

**Closing Up Shop:
Strategies for Partners & Communities When Historic Sites Close**
OAH / NCPH Thursday, April 19, 2012 – 3:30 PM

- Panel Chair: Chuck Arning, National Park Service / JHC Blackstone River Valley National Heritage Corridor Chuck_Arning@nps.gov
- Panelist: Barbara Franco, Gettysburg Seminary Ridge Museum bfranco@seminaryridge.org
- Panelist: Bob Beatty, American Association for State & Local History beatty@aaslh.org
- Panelist: Sheila Kirshbaum, Tsongas Industry History Center Sheila_Kirschbaum@uml.edu
- Panelist: Bruce Beesley, Indiana State Museum & Historic Sites bbeesley@indianamuseums.org

Closing Up Shop: Ideas and Best Practices

Bruce Beesley

Indiana Historic Sites

bbeesley@indianamuseums.org

- 1) **All politics are local.** Closing an historic site, especially if it is supported by government at any level, will end up with political ramifications. Surprisingly, many politicians understand IF you talk to them early. Be up front--show them the budget/attendance numbers that led you to the decision to close the site or move it along. They might actually help you find a new owner.
- 2) **Who cares?** When the numbers turn unsustainably bad make a list of those who care. Who are the stakeholders--or think they are? Folks who have never darkened the door will publicly bewail the closing. Ask them to contribute. Ask them to join in a solution.
- 3) **Where does the stuff go?** An exit strategy must involve not only the buildings but the collection, archives, props, objects, and exhibits also. Offering to hand over a fully functioning site, with its collections, etc intact, is a strong attraction if you are seeking new owners.
- 4) **It will take forever.** It will take months, maybe years for you to close or transfer a site to new owners. If government owned, the bureaucracy of transferring gov't property is mind-boggling. You will wait for the monthly/quarterly meeting and budget cycle of every entity involved with the closure or transfer. Meanwhile the bad publicity continues.
- 5) **The story goes on.** Just because the need is to close or transfer a site does not mean your institution must give up on that theme or story. Find other venues, develop other exhibits elsewhere, including electronic ones, that can reach more audiences than the physically limited site ever could before.

Closing Up Shop: Ideas and Best Practices

Sheila Kirschbaum
Tsongas Industrial History Center
Sheila_Kirschbaum@uml.edu

- 1) **Form partnerships, and nurture them well.** Being able to show that your operation well addresses the core mission of each partner is perhaps as valuable as the partnership itself, since in tight budget times anything that does not seem critical to the mission is vulnerable to cuts.
- 2) **Build and nurture a network of leaders of key audiences.** Use the network to identify trends in the field and prepare to counteract possible threats to visitation or program participation.
- 3) **Keep tabs on your audience by collecting relevant data and analyzing it often.** Take steps to reach out to your target audience as soon as you detect some falling-off of visitation. At the same time, examine your programs to see whether they have kept up with larger trends. Revise as necessary, and re-advertise.
- 4) **Interpret your content area broadly and communicate the breadth of what your organization covers**—without watering down your identity.
- 5) **Collaborate with other cultural organizations** to accomplish mutually beneficial projects and to avoid duplication of programs or exhibits. Hire wisely, seek competent volunteers, and offer continuous staff professional development.

Closing Up Shop: Ideas and Best Practices

Barbara Franco

Gettysburg Seminary Ridge Museum

bfranco@seminaryridge.org

- 1) **Know what business you are in.** The decision to close the Heurich House in Washington DC and not to continue to operate it as a house museum once the new facility at the City Museum was completed was based on mission of the Historical Society.
- 2) **If you have to turn a facility over to another entity, have realistic expectations about standards, etc.** In Pennsylvania, many of the sites were taken over from local groups who had been running all volunteer organizations. The degree of professionalization that the state brought to operations also made them unsustainable when money was scarce.
- 3) **Closing a site costs money too.** Keep in mind the cost of mothballing -- preserving versus operating and interpreting. In PA the cost of mothballing sites gave us a base line to look at what it cost to simply preserve a building with no public access. This became the basis for continued support for new partners. Fort Pitt Museum and Erie Maritime Museum.
- 4) **Communication is essential.** What does "closed" mean? Difference between closing to the public and closing down and walking away. In PA we experienced a lot of confusion about what it meant to close to the public temporarily versus permanently. We also saw some Friends groups that spent all their reserves to keep a site open during the winter on principle and then had a shortage of money to operate during the busy school season. Managing strategic closings and reopenings can be helpful in saving money, attracting press and support. Brandywine Battlefield would be the example.
- 5) **Enlist the help of the community and identify the constituents for a site.** The essential role that the community constituents play-- especially in state-owned properties. Example would be how the Friends of the Erie Maritime Museum and Brig Niagara reacted versus Friends of Old Economy Village in Pennsylvania.

Closing Up Shop: Ideas and Best Practices

Chuck Arning

National Park Service / JH Chafee Blackstone River Valley National Heritage Corridor

Chuck_Arning@nps.gov

Be Bold. Think Big. Be Creative. Don't wait for the better times, create the better times. In difficult times, those organizations that pull their teams together [teams meaning staff, stakeholders, partners and their communities] to create bold concepts that engage their community / their regions will survive.

“Build a network before you need a network.” Develop a presence in your community. Be a player. Be involved. Make yourself part of the community. Grow a network of individuals and organizations who know and understand your organization and its role in the community. In times of crisis, re-educating the community to your museum / historic sites significance is a project way too late to make a difference.

Collaborate! Collaborate! Collaborate! Be Part of the Community! There is a theme here - connecting your site to the whole is a strategy for success. Share credit. Develop themes that can involve the broader community - allow everyone to share in telling a story - each different perspective brings opportunities for new avenues for dialogue.

Make your site a catalyst for change - for new ideas - for new awarenesses. As the complexity of our world continues to grow, as we continue to struggle with what that means to ourselves, our families, our communities, our nation - can you turn your site / your museum into a place for dialogue, into a “safe place for unsafe ideas”, a gathering place for thought that reflects your mission. Examples: Lower Eastside Tenement Museum in NYC, Harriet Beecher Stow House in Hartford, CT.

The Challenge is how to find out how your site / museum from the Past can help us understand and succeed in a challenging Future. Making yourself relevant is not a catch phrase, but rather is a new way of looking at your collections and seeing how they can provide guide posts for our communities as we try to move, in an increasingly complex world, and engage our communities in that discussion.