developing this project the Museum consulted its current 2020-2022 Strategic Plan, specifically Strategic Issue 3: Collections Management and Programs, which states that the "Erie Canal Museum will utilize its collections and strengthen programs to increase community and audience engagement and support." This section specifically calls for the Museum to plan the future of its exhibitions, engage more diverse audiences, and bring its interpretation in line with present educational curricula and focus. The creation of a cohesive interpretive plan would allow the Museum to effectively address these points and make significant progress on its effort to develop a more sustainable and innovative organization. The interpretive plan, when complete, will primarily focus on the utilization of its collections through exhibition and how best to strengthen programs to reflect community needs, thus greatly advancing this component of the strategic plan. In 2022, we will develop a new 2023-2025 Strategic Plan that will include the development and at least the beginning part of implementation of the interpretive plan.

*What need, problem, or challenge will your project address, and how was it identified?*

In 2015, a new introductory exhibit was installed on part of the Erie Canal Museum's first floor (of two floors). This exhibit transformed a space that lacked interpretation into an engaging exhibit that shares a basic chronological interpretation of the Erie Canal, why and how it was built, how it operated, and what the economic impact was. This exhibit was the culmination of over a decade of planning, which initially included a much larger project that was canceled due to the 2008 economic collapse. While the introductory exhibit did much to improve the visitor experience, it also left many problems unsolved and created new ones. The majority of the Museum has not been updated in several decades, which is more obvious now in contrast to the 2015 exhibit. Many of the Erie Canal Museum's spaces, especially those on the first floor of its historic Weighlock Building, are in need of updating with new interpretation that more accurately reflects the values and needs of the Museum and its audience. Current exhibits in the Weighlock Building were often constructed in a piecemeal fashion, resulting in a sometimes disorienting and fragmented narrative that suffers from a lack of a cohesive exhibit design and the effects of legacy design. Most exhibits in the Museum, including the 2015 introductory exhibit, focus largely on the economic and engineering impact of the Erie Canal, with relatively little attention given to the important social history of the canal, especially in regards to the Canal's role in the disruption to indigeneous peoples' way of life and in the abolition and women's rights movements. Additionally, we have a small Children's Nook that is in a space that could be better utilized in another way, but we would also like to increase engagement for children and families throughout the Museum, instead of designating it to one small space.

For several years, executive staff at the Erie Canal Museum has called for and discussed in depth the need for the creation of a more up to date and inclusive Museum, a goal which staff has pursued vigorously over the past two years primarily through programs and temporary exhibits. Before we begin making any major changes, however, we need a comprehensive plan to guide us.

We've conducted numerous internal surveys over the past 2 years that have indicated that Museum members as well as its general audience are looking for more information regarding the social history of the Erie Canal, specifically the stories of marginalized communities, and the functioning of the Weighlock, the National Register building in which the Museum is housed. In addition to this, consultations with faculty and students within the Syracuse University Museum Studies program have indicated that the Erie Canal Museum would be well served by a new interpretive plan and more up to date exhibits reflecting current museum best practices. Finally, the release of the recent census continues to show that the City of Syracuse, home to the Erie Canal Museum, is an

increasingly diverse community, which is not reflected enough in the present exhibitions and interpretation found within the Museum. In order for the Museum to be relevant to our community, we must adapt in order to better reflect the people and the stories that exist and have existed along the Erie Canal.

The Museum must undertake this project immediately as New York State is presently commemorating the bicentennial of the Erie Canal's construction between 1817 and 1825. Public interest in the Erie Canal has increased, and the Erie Canal Museum looks to harness that popular support by improving its interpretation to better meet its vision to "be the leading interpreter of the Erie Canal's profound influence on Central New York, the United States, and the world, while being a vibrant hub in downtown Syracuse, engaging the community onsite and online with our world class collections and unique educational experiences." Because of its long history and significant national impact, the Erie Canal provides a platform for discussing many topics, including those that can be more difficult. For this reason, the Erie Canal Museum has an opportunity to be a leader among museums as many of us work to be more inclusive.

*Who is the target group for your project and how have they been involved in the planning?*

The target group for this project will be Museum staff and volunteers, as well as the staff of partner organizations. Museum staff have discussed the plans for this project in detail for several years and have taken active steps in beginning its implementation. Volunteers have also been consulted through surveys about the Museum's public programming and exhibitions. The implementation of this project will allow Museum staff and volunteers to have a solid framework from which to develop better and more up to date interpretation for its visitors and to base funding proposals upon to further improve the Museum. Museum partners will also be a target audience, as they will be greatly involved in the creation of the plan and will themselves benefit from gaining a better understanding of how the stories they tell intersect with the history of the Erie Canal. At present the Erie Canal Museum has 6 full time staff members and 4 part time staff members as well as approximately 50 regular volunteers. The Museum has also identified and worked with numerous partner organizations including the Skã•noñh Great Law of Peace Center, Erie Canalway National Heritage Corridor, Harriet Tubman National Historical Park, National Abolition Hall of Fame, The Stand - South Side Newspaper Project, and La Casita in the planning process for this project, working with them to gather input on how to best represent the communities that they represent in our interpretation and discussing what the process of developing an interpretive plan will entail. With the production of this interpretive plan, these organizations will also have a framework for how they can integrate Erie Canal content into their interpretation and work. The creation of this plan will also serve to strengthen and further develop these partnerships.

*Who are the ultimate beneficiaries for this project?*

The creation of this plan will allow the Erie Canal Museum to develop exhibitions and programs that create more meaningful and immersive engagement for all visitors to the Museum and its external programs. School age children will also be a primary beneficiary as the planning for new exhibitions will aim to make the Museum and its interpretation more accessible to children through engaging displays. Scholarship has shown a clear correlation between visiting museums as a youth and future positive outcomes for those children in their overall education and as adults. The new plan will also benefit traditionally marginalized populations within our community, specifically African American, Indigenous, Latinx, and immigrants populations, who are presently underrepresented in current interpretation but will receive a critical focus in the development of this new interpretive plan, with that interpretation created in partnership with community organizations representing those populations. The inclusion of these groups into the broader narrative of the Erie Canal will have the effect of allowing people of color and from other marginalized communities to see themselves represented, which is proven to improve visitor engagement, enjoyment, and education. It will also provide a more accurate depiction of the incredibly diverse Erie Canal to all visitors, thus improving everyone's experience as they learn of the far more inclusive history that exists in contrast to the traditionally received narrative of the Canal. The Museum will additionally work in the creation of this plan to focus on people with disabilities and try to make Museum interpretation as accessible as possible to the widest

possible audience. Finally, the Museum itself will greatly benefit from the creation of this plan. We will have a guiding vision for years to come, which will be incredibly useful internally for staff in planning future exhibitions and programs as well as externally, as the Museum will be able to utilize this plan to further engage with its community and advocate with funding organizations. The end results of the plan, the development of new exhibitions and programming, will further benefit the Museum by more effectively engaging the public, expanding its audience, and creating a more sustainable model for the Museum's future, thus leading to improved visitorship, membership, funding, and capacity.

### **Project Work Plan**

*What specific activities will you carry out and in what sequence?*

#### **1. Conduct Assessment of Current Interpretation**

For each section of the Museum, we will evaluate success, shortcomings, and spaces for improvement through walkthroughs and visitor surveys. The evaluations will consider issues of age of the exhibit, if the content is still applicable to the Museum and its goals, useability in terms of interactives and readability, and accessibility to audiences. We will also evaluate the Museum's programming. Part of this process will be bringing in our partner organizations to make their own notes and critiques. We will use these notes to discuss how we want to renovate and update those exhibits so they fall more in line with the mission and goals outlined in the Strategic Plan.

#### **2. Consultation and Creation with Content Developer and Exhibit Developer**

We will discuss with the content developer and exhibit designer our desired themes and interpretation for the Museum, taking into account desired additions to the Museum including inclusivity, a more streamlined experience, and more engagement for children. The content developer will write a narrative for the interpretation, and the exhibit designer will create a floorplan of the planned new exhibits that suit our desired interpretation. He will also work out a general schedule for the renovations and quote for the cost of each new section. We have worked with our exhibit designer before on the layout of our most recent permanent exhibit and plan to use his previous design as a loose template for the rest of the Museum, since part of our goal is to make the Museum feel more cohesive. This step will be the bulk of the work for the plan, during which time we will work closely with our consultants.

#### **3. Review the Plan and Report**

Once the consultants complete the plan, it will be shared with us and our partners for review. We will provide feedback that will be incorporated into a final report. The report will include a schedule outlining the sequence for development.

*What are the risks to the project and how will you mitigate them?*

If we have learned anything since March 2020, it is that we should plan for the unpredictable. Risks to the completion of this project are staff, partner, and consultant capacity and potential priority shifts. The creation of this plan is essential to the progress Museum staff hopes to make in the coming years, but we have all learned that it is impossible to predict what capacity will be several months from now when this project is set to begin. We will continue working to build relationships with the partners identified for this project to ensure they will still want to be involved. In order to plan for unpredictable capacity, we have tried to create a realistic timeline for the project and a plan for staff to devote resources to this project, understanding that might mean limiting other plans during the project period. Consultants can also have unpredictable schedules.

Another risk we need to consider is that the Museum is physically relatively small and any plans we make to redesign the exhibits have to take that into account. Because we want to greatly expand the content and themes of the Museum, we will have to make use of the space we have as efficiently as possible.

And then we must consider the ultimate feasibility of the plan we create. Money and time will always be issues, especially when considering extensive renovation of the Museum. Throughout the entire planning process, we must keep in mind how much each decision will cost to complete. Along with that, we are working with the knowledge that we are in the middle of the Erie Canal's 200th anniversary, which culminates in 2025, when we

celebrate the anniversary of the Canal's completion. One of our goals is to have at least some renovations completed by 2025 for the bicentennial celebrations. The pieces of the plan that we want to complete by 2025 must be feasible in that time frame. We will work with our consultant designers to make sure of that. We do, however, have the benefit of increased funding opportunities available during the bicentennial period.

*Who will plan, implement, and manage your project?*

Natalie Stetson, Primary Contact/Grants Administrator and Executive Director, Erie Canal Museum- Responsible for overseeing the overall completion of the project on time and on budget while also remaining within the scope of the grant. Stetson holds a BA in American Studies and Literature from the Honors College of Florida Atlantic University and an MA in Museum Studies from Syracuse University. She has served as Executive Director of the Erie Canal Museum since 2016.

Hannah Lewis, Project Director and Curator of Collection & Exhibitions, Erie Canal Museum- Responsible for organizing and overseeing the development of the plan. Other responsibilities include research and interpretation of exhibits. Lewis holds a BA in Archaeology, Technology, and Historical Structures from the University of Rochester, an MA in Archaeology from the University of Exeter, and an MA in Critical Museum Studies from the State University at Buffalo. She has significant experience with research and teaching, in a number of areas, including in her most recent project conducting archeological work on a 19th century African American settlement in Maryland with the aim of producing an exhibit and educational curriculum.

Derrick Pratt, Museum Educator, Erie Canal Museum- Responsibilities will include contacting speakers and panelists, coordinating volunteers, facilitating partnerships, and leading public programs. Pratt holds a dual BA in History and Social Studies Education from SUNY Cortland and an MA in Museum Studies from Syracuse University. He has been Museum Educator at the Erie Canal Museum since November 2019 and was previously Director of Programs at Chittenango Landing Canal Boat Museum for three years. In these roles he has extensive experience in utilizing best practices in the humanities to effectively educate a broad spectrum of audiences. He was also Interim Curator at the Erie Canal Museum for most of 2021.

Steve Feldman, Principal, Steve Feldman Designs - Steve Feldman Design, LLC (SFD) is a Sole Proprietor Limited Liability Company specializing in museum interpretation, planning and design. His focus is the interpretation of history and the natural sciences. SFD has successfully planned, designed, and implemented outstanding interpretive exhibitions and visitor experiences since its founding in 1988. Clients include governmental agencies, private institutions, state and local organizations and corporations.

Kathi Ann Brown, Founder and Principal, Milestone Historical Consultants- Brown will be the consultant content designer. A graduate of Bryn Mawr College (A.B.) and George Mason University (M.A.), Brown is a longtime member of the Society of American Archivists and the American Society of Journalists and Authors, and joined the Family Office Exchange (FOX) in 2019. In 1997 she was awarded the first Outstanding Alumnus Award by the Department of History at GMU in recognition of her professional achievements.

*What time, financial, personnel, and other resources will you need to carry out the activities?*

This project is scheduled to take about 11 months. It is expected that the Museum's Curator and Educator will spend at least 10% of their time and the Director about 5% of her time working on this project. The total project costs, including consultant fees and staff time are just over \$54,000. The Museum will be relying on the expertise of our consultants and partners to help steer the direction of the interpretive plan. It is essential that we work with people representing the stories we want to share and the audience we hope to serve. We've worked in the past two years to build trust with a diverse set of partners that will be needed to complete this project successfully. We feel confident that we have the resources necessary, either internally or through our partnerships and consultants, to complete this project.

*How will you track your progress toward achieving your intended results?*

At the end of each month, Museum staff will review with the exhibit and content consultants the results of that month's efforts and assess our progress within the larger project work plan. Part of that assessment with me to make sure our priorities are being incorporated into the final plan. On a bi-monthly basis, we will meet with our advisory committee made up of community partners. At those meetings, we will share progress being made and ask for feedback. Minutes from advisory committee meetings and information from the consultants will be used to update a progress report that will be evaluated each month by the Executive Director.

*How and with whom will you share your project's results?*

We will be sharing results with our advisory committee and community partners in draft form and then also once completed. The Museum's board will also have access to the plan. We will also share the plan with potential funders. In addition to being a guide for staff, the plan will be used as a fundraising tool.

### **Project Results**

*What are your project's intended results and how will they address the need you have identified?*

The intended result for our project is a completed interpretive plan that addresses a few key areas: 1) telling a more inclusive Erie Canal story through exhibits and programs, 2) expanding interpretation of the 1850 Syracuse Weighlock Building, 3) increasing engagement for children and families, 4) providing a more welcoming environment for marginalized populations, and 5) creating a more cohesive visitor experience. The plan will allow for strategic updates over the course of many years or as funding becomes available. We expect to implement some parts of the plan immediately with funding we already have available, but it is not our expectation that the entire plan will be implemented right away.

*How will knowledge, skills, behaviors, attitudes of the intended audience change?*

With the new interpretive plan, we will widen the range of our intended audience. This will mean that more people will be able to learn from us and our more comprehensive experience. We especially want to be able to provide a better experience to children and marginalized populations. The audience will gain a more nuanced view of the Erie Canal and how it influenced New York and the United States, outside of the generally accepted view. They will not only learn and widen their world views, but also have an enjoyable experience.

*What products will result from your project?*

The only anticipated product resulting from this project is the Erie Canal Museum Interpretive Plan. A less tangible product will be stronger partnerships within our community.

*How will you sustain the benefit(s) of your project beyond the conclusion of the period of performance?*

The benefits of this project will extend far beyond the grant period. In fact, the grant period is just the beginning. The partnerships we build upon during the creation of the interpretive plan will be sustained through future collaboration and information sharing. The implementation of the plan will be completed strategically over time. We have some funding already granted to us expressly for updating our exhibits to include more social history. That funding will be enough to get us started, but the plan will be used as a fundraising tool to secure the remaining funds needed to update the Museum. The long term benefits of this project will likely be felt for decades, as the work we do to create this plan and then the plan itself will steer the direction of the Museum's exhibits and programs for years to come.

|                                  | Sept | Oct | Nov | Dec | Jan | Feb | Mar | Apr | May | Jun | Jul | Aug |
|----------------------------------|------|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|
| Review of Exhibits               |      |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |
| Initial Meeting with Consultants |      |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |
| Content Designer Work            |      |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |
| Exhibit Designer Work            |      |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |
| Review of Plan and Publishing    |      |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |