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Who Supports the Humanities in Maine?:

The Benefits (and Challenges) of Volunteerism

by Libby Bischof

When Amy Aldredge, the executive director of the Yarmouth Historical Society (YHS), was getting ready to move her organization into the newly built Yarmouth History Center on East Elm Street last year, she consulted a local moving service for an estimate. After receiving a quote that would have been a bit steep for her organization, Aldredge called upon a different kind of local resource—a high school sports team. She put a call out to the athletic department, and in response, the boys and girls track teams of Yarmouth High School showed up and helped move the society out of its temporary location in the library and down the street to the new History Center in a matter of hours. Their volunteering of time and labor saved the organization thousands of dollars, and Aldredge remarked, “I don’t know how else we would have done it.”

The people of Lincolnville were faced with a similar problem in 2012—only on a much larger scale—when the community decided to move forward with the renovation of a historic school house and turn it into a town library. Hundreds of community members turned out to volunteer their time and they literally pulled the old school house across the street to its new location. (Watch the video here—it’s remarkable: <http://www.lincolnvillelibrary.org/about.html#about>). These examples of community members and student athletes pitching in to assist local organizations in a move are but two of thousands of examples of how the humanities in Maine are deeply dependent on the work of a broad spectrum of volunteers—from high school students to retired professionals.

According to the most recent information (2013) from the Corporation for National and Community Service, 32.5 percent of Maine residents volunteer annually, performing 40 million hours of service, ranking the state 13 out of the 50 in the nation.¹ Included in this tremendous outpouring of civic energy are the thousands of boys and girls, women and men, amateurs and professionals, who give generously of their time to hundreds of local organizations that support and promote the humanities in Maine—especially local

libraries, museums, historical societies, and friends groups organized around preservation.

When I was asked to write this article, I quickly came to realize that the best sources of information about volunteerism and the humanities in Maine would not necessarily come from statistics, journals, and other scholarly references, but rather, directly from those who volunteer and organize volunteers around the state. As a result, this article draws heavily on interviews that I conducted in the winter of 2014–2015 with paid and volunteer staff at museums, historical societies, libraries, and friends groups, as well as others who volunteer their time to these organizations in a variety of ways. According to the latest data (FY 2015, first quarter) from the federal Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS), Maine has 556 museums—the second highest per capita in the nation.² In his article “Call it ‘Museumland’” in the *Maine Sunday Telegram* (September 7, 2014), Ray Routhier noted that of these 556 museums, 67 percent are categorized as historical societies, history museums, or historic preservation groups. The majority of these are all-volunteer organizations and would not exist without dedicated people intent on preserving and presenting their history for a wider public audience. In interview after interview with volunteers and those who coordinate them at a wide variety of organizations, a few common themes emerged. First among them was this sentiment regarding the importance of volunteerism in the state: organizations simply could not do the work that they do without their large cadre of volunteers. From historic house tours, to docenting, research, archival preservation, and cataloging, communications and outreach to members, fundraising, collections management, educational programming, data entry, website development, and even financial management—volunteers work behind the scenes and at the helm of cultural institutions throughout the state, and, in many cases, are on the front lines of both preservation and outreach. Simply put, without the high level of volunteerism that exists within the state of Maine, the general public would not

have access to the remarkable variety of historical resources and cultural programming that currently exists. Volunteers enrich the humanities in Maine in countless ways, perhaps most importantly by increasing access to history, literature, art, and culture in major cities, towns, and our lightly settled rural areas.

Jessica Skwire Routhier, past president of Maine Archives and Museums (MAM), said in a recent interview:

volunteers are an absolutely essential part of the way that museums, historical societies, and other collecting institutions function in Maine. Everybody here is understaffed and underfunded, and volunteers help to fill those gaps so that museums and other cultural organizations can deliver services to their visitors and patrons. They do everything from painting the gallery walls, hanging the holiday decorations, and stuffing envelopes to very high-level work that would be done by professionals in larger and wealthier organizations: cataloging objects, updating websites, leading tours, and so much more.

Relying on volunteers for traditional volunteer work as well as for work that would typically be done by paid professionals in wealthier institutions is not, however, without its challenges. To this end, another theme that emerged in conversations with both volunteers and professional staff members at a variety of institutions centered around the difficulties of over-reliance on volunteers to do professional work—especially in terms of archives and collections management. Jamie Kingman Rice, director of library services at the Maine Historical Society (MHS), explained some of these challenges: “We cannot always rely too heavily on volunteers to do collections work as we might lose some of the standards of the field.” She further noted that most of the materials her volunteers work with are “irreplaceable,” so, a certain “level of exposure and supervision” is key. Often volunteering is a trial-and-error process. It can take considerable time for volunteers to find organizations as well as appropriate tasks at those institutions that suit their interests, skills, and available time. Moreover, there is a careful balance that must be struck; just as volunteers donate their time, they can also take it away in an instant, often without the notice that a paid employee typically gives.

Jeanne McGowan, president of the all-volunteer Georgetown Historical Society (GHS), voiced another

common sentiment about the challenges of volunteerism in the twenty-first century: “People no longer join an organization just to join an organization. We have to capture people where they are and work with their schedules, oftentimes allowing for a ‘plug in and step out’ volunteer experience, as well as a sustained volunteer experience. As a result, we must constantly restructure our expectations based on volunteer availability.” She added the caveat that when working with volunteers, it is always essential to remember that their “reward is a job well done, not a paycheck.” Despite challenges of recruiting, training, organizing, and managing the valuable time of volunteers, without fail, each organization and individual I spoke with lauded the contributions of volunteers and cited their work as essential in day-to-day operations. Aldredge, for instance, praised the tireless work of one of her volunteers at the YHS who, in the last two years, has essentially caught the society up on five years of tedious collection data entry into Past Perfect, a standard database used for collections management. Because of this volunteer’s tireless efforts, when Maine Public Broadcasting Network producer Bob Greene recently visited the society to do research for his television program, Aldredge was able to give him seven pages of Past Perfect data on the collection he was interested in. For Aldredge, volunteers allow YHS to function more efficiently, and consistently: “they make our organization look good.”

While larger Maine organizations have paid professional staff of various sizes, many also rely on volunteers for a variety of important tasks. The MHS is no exception, particularly in its Brown Research Library. According to Rice, “there is no way we would ever get the amount of work we get done without volunteers. They help from beginning acquisitions, to processing, to getting patrons materials. We would not be able to fully function without our volunteers.” In any given month, Rice manages between 15 and 20 volunteers who work with the library’s collections, some of whom have been volunteering for years, others for a season or semester. Her volunteers range from a 16-year-old high school student to retired folks who have time during the day to give to their work at the MHS.

Rice includes students doing unpaid internships (for their resume or for college credit) in the category of volunteers, as they also donate their time. Each season, she hosts interns from local colleges and universities, as well as graduate students completing masters in library science degrees. Rice herself started as a volunteer at

MHS in the summer of 2002, after receiving her B.A. in history from the University of Southern Maine. When she works with interns and other student volunteers, she notes that it is important to have defined start and end dates for internships, as well as clear expectations and a specific project for the intern to work on—so that they can return to their home institution and say, “I completed this project.” Coming up with these projects can sometimes be challenging, as Rice wants them to be interesting and valuable to her interns for their own professional development. For those reasons, and because supervision takes a great deal of time and organization on the part of paid staff, she limits the numbers of interns she takes on at any given time.

These sentiments were echoed by Cathleen Miller, curator of the Maine Women Writers Collection (MWWC) at the University of New England, who noted, “I don’t want to take someone on as an intern if I don’t have a useful project for them and their professional development.” Miller is the only full-time staff member at the MWWC. She has a half-time assistant and a half-time cataloger, who also assists with digitization initiatives. She has a core of three regular volunteers and often takes on an intern each semester. Her volunteers tend to range from people in their fifties into their eighties, and they are often retired professionals with strong connections to the collections and who care about women’s lives, stories, and history. Miller tries to coordinate her volunteers and interns, when possible, so they are working on the same day, for ease of supervision since the management of volunteer projects can take a great deal of time and effort. In addition to their assistance in the processing of collections, Miller values the passion of her volunteers and their connection to the collections as an important outreach tool. One of the many benefits of volunteerism for her is that “people in the community have a stake in what we are doing and will continue to see value in preserving and perpetuating these collections for future generations.”

People volunteer their time in service of the humanities in Maine for many reasons. High school students in Maine often have to complete community service as part of their graduation requirements; local college and university students increasingly are required to do service-learning or internships in conjunction with their coursework; practicing humanities professionals frequently donate research assistance and expertise, or give public lectures on topics of interest to local organizations and communities; many community

members feel a sense of civic pride and want to help preserve local history; working professionals are looking for enjoyable activities that feed their passions; and retired men and women wish to stay active in their communities and donate their long-cultivated professional skills to organizations that need their assistance. The reasons for donating one’s time are as varied as the people who volunteer.

People volunteer their time in service of the humanities in Maine for many reasons.

On a recent research trip to the MHS, I had the opportunity to speak with Kue John Lor, who has been volunteering at MHS for a little over a year and has catalogued thousands of previously unprocessed glass-plate negatives in the library’s collections. Lor has a B.S. in history and a master’s degree in museum studies and would like to one day be employed as the curator or director of a museum or historical society. He moved to southern Maine a couple of years ago from the Berkshires, where he was working and interning in small museums. While he currently makes his living working in retail, he gives his time and expertise to the MHS partly because of his desire to preserve and promote history and partly because he sees such volunteer time as an investment in his future career. His volunteer position is an important opportunity to network with society’s staff and visiting researchers and scholars, and his projects there add to his resume. Lor is also on the board of the Portland-based Museum of African Culture, another organization that relies heavily on volunteers to sustain its operations, write grants, and keep the doors open. Lor loves hands-on work and interacting with the public and will continue to volunteer his time at both organizations.

For many undergraduate and graduate student volunteers and interns, volunteerism is an essential form of career exploration in the humanities. Working as a docent, processing special collections materials, doing research for patrons—all of these activities can help a student to decide whether or not to pursue a graduate degree in the humanities and related fields such as

museum studies and library science. In this way museums and libraries that host interns and volunteers do a tremendous service by mentoring those who will pick up the mantle of outreach, interpretation, and preservation in the future. Such relationships require a mutual investment of time and effort on behalf of the student and the organization, but they are also mutually beneficial. An influx of youthful energy through volunteerism can also be a boon to organizations and something that many friends groups, boards of directors, museums, libraries, and historical societies are constantly trying to tap into.

Certainly young working professionals, many of whom are also raising children, have major demands on their time, but if civic engagement and volunteerism are instilled throughout their high school and undergraduate years, it will be easier for organizations to recruit new volunteers and board members. If volunteers in their twenties and thirties are initially asked to help on specific short-term projects and are made to feel that their efforts are valuable to the organization, humanities organizations will be more likely to attract and retain these essential new partners. Cultivating a younger cadre of volunteers and board members often requires more targeted outreach campaigns and sharing opportunities for volunteering on social media networks such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. These active recruitment efforts, however, can pay off in terms of attracting a broad cross-section of generational interest in programming and event planning, as well as new memberships and networks for fundraising.

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An essential fact of volunteerism and the humanities in Maine is that many small museums, historical societies, and libraries throughout the state are managed and operated entirely by volunteers. The GHS is one such organization. According to McGowan, there are 14 current board members, including officers, and about 35 regular volunteers who keep the society open

year-round on Wednesdays and Saturdays. Volunteers also coordinate seasonal programming and exhibitions from May to September, the busy season for the society, as well as organize and process collections, fundraise, conduct outreach to members through newsletters and email, and countless other activities. In 2007, GHS moved into a new building, which, after much discussion, the organization decided to name the Georgetown Historical Society Center for History and Culture because, according to McGowan, “naming the building was a deliberate act to say who we are. History happens every day. We focus on the past, but we also program around contemporary issues and celebrate art and music.” The building has become a real community center for the small town—with dozens of programs each year on contemporary environmental issues, new historical research, as well as talks by local artists and musical performances. The basement has even been used to teach local elementary school students the art of wooden boat building. For McGowan, an all-volunteer institution benefits from the infectious enthusiasm of volunteers that is immensely fulfilling. She notes, “people come to work because they think it is important and they enjoy it. Volunteers bring an extra level of enthusiasm to tasks because of their interest.” When I asked McGowan why she continues to volunteer so much of her own time to head up such an active local organization, she told me:

it’s important. I enjoy it. It’s a service to the community. I work with a great bunch of people. Before I was even on the board I was brought in as a citizen of Georgetown to help with long term planning and reorganization and saw an opportunity to use my skill sets doing this interesting type of work. It’s still interesting to me.

Feelings of civic pride, interest in local history and culture, and a belief in the importance of community service are all essential elements that underpin the tremendous time, energy, and commitment of volunteer work that makes hundreds of organizations like GHS possible.

Jeanne Benedict, the only full time staff member at the Henry D. Moore public library in Steuben, Maine, highlighted another important element that makes the volunteer experience attractive to many Mainers, especially in more rural communities. She reminds us that volunteering can also be an important social experience, “a time to visit with friends, as well as meet new people

in the community.” For some of her volunteers, it is also a way to “keep their hand in,” and continue to keep their minds active in retirement. The Moore library is a hub of activity for the community of just over 1,000 residents, and, according to Benedict, “the library is a busier and more dynamic place because of volunteers,” both those who have assisted in a recent major project to barcode all of the library’s more than 14,000 items so their catalog could go online, as well as those who make possible community dinners, summer reading programs for children, musical performances, art shows, and community movie nights. Libraries and historical societies, particularly through programmatic outreach, are a critical point of humanities access for Mainers throughout the state. Because of their community orientation, they are able to understand and meet the needs of their patrons and residents, as well as introduce new ideas and experiences.

Kim Smith, of the Presque Isle Historical Society (PIHS), another all-volunteer organization, echoed many of McGowan’s and Benedict’s sentiments. Smith was recognized by the New England Museum Association in 2014 as one of six outstanding practitioners within the large association, particularly for her “tireless dedication to the many and varied facets of the Historical Society’s role in the community.” According to Smith, the PIHS relies on about 50 active volunteers who give more than 2,000 collective hours to the society each year, the benefits of which are numerous both for the volunteers and the organization itself. As Smith explains, “for me personally (I am the volunteer with the most hours acting essentially as a volunteer director with over 1,000 hours annually in addition to working full-time), I find it very rewarding as I feel that I am giving back to my community on a daily basis.” Furthermore, “it allows us to continue to offer our quality family programs as we simply do not have the budget to hire staff. The challenges, of course, are finding volunteers.” In a similar vein to the challenges discussed earlier, Smith articulated some of the challenges involved in the actual preservation of historic material, “once you find someone willing to volunteer, you must train them in proper archival, digitization, and other techniques. For many, that is too involved.”

Many of the individuals with whom I spoke said their organizations hold yearly volunteer recognition events, which is an important way of publicly expressing gratitude; others have annual awards, or invite volunteers to write articles, blog posts, and do other forms

of outreach to showcase their knowledge and their work. Each year, the governor’s office recognizes both individuals and organizations with the Governor’s Awards for Service and Volunteerism.³ Not only do these volunteers and organizations add to Maine’s tremendous quality of place; they preserve Maine’s heritage and ways of life that would otherwise disappear from public memory and consciousness.

Barb Hager, president of the all-volunteer group Spirits Alive, who preserve Eastern Cemetery, Portland’s 1668 burial ground, spoke passionately about the importance of preservation as well as education and outreach:

our projects reach out to the community to educate and raise consciousness about this gem, and our projects serve the community by aggregating and preserving valuable genealogical and historical information. As an all-volunteer organization, we have inventoried, sketched, mapped, measured and now are photographing every headstone—some 2,800 in all. Our research brings alive the history of Portland, and our volunteer Docents share these wonderful stories through public tours, events, and lectures.

To facilitate this preservation work and outreach, tapping into the passion and interests of volunteers, and cultivating multiple strengths and skill sets on boards and within organizations, is key to sustenance, and to growth.

Nearly 30 years ago, in “Humanities in America,” Lynne Cheney, then president of the National Endowment for the Humanities, spoke of the public humanities as a “parallel school,” for citizens, enriching education and discourse and awareness throughout the nation (Cheney 1988). “The Heart of the Matter,” a report by the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, argues that “public programs and cultural institutions, connecting people of all ages and backgrounds, provide opportunities for contact, growth, and collaboration—the very essence of a civil society. They should be included among our highest educational priorities” (2013: 53). In Maine, as throughout the nation, dedicated volunteers support and contribute to the public humanities in a multitude of ways, as detailed throughout this article. In the giving their time, volunteers provide a brighter future for Maine, and an intellectually richer, more culturally engaged, and more civic-minded citizenry. To continue this important work, we, who care deeply about the humanities and the quality of our

public life, must ask ourselves: How can I further the mission of the public humanities in Maine? Where will I give my time? 🐞

ENDNOTES

1. Corporation for National and Community Service. 2013. Volunteering and Civic Engagement in Maine, Trends and Highlights Overview. <http://www.volunteeringinamerica.gov/ME>
2. Institute of Museum and Library Services. 2015. FY 2015, 1st quarter. Museum Universe Data File. http://www.imls.gov/research/museum_universe_data_file.aspx
3. To learn more about these awards, and to nominate an individual or organization, visit the website <http://www.volunteermaine.org/governors-service-awards/>

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Here in the Georgetown Historical Society library, volunteers are mailing the bi-monthly The Georgetown Tide to the 500 GHS member households. (Photo courtesy of the Georgetown Historical Society).



The Lincolnville Community Library opened on February 1, 2014, in this renovated one-room schoolhouse built originally in 1849. The opening date was just 15 months after nearly 200 community members helped pull the old building across Main Street to a formerly vacant lot (seen here). A large team of skilled volunteers and professional contractors worked together to turn the old schoolhouse into Lincolnville’s new library. (Photo courtesy of Lincolnville Community Library)