

Blue Ribbon Committee for Historic Archives  
Meeting Minutes July 14, 2023

Attending: Richard Candee, Alan Cohen, Charles Doleac, Thomas Hardiman, Jeff Keefe, Vincent Lombardi, Kristen Peterson, Susan Sterry, Emma Stratton, Thomas Watson

Absent: Elizabeth Farish, Christine Friese

Meeting was called to order at 9:07

A motion passed to approve the minutes of the 06/09/2023 Meeting

Guest Presentation by David Choate

- Summary of the general state and availability of commercial real estate in Portsmouth and surrounding communities
- The expense and high demand would require the need to be “ready to go” for any purchase or lease
- Advantage of City owned property
- There was a general discussion of the needs and potential location of a facility
- Explore GSA land at Pease

Review of the take-aways of the June 28 Public input meetings

Review of Gerry Wards email detailing specific archival needs of various types of materials.

Discussion of written submissions submitted by committee members.

Meeting adjourned at 10:16

From Susan Sterry

July 13, 2023

"The taskforce is charged with exploring options to create a public/private archive to protect documents related to the city's past, present and future."

The major issue that launched the task force in November of 2022 was the City of Portsmouth's lack of space to store documents. The city has mandated documents and historical documents going back to the seventeen hundreds era that need a home. Both materials should have well organized and proper archival storage to protect them for the future.

The city has to store documents from city hall, police department, fire stations, department of public works and the library. Currently each of these locations is bursting at the seams. These items are not stored in optimal conditions. Unfortunately, historical items have disappeared in the past due to not having a central repository where items would be entered into an inventory for tracking and quick access to items.

A properly designed archive would address all the issues created by the city's storage problems. In today's economic environment, it would be costly for the city to build and to maintain an archive. In the past the city has researched a possible partnership with local historical organizations. It did not produce a positive outcome for an archive.

The Portsmouth Athenaeum, Strawberry Banke, and the Historical Society are the major private organizations collecting and preserving Portsmouth History. Citizens and smaller organizations have deposited their Portsmouth collections with these organizations for safe keeping.

These Historical groups are bursting at the seams too. Many have their collections scattered in off site storage. Artifacts are stored in damp basements or hot attics. Access is time consuming, inefficient and exposes items to possible damage each time it has to be transported back to the central home of the organization.

The City of Portsmouth, Portsmouth Athenaeum, Strawberry Banke and The Historical Society currently are facing the same major issue of lack of storage. Every organization wants to preserve the incredible history of Portsmouth. Each organization has limited funds as well as limited space.

Now is the time to sit down together and create a public/private archive. Organizations are receptive to the idea and are willing to come to the table to discuss the idea. A well designed collaborative archive benefits everyone financially and offers better preservation for items in a central location.

MAYOR'S BLUE RIBBON TASK FORCE ON HISTORICAL ARCHIVES:

**Report Sections *proposed***

1. Executive Summary **Jeff & Vince**
2. General Information, including the history of prior efforts **Tom W & Tom H**
3. Current Condition **Elizabeth & Emma**
  - a. Example: Lack of appropriate storage, quality of conditions, accommodation of diverse storage needs, etc. (see Tom's Collections Assessment)
4. Description of Need/Issue
  - a. Assessment **Elizabeth & Emma**
    - i. Member Organizations (include collections, scope and special needs):
      1. City of Portsmouth
      2. The Portsmouth Athenaeum
      3. Strawberry Banke Museum
      4. The Portsmouth Historical Society, and
      5. Such other entities as appropriate
      6. Private Collections
  - b. Rationale **Kristen & Alan**

The history of Portsmouth is:

    1. Nationally recognized as important to the history of the Country and State
    2. Integral to the cultural identity of the city
    3. A major tourism draw
    4. Important to the economic viability of the city
    5. Studied and documented by Scholars from all over the world

6. A repository of information about the people and cultures who have lived in Portsmouth (Piscataqua region)
7. Important for how we shape Portsmouth in the future

5. The Issue **Susan & Tom H**

- a. The city and many organizations (and individuals) currently have and store relevant materials to the history of Portsmouth.
- b. The city and these organizations do not have adequate facilities to properly store and preserve these materials.

6. Recommendations/Goals **Christine**

- a. How the City and Portsmouth private historical organizations can join together to create a facility that meets the needs of archiving important records, with a recommended assessment.
- b. Ongoing, long-range committee to assist with this initiative moving forward.
- c. How the pertinent materials are identified and judged as vital; what should not or cannot be included? What qualifies as Portsmouth history? Flow of ongoing acquired objects.
- d. What archiving methods should be used for each type of material to assure each type is protected effectively?
- e. What space will be required for such an effort? How will the space be identified, procured and maintained?
- f. Scale of acceptable objects for archiving.
- g. How will the ongoing efforts be funded? What are the opportunities for establishing trust funds, local and state monies and private contributions?
- h. How will the archives ongoing leadership and management be structured and implemented?
- i. Structure/architectural needs
- j. Legal

7. Conclusion **unclaimed as of 4/28/23 – assigned later toward the end**



Vincent Lombardi <councilorvincelombardi@gmail.com>

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## Fwd: Large storage facilities

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Emma Stratton <emma@portsmouthhistory.org>  
To: Vincent Lombardi <councilorvincelombardi@gmail.com>

Thu, Jul 6, 2023 at 2:36 PM

Hi Vince:

I'm forwarding along an email from our curator who has worked at many institutions with off-site storage facilities. The details he provides are a bit ahead of where we are in the process, but his insight and notes are valid (for example, considering a loading dock!). I wanted to share it with you while it's fresh in my mind.

Thanks!  
Emma

----- Forwarded message -----

From: **Gerry Ward** <[gward@portsmouthhistory.org](mailto:gward@portsmouthhistory.org)>  
Date: Wed, Jul 5, 2023 at 11:30 AM  
Subject: Large storage facilities  
To: Emma Stratton <[emma@portsmouthhistory.org](mailto:emma@portsmouthhistory.org)>  
Cc: Molly Liolios <[molly@portsmouthhistory.org](mailto:molly@portsmouthhistory.org)>

I am sure that you and the committee have considered the points mentioned below, but I can't resist passing them along, all based on my experiences at the Garvan Furniture Study at Yale (1976-83) and our giant secret off-site storage (in Randolph) at the MFA (2006 or so to the present). Both share some of the characteristics of the HNE facility in Haverhill.

The Furniture Study was mainly a large open space (once a bakery) of about 10,000 sq. feet, where ca. 800 pieces of American furniture and a few other things could be arranged by form (clocks, chairs, chests, etc.) in long rows from front to back. The ceiling height was such that smaller objects could be stored on two-level shelving (as here and there at HNE). The taller chests-on-chests, desk and bookcases, clocks, etc., just stood on the floor or platforms. In essence it was open storage long before the Luce Center at the Met came along.

The MFA facility is a repurposed pharmaceutical manufacturing building and I have no idea how big it is except that it is large. Suffice it to say it holds all the American and European (and a few Asian) decorative arts objects (except precious metals) that are not on view, totaling many thousands of objects. (Textiles and fashion arts are not included.) So basically it has furniture and woodwork, glass, ceramics, and some base metals. The very high ceiling

allows for storage on shelving that has maybe 6-7 levels, requiring lifts of various sorts to get things down. Small objects usually remain boxed in their shipping crates.

In addition to the actual storage space for objects, good security, environmental controls, good lighting, etc., the good parts of each of these facilities included:

- easy access via a large loading dock and/or freight elevator
- office space/equipment for a curator, facilities people, or whomever staffs the place
- office space for object files (obsolete these days)
- photography studio big enough to shoot large objects professionally when needed
- dedicated space, either a separate space or an area within the storage area, for object examination by staff and visitors, with doors large enough for large objects to be brought in if need be
- a clean conservation space for at least minor treatments (Yale had a full furniture lab, but that was a site-specific need)
- the Furniture Study had a small reception area where a few objects could be displayed and where classes/groups of ca. 25-30 people could meet on occasion for lectures, workshops, etc.
- good parking for staff and visitors

Some of the "bad" parts include:

- lack of accessibility for the MFA site: it is ca. 19 miles from the Museum down the Southeast Expressway, so casual visits are not possible; the Yale site (in my time--they have subsequently moved) was only about 75 yards from the main Museum
- Inability to easily retrieve or look at objects for examination because they are boxed up or 50 feet in the air or no staff is available to retrieve them for weeks on end (MFA)
- Long delays in retrieving objects to put on view when need be (MFA)
- Below ground (Yale); never put anything you want to keep in the basement
- Public access only by appointment (both facilities); so-called "open storage" as at the Met or the Flynt Center at Historic Deerfield is a vast improvement, as it at least allows visual access for the public without an appointment. Online databases with images are only a partial solution to the access issue, although a good step.

One additional component to consider might be the inclusion of a small silver vault, which is sort of a standard part of storage for gold, silver, jewelry, and other rare and valuable objects that usually need good clean air in particular. No institution in town, to my knowledge, has much of a silver collection (we have ca. 50-55 pieces and SBM probably has ca. 125-50) but most of what everyone has tends to be in storage for security/environmental issues. One could easily

create a small secure vault within a larger storage area and perhaps provide it with good environmental controls so that things could be stored in cabinets without the need for bagging. Compact shelving works well in these spaces, of course.

Most places also have a small receiving space where newly arriving objects can be stored for a bit to make sure they are bug and mold free etc., to avoid introducing critters to the whole building. (Thinking of Molly and her spiders here.)

As I say, none of this is news, but I enjoyed thinking about these spaces and what they might add to your committee's discussion, which I suspect is not much.

One other point: it would be good to have each institution 'edit' their collections before (as opposed to after) moving them to a new storage facility. Here I am thinking mainly about us. No sense paying to move things you don't want to keep.

And, of course, allow room for growth over time. Collections that don't grow are basically dead.

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Gerald W.R. Ward  
Consulting Curator  
Editor, Portsmouth Marine Society Press  
Portsmouth Historical Society  
P.O. Box 728  
gward@portsmouthhistory.org

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Emma Stratton (*she/her*)



PORTSMOUTH  
HISTORICAL SOCIETY  
10 MIDDLE STREET, PORTSMOUTH, NH 03801  
603.436.8433 • WWW.PORTSMOUTHISTORY.ORG

Executive Director  
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