



**CITY OF PORTSMOUTH  
BLUE RIBBON TASK FORCE TO STUDY THE  
ESTABLISHMENT OF A PUBLIC/PRIVATE  
HISTORICAL ARCHIVE**

**FINAL REPORT AND  
RECOMMENDATIONS**

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## **BLUE RIBBON TASK FORCE ON HISTORICAL ARCHIVES**

In September 2022, Portsmouth, New Hampshire’s Mayor and City Council established the Blue Ribbon Task Force on Historical Archives, charged with exploring options to create a public/private Archive to preserve documents and materials related to the city’s past, present and future. Committee membership includes representatives from the city, the community and non-profit organizations whose missions relate directly to protecting Portsmouth’s history. What follows is the rationale, historical context, summary of current conditions, explanation of need, economic and cultural considerations, potential funding sources and recommendations for next steps.

*See Appendix A*





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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**A** Portsmouth Public/Private Archive would preserve and provide access to the administrative records and historical and cultural materials of Portsmouth for the benefit of present and future generations. The keepers of the Archive would be committed to providing archival services to member organizations by organizing and maintaining them in a secure, climate-controlled and fire-protected environment, making these Archives available to researchers, students and the general public through digital and physical means.

## **Benefits for the City**

In addition to meeting modern record keeping requirements for the city, a Portsmouth Archive would encourage engagement in our community from those who live, work and recreate here. It would provide access to all who are interested in the history of our city, both by the preservation of records and by fostering partnerships with public and private organizations. Portsmouth records and materials are considered primary resources for scholars studying the early development of our country, including the geography and populations that preceded European settlement. Many individuals come to study their own heritage and ancestry. Heritage tourism is an important economic driver for the region; Portsmouth's rich history and extensive cultural resources attract thousands of people who come to explore, learn and enjoy the city and all it has to offer. Preserving primary resources and making them widely available is critical to the identity of the city and its future.

## **The Collections**

There are four initial stakeholders in the Portsmouth Public/Private Archive: the City of Portsmouth, Portsmouth Athenaeum, Portsmouth Historical Society and Strawberry Banke Museum. The Task Force anticipates additional stakeholders, including smaller institutions and organizations, as well as individual collectors of significant historical documents and objects.

Their collections provide a window into New Hampshire history from indigenous inhabitants to the European settlement of our nation in the 17th century through the economic and social development of the 20th century. Visitors come to Portsmouth from across the country and around the world to explore this history and development. While the Athenaeum contains private documents of the colonial era, the city Archive contains most of the known public record directly related to Portsmouth.

The same may be said of subsequent centuries; the 19th and 20th centuries represent evidence of the growth and economic changes after the War of 1812, the impact of industrialization and the maritime and naval history of the port.

Online and in-person requests for documents and photographs from the Athenaeum's manuscript, ephemera and photographic collections suggest that even greater online access to a broad range of resources through collaboration will find a ready market among family history researchers, genealogists, as well as both academic and public history scholars from around the world.

**The City of Portsmouth** has many documents and records that New Hampshire state statutes require the city to preserve. But other materials in the city's hands are important to understanding our 400-year documented history. They reveal the people who have lived in the Piscataqua region, and have contributed to our changing understanding of the social and economic growth of this place. Thus, documentation of architecture ranging from the 1660s to present offers a timeline of how people lived and worked and how this place has changed over time. Our historic graveyards record the families who made Portsmouth what it is today.

**Portsmouth Athenaeum** has extensive documents and photographs acquired or entrusted to it by other historical organizations and individuals. Since the 1980s it has cataloged, digitized and stored these records and made them accessible online. Its storage facility is full and cannot accommodate all that currently exists as well as what they expect to add in the future. Its history of growth is a strong indicator of what to expect in the coming years and is a useful measure in determining the scale of a new archival facility.

**Strawbery Banke Museum** in addition to dozens of historic buildings with period furnishings on a 9 acre site, has substantial photographs, manuscripts and other documents and archeological materials in its collection. Its archeological artifacts are currently stored in boxes in the basements of the historic houses, in an area experiencing sea level and subsurface water level rise and flooding in the basements.

**Portsmouth Historical Society** is home to an extensive collection of paintings, furnishings, textiles and other objects related to Portsmouth's history up through the present day. Their object collection is stored primarily in the attic of the historic John Paul Jones House. They collaborate with the Portsmouth Athenaeum for storage of their documents and photographs.

The lack of proper storage can result in the deterioration or loss of valuable artifacts and can restrict the ability to acquire additional important collections. This puts Portsmouth's history at risk of being lost forever by being poorly stored, damaged, discarded, or sold outside the Portsmouth area. Past attempts to collaborate archiving efforts among Portsmouth's primary historical institutions have all failed due to an unwillingness among the organizations to participate and uncertain funding.





### **Momentum for Collaboration**

This collaborative project between the city and the major historical institutions is a unique opportunity to create a public/private Archive which will take advantage of the economy of scale, finance and operations.

Through the work of the Blue Ribbon Task Force on Historical Archives, key historical institutions have agreed to collaborate to solve Portsmouth's archival needs. The leaders of these organizations have determined that the cost savings alone of forming a consortium — for real estate, staffing, security and HVAC and environmental equipment, etc. — will allow them to better execute their roles as stewards of Portsmouth's history and preserve more of the past for future generations. In addition to reducing costs, a collaborative Archive would provide easier access to researchers, students and all who are curious about Portsmouth's past. It will also promote greater accessibility for the City of Portsmouth's municipal documents, as required by law. Financing opportunities will expand, with access to separate funding channels directed at government Archives and private, non-profit preservation efforts.

## **Leadership and Operations**

A successful historical Archive consortium will require the proper legal entity to operate effectively. A legal framework will ensure that the Archive operates in a way that defines the responsibilities and duties of the public and private partners, as well as the ownership and access rights to the records. A governance structure will ensure that the Archive is managed and funded effectively and transparently. This will include a governing body that oversees the Archive, including appointing a director or manager for day-to-day operations.

Well-established policies and procedures will ensure that the Archive operates smoothly for record acquisition, preservation and access. These policies will be informed by best practices in archival management, regularly reviewed and updated as needed. A record management system will ensure that records are organized, preserved and accessible and allow for the easy retrieval and sharing of records, while also ensuring that they are protected from unauthorized access or loss. Procedures will be in place for accessing records, while also ensuring that privacy rights are protected.

## **Conclusion**

Based upon its year-long examination of the current and future needs for archival space of the City of Portsmouth, Portsmouth Athenaeum, Strawberry Banke Museum and Portsmouth Historical Society and the issues surrounding the housing, funding and management of such archives, the Task Force concludes that the development of a consolidated "Portsmouth Archive" as a public/private collaboration with the City and those institutions is both a feasible and the preferred option for preserving the records and materials that memorialize the history and culture of Portsmouth and its people. Each of the private institutions has expressed its interest and agreement to further pursue this option. In furtherance of this effort, the Task Force requests that the City Council adopt the recommendations for future action set out in the last section of this report.





## ARCHIVE EFFORTS TO DATE

NH Revised Statutes Annotated, including RSA 33-A, Municipal Record Retention, regulate the obligations of a municipality to create, retain and make available to the public the records of governmental activity.

In contrast, decisions relating to the acquisition, retention, preservation of and accessibility to records and other archival material generated or acquired by private institutions have historically been lightly regulated (e.g., the obligation to retain tax records) and left to the varying rules of the institutions and, often, to the discretion of their leaders.

This difference in approaches has resulted in much variation among the record-keeping efforts of Portsmouth historical, religious, fraternal, sporting, business and educational institutions. Some institutions have retained records for more than two centuries, others have disposed of their records much sooner for lack of adequate storage space. Moreover, as some community organizations have ceased to exist, their records have been lost to landfills. Portsmouth, despite being one of North America's earliest settlements, has not been immune from the loss of its written history.

The need for and utility of a public/private archival facility in Portsmouth has been recognized since at least August of 1979, when Nancy Peace of the School of Library Science at Simmons College submitted "A Proposal for Preserving the Historical Records of Portsmouth, NH." Peace wrote:

*When I sat down to write this report, I began by making a list of the types of materials that serve to document the life of a town and its people. In a parallel column I tried to list the potential custodians of each type of material in Portsmouth. The latter effort proved futile as almost any of the city's institutions could collect each type of material. I believe the most effective programs are those where a single institution accepts the primary responsibility for developing research collections.<sup>1</sup>*

The report generated interest, but efforts to create a consortium of collecting institutions were timid and the costs of conservation and cataloging of historic materials were left to grant funding and private donations. Portsmouth Public Library requested an appropriation of \$45,000 in the city budget for 1982 to do more extensive cataloging and preservation, but the request was not funded.

That same year, the master plan for Portsmouth Athenaeum prepared by Robert Thoresen and Richard Candee recommended that the Athenaeum use its newly acquired space on the third floor of the Foye store building in Market Square to create a research library. The free research library opened in 1986 and the Athenaeum took on the administration of the records of 40 Portsmouth organizations, including the very important historical Archives

<sup>1</sup> Peace, Nancy, Library's Historic and Special Collections, Simmons College of Library and Information Science, 1979.

of the Portsmouth Historical Society, the Warner House Association, the Society of Colonial Dames of New Hampshire and five historic churches. However, in 2019, the Athenaeum received a critical engineering report showing that, primarily due to the exponential growth of its archival collections, its constricted space in the Foye building was dangerously overloaded and it has had to take steps to move materials offsite, limiting their accessibility.

A grant to the National Historic Preservation of Records Commission to create a city Archive was proposed in 1983, but it was not approved because the city could not guarantee future funding of the operation. The grant was revived in 1992 as a joint application from the city and Portsmouth Athenaeum, but it was again rejected because there was no guarantee of future funding beyond the two-year term of the grant. In 1997, the City Council approved \$10,000 to fund a complete inventory of the city's historical collections. Contractor David Goodman's three-volume report<sup>2</sup> on more than 5,500 items was submitted in 1999 and comprises the format for the city's Archives today.

In 2018, the city made a major commitment of \$200,000 over four years to create a permanent document storage area in City Hall, overseen by the Finance Department and City Clerk. The facility has UV protection, a dry fire suppression system, environmental monitoring and security. It is the best archival storage system that the city has ever had for its internal records, but it is rapidly pushing its capacity to the limit.

Portsmouth Athenaeum, Strawberry Banke Museum and Portsmouth Historical Society, as the major private organizations collecting and preserving Portsmouth history, now face the same space and climate-control issues as the city. Strawberry Banke Museum closed its Thayer Cumings library in 2007 and its Jones House Archeology Center soon after, leaving major historical resources with little or no accessibility to the public. Portsmouth Historical Society's collections storage areas are limited in their ability to accept new donations. In addition to these concerns, there are important private collections (small and large) that are leaving Portsmouth because our institutions lack the space and the resources to care for them. The fragmentation of preservation efforts in Portsmouth

<sup>2</sup> Goodman, David M. , *Historic Records and Artifacts Inventory Project: Report and user guide with introduction and comments*, March, 2000.





acknowledged more than 40 years ago has only increased in the intervening decades. The situation is multiplied by the inefficiency of several institutions working to fund exactly the same thing. And the disparity of access to materials across collecting institutions means that our city's rich history is promoted incompletely to our citizens and to the wider world.

The creation of a central Archive would meet the public benefit objective need identified in 1979 and the efficiencies and funding opportunities of a public/private partnership would reap long-term savings for all of the participants involved.

Peace's report from 1979 concludes:

*"Research collections, if they are to be useful, must be as extensive as possible, well organized, carefully cared for and accessible on a reasonable basis. Staff with expertise in the handling of special materials is required, as is a safe environment to preserve valuable and often unique items. The development of research collection demands considerable commitment of time and funds. If this commitment is absent, a program should not be undertaken."*



## Collections and Description of Need

The following assessments include collections, scope and special needs.

### City of Portsmouth Archive

#### *Collections*

By law, the city is required to keep certain types of documents and artifacts in perpetuity (i.e. tax warrants, assessing information, City Council records, etc.). Many of these historic/permanent documents, ranging in age from newly created to 300-plus years of age, are not in current city use and are being stored with others at the city's Police Department, Planning Department, Legal Department and Public Works Building. City Hall houses permanent records from many of the city's departments including City Clerk, Finance, Planning, Public Works, Human Resources, Trustees and Fire Department. City staff are bound by many different record retention policy requirements including, but not limited to:





- NH RSA 91-A (Right to Know Laws)
- NH RSA 33-A (Municipal Record Retention)
- NH RSA 201-D (Libraries)
- NH RSA 106-B (Criminal Records Laws and Rules, Police)

These permanent records, as well as the vital records held by the City Clerk, must legally be held in perpetuity by the city and as such must be protected more so than other records.

#### *Description of need*

Prior to 2017, the city's public records were stored in an underground tunnel connecting the hospital to Connors Cottage, where they were subject to frequent water infiltration, fluctuating temperatures and mold. Many of the historical records were compromised in the process. In 2017, the city devoted an area of the basement in the Seybolt Building of City Hall to storage, including those records it is required to keep due to NH RSA's. The Archive is climate controlled with a temperature monitoring system in place to alert for outliers. The Archive room is also humidity controlled through an industrial-sized, stand-alone dehumidification unit with humidity monitoring in place to alert staff to any needs for changes to levels. Wetness monitors have been put into place due to the basement location and the nature of the building's old plumbing structure and the lighting in the room is UVA/UVB protected. The room is protected by a waterless fire suppression



system, the only part of the building to be so. Initially, there were instances of leaks and outside water infiltration during heavy rains. Through trial and error, these leaks no longer directly affect the Archive space, but staff are acutely aware of the importance of the Archive space and monitor it often when extreme weather events are in place. Basements and attics are two of the least ideal places for archival storage due to the likelihood of water infiltration as well as additional challenges controlling heat and humidity of the area. For example, during our site visit, the ceiling of the quarantine room and the fire suppression system room were exposed due to a recent burst wastewater pipe that impacted the fire suppression area. The affected pipes were chased back until a healthy pipe was located and the affected pipes were replaced to ensure a safe environment for the documents. No records or artifacts were harmed during the episode.

The facility is already at capacity for space (within six years of opening). Records stored in the Archive are growing at a rate of four or five shelving units per year to include all the documents required under state RSA. Additionally, there are permanent records and artifacts not stored in the city's Archive for various reasons, including objects and maps at the Department of Public Works (DPW) as well as records from the School, Legal, Library, Planning and Police Departments. It should be noted that some departments including the School Department, Public Library, Legal and Police Department have additional state, federal and RSA requirements for specific documents as well as privacy laws that increase the difficulty of a central repository for city records.

The building of this archival space, its contents and its current upkeep are all due to the dedication of the Director of Finance and Administration, a member of the Finance staff who has taken on the Archives as a passion project and the Director of Public Works and his facilities staff. The Director of Finance, along with the City Clerk, annually request funding to maintain and expand the facility as well as to clean and remediate damaged materials. Funding comes from the city's Capital Plan as well as applications to New Hampshire's "Moose Plate" Conservation and Heritage Number Plate program. The city's finance team member is not able to devote a significant amount of time to some of the more finite tasks needed to enhance the capabilities of the city Archive, but is able to dedicate her time to its oversight and upkeep. She works in tandem with the city facilities staff to ensure annual maintenance is performed, environmental needs are met and identified issues are fixed, in addition to checking in frequently during drastic weather events. Although the location has a great amount of technological monitoring, she relies

heavily on the facilities and maintenance teams for in-person routine checks during overnights, weekends, holidays and extreme weather situations.

Additionally and 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.

**The primary goal of the city is to eventually house all permanent records and artifacts in a manner that ensures compliance, historic preservation and security of the items.**

## **Portsmouth Public Library**

### *Collections*

Portsmouth Public Library, constructed in 2006, has a small special collections room and climate-controlled vault.

The Collections consist of books, articles, city documents (tax records, annual reports, etc.), city directories, vital records (birth, marriage and death indexes), maps, art work, photographs, historical newspapers and ephemera. Also included are microfilm covering Portsmouth historic newspapers, digital files created by Portsmouth Public Library relating to the art and archival collections and institutional records for several Portsmouth organizations.

The Special Collections department maintains an Archive of manuscripts, photographs and art. Researchers will find unique historic materials including school attendance records, urban renewal materials, early 19th century watercolors of local homes and other properties by Sarah Haven Foster and mural sketches by WPA artist Gladys Brannigan. Artwork from prominent local artists can also be viewed throughout the building while the vault holds the majority of the library's special collections.

Information and resources pertain to topics for Portsmouth, the Seacoast and some surrounding cities and towns. While the collection development efforts have focused on acquiring materials relating primarily to the City of Portsmouth, information about other

towns in Rockingham County, including town histories for Strafford County, NH; York County, Maine; and a bit of Essex County, Massachusetts, are also available.

#### *Description of need*

A collection assessment was done many years ago and has been the focus of conservation grants yearly, rehousing of many materials and efforts to improve access. Special Collections storage has also extended from the vault and office to the repurposed Reference Storage space during the past several years. This allowed for safer storage for growing collections of vertical files, historic books and Archives. **The collections are in good order and well cared for, but filled to capacity.**



### **Portsmouth Athenaeum**

#### *Collections*

The Portsmouth Athenaeum has, since its inception in 1817, been the steward of important collections related to the history of Portsmouth and the Piscataqua River region. Scholars and students from all over the United States and internationally come to



use the Athenaeum's rich resources for original research. Virtually the entire collection is also accessible online, with catalog information and images; the site receives between 2,000 and 3,000 unique visitors every month.

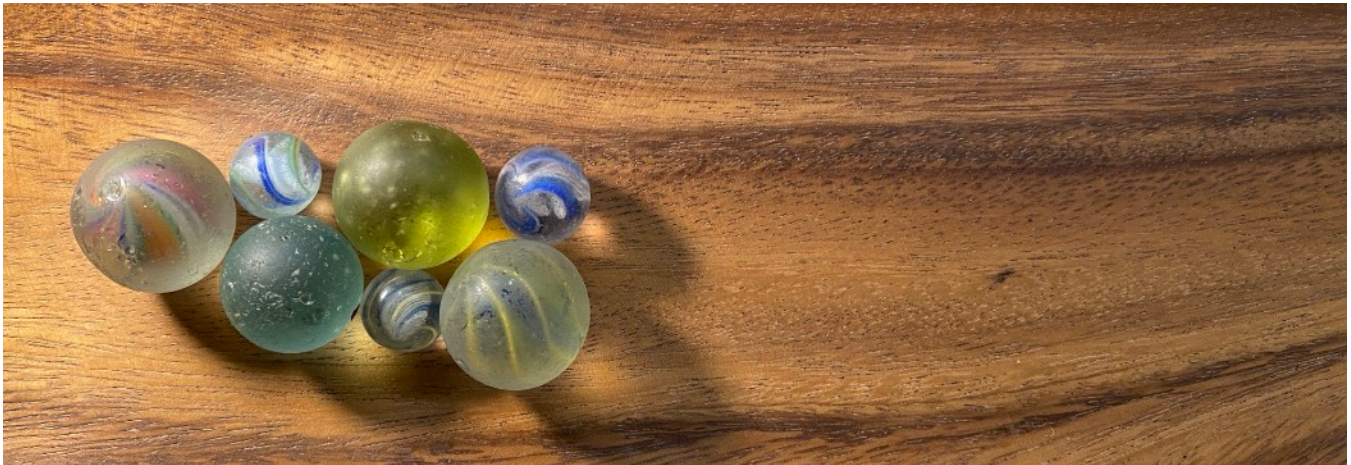
The Athenaeum's holdings include:

1. The Art and Artifacts collections, includes paintings, furniture, original art prints, models of Piscataqua River ships, ethnographic and archaeological objects given before 1875 and other artifacts of significance;
2. Rare Books, including many old and rare books purchased starting in 1817 and the entire libraries of Charles L. Woodbury and Benjamin T. Tredick, both dating from the late 19th century;
3. The Manuscript Collection (1,300 lineal feet), comprising Archives of local businesses, families and organizations including the Athenaeum itself; as well as those on deposit from other local institutions
4. The Photographic Collection, including 24,000 photographs, copper plates, daguerreotypes, glass slides, etc., almost all of which are on the Internet and an estimated 30,000 yet to be processed.
5. The circulating library (40,000 volumes), which is available to proprietors and, through the New Hampshire Public Library System's Interlibrary Loan Program, to members of the general public.

Day-to-day responsibility for the Athenaeum rests with the Keeper, who oversees a staff of five: a Research Librarian, who is also responsible for the Ephemera Collections; a Rare Books Librarian, also responsible for pamphlets; an Archivist, who is responsible for the Manuscript/Archive collection, a Photographic Collection Manager creating digitized images and the Map Collection; a Curator of Art and Artifacts; and an Assistant Curator. A number of members of the board and proprietors generously volunteer their time assisting with Athenaeum work, such as name and place recognition, historical research, mounting exhibits, maintaining the building, acting as docents for the public and carrying out special projects.

*Description of need*

The Athenaeum has quickly outgrown its existing space, to the point where the weight of the collections may compromise the structural integrity of its buildings. A short-term solution has been secured with additional off-site storage on State Street, but this storage is not environmentally stable. **The overriding, dominant concern at the Athenaeum is the building environment — including temperature and humidity control and visible and ultraviolet light levels — which is damaging the collections. Equally important is fire risk, especially in the 1805 building. There is an urgent need to address these issues.**

**Strawbery Banke Museum***Collections*

Strawbery Banke Museum collects objects needed to illustrate and understand Portsmouth's historic Puddle Dock neighborhood through time as defined by the interpretive plan. Strawbery Banke collects archives and artifacts that were made or owned in Puddle Dock, Portsmouth, the greater Piscataqua area and the Seacoast region between the earliest period of Native American habitation in the region until the founding of the museum (c. 1960) when Puddle Dock was last a residential neighborhood. Except for Native American artifacts, the core years represented by the collection are 1623-1960. Core collections items include:

- Objects that can be documented or attributed to Portsmouth makers or makers in the greater Piscataqua River region or the Seacoast region;
- Objects that have a history of ownership in Puddle Dock, Portsmouth, or in the Piscataqua region, or the Seacoast region;
- Period objects that are similar to those that might have been owned in Puddle Dock, Portsmouth, the greater Piscataqua region or the Seacoast region as documented by local archaeological evidence, early household inventories, newspaper advertisements, account books, related documented examples, photographs and oral histories;
- Period manuscripts, photographs and published materials that relate to the families of the Puddle Dock neighborhood and the furnished house exhibits of Strawberry Banke Museum.

The Permanent Collection consists of original, rare and often irreplaceable historical and art objects preserved for future generations with the inherent understanding that curatorial staff are only temporary stewards. Objects in the Permanent Collection may be used for research and exhibition and curator-supervised teaching and include ceramic, glass, metal, textiles, paintings, prints (graphics), wooden objects (primarily furniture) and tools from the late seventeenth century through the mid-20th century.

The museum avoids using objects in the Permanent Collection in any way that is detrimental to their preservation. Objects in this collection number around 25,000 and are fully accessioned and may only be transferred through the deaccession process.

The Archaeological Collection consists of material culture remains found during the course of excavations at Strawberry Banke, in the City of Portsmouth and the greater Piscataqua region. There are over one million artifacts in this collection. These constitute a collection of prehistoric artifacts and historic artifacts from the late seventeenth to the twentieth centuries. The collection includes human-made objects as well as biological and geological remains, which are maintained in storage, exhibition, study and educational collections. In addition to artifacts, environmental and dating samples, field



documentation, laboratory documentation, photographic records, related historical documents, maps and reports are considered part of the Archaeological collection.

The Thayer Cumings Library and Archives Collection includes historical monographs, photographs, research papers, manuscript collections or single items (account books and other business records, personal letters and diaries, ephemera) and books relating to the history and inhabitants of Puddle Dock and the surrounding neighborhoods in Portsmouth and architectural plans and drawings of Strawberry Banke structures and landscapes. There are approximately 500 linear feet of archival collections housed in Carter Collections Center and the Townhouse Vault.

Strawbery Banke's Collections staff consist of a full-time curator, a full-time project based archaeologist and a part-time Collections Manager.

#### *Description of Need*

Strawbery Banke Museum has appropriate storage space for archival materials, including documents, photographs, oral history transcripts, maps and building assessments in the Carter Collection Center. However, there is little to no room for growth. The closure of the Thayer Cumings Library and Archive in 2009 precipitated the need for alternative storage, hence the move to the object collection facility. However, public access to the museum's resources was severely affected by the library closure. The archival material is still available if requested, but the public-facing nature of the resources no longer exists.

The museum has a small vault in what is now a museum-owned rental building, the Shapley Townhouse at 454 Court Street. This small space has environmental challenges and must be monitored constantly. The vault holds glass plate negatives, various types of tapes with recorded oral histories, 20th century advertising material collected during the Abbott Store project, institutional Archive among other Archives. The museum's archaeological collection is precariously stored in the basements of the museums' 18th and 19th century houses. The collection represents artifacts from the 30 excavations executed by archaeologists on Puddle Dock and the significant Deer Street excavation of the 1980s. This is problematic for numerous reasons including accessibility, possible harm from failing building systems like furnaces and sump pumps, the constant breakdown of the boxes from damp basement conditions and, more recently, the threat of sea level rise.

**Strawbery Banke Museum’s archival material should be more easily accessible to the public and the archaeological collection should be protected and available for scholars for research projects.**

## **Portsmouth Historical Society**

### *Collections*

The Portsmouth Historical Society has one of the region’s most diverse collections of objects, which includes furniture, paintings, textiles, silver, glassware, china and more. The nearly 3,000 objects are all stored on-site at the historic John Paul Jones House. Portsmouth Historical Society has collected objects needed to illustrate and understand the history and material life, broadly conceived, of Portsmouth, New Hampshire and the immediate Seacoast area, from the 17th century (with the exception of certain earlier Native American materials) to the present. Such objects include artifacts that were made or owned in Portsmouth and the Seacoast region. Some types of items include but are not restricted to:



1. Objects that can be documented or attributed to a Portsmouth artist, artisan, company, or maker(s);
2. Objects that have a significant history of ownership in Portsmouth or the Seacoast region; for example, Asian or European ceramics of the types imported into Portsmouth;

3. Period objects that are similar to those that might have been owned in Portsmouth or the Seacoast region as documented by local archaeological evidence, early household inventories, newspaper advertisements, account books, related documented examples, photographs and oral histories;
4. Period manuscripts, photographs and published materials that relate to the history of Portsmouth. This aspect of the collection is coordinated with the Portsmouth Athenaeum, where PHS materials of this sort are on long-term deposit.

The collection is overseen by a part-time Collections Manager and part-time Curator who are guided by a Collecting Policy that has been vetted by the Historical Society's Collections Committee and Board. Documents and photographs owned by the Historical Society are on deposit at the Portsmouth Athenaeum.

#### *Description of Need*

While attempts have been made to properly store items with archival boxes, metal shelving and hanging walls, the third floor space in the John Paul Jones House is not properly climate controlled. There is evidence of substantial past leaks from the roof and the window air conditioning units are not sufficient to moderate the fluctuating heat and humidity levels in a 1758 home. The third floor is only accessible to museum staff and the organization lacks adequate study/research space. Furthermore, the Society's storage space is at capacity, leaving minimal room to grow their collection. **The lack of public access and climate control are two major concerns for the Portsmouth Historical Society that this project will hopefully address.**



## Recommended Methods and Facilities

Although beyond the scope of the Task Force’s mission, we have included recommended methods and facility needs for archival storage.

*See Appendix B*

## Potential Funding

Although beyond the scope of the Task Force’s mission, we have included examples of potential federal and private foundational grants.

*See Appendix C*



## Cultural and Economic Considerations

### Archive as Cultural and Historical Record

In appointing this Task Force, the City Council recognized that the history of Portsmouth provides important context and documentation for the history of New Hampshire and the country. Portsmouth's history is also integral to the identity of the city, is a major tourism and academic draw and is critical to the economic viability of the city. A Portsmouth Archive will serve as a repository of information about the people and cultures who have lived here and will be of great consequence to the future.



Portsmouth has witnessed a transformative shift in its historical institutions since the 1990s, with a heightened focus on collecting and representing underrepresented communities. The city's rich history, spanning from its earliest inhabitants to its present-day diversity, is closely entwined with the experiences of European immigrants from the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the free and enslaved Black community, the LGBTQ+ community, indigenous inhabitants, and women. By emphasizing these historically

marginalized narratives, local institutions acknowledge the vital role these communities have played in shaping Portsmouth's heritage.

These underrepresented stories have often been excluded or underrepresented in historical records and interpretations. Local institutions are committed to rectifying this historical bias, striving to provide a more inclusive and accurate portrayal of the city's shared history. Their dedication reflects a commitment to preserving the entirety of Portsmouth's historical tapestry and cultivating a deeper understanding and appreciation of the contributions and challenges faced by these communities in the city.

The Chamber Collaborative of Greater Portsmouth reports over one million visitors per year. Heritage-tourism visitors take advantage of our well-preserved downtown to explore collections at the Athenaeum; follow the self-guided tour of Strawberry Banke living history museum; or view regionally unique exhibits and walking tours at Portsmouth Historical Society. History is as central to the cultural economy as world-class music venues, live theater and fine dining. Everything that's done today continues to add to our unique and fulfilling way of life and the Archives are a treasure that continues to shape our story.

### **Archive for Long-Lasting Economic Viability**

Having a city Archive in Portsmouth can bring several benefits that contribute to the economic viability, scholarly interest, cultural preservation and future development of the city, including:

1. *Preservation of Historical Records*

A city Archive serves as a repository of historical documents, photographs, maps, city-owned documents and other artifacts related to the city and its surrounding region. By preserving these records, the Archive ensures that the history of Portsmouth and the Piscataqua region is safeguarded for future generations. This preservation effort helps maintain the city's cultural heritage and provides researchers with rich resources to study and document the past.

2. *Attracting Scholars and Researchers*

The existence of a comprehensive city Archive attracts scholars, historians and researchers from all over the world who are interested in studying the history,

people and cultures of Portsmouth. Researchers often require access to primary source materials and a well-organized Archive with a diverse collection can make Portsmouth an attractive destination for academic and intellectual pursuits. This influx of research and general interest can bring economic benefits to the city through increased visits by academics and researchers, enhanced collaboration with local institutions and academic conferences.

### 3. *Promoting Cultural Tourism*

Portsmouth has a rich cultural heritage and a city Archive can help promote cultural tourism. The Archive can showcase exhibitions, host educational programs at schools and offer guided tours that highlight the historical significance of the city and its surrounding region. This not only attracts tourists but also generates revenue for local businesses, such as hotels, restaurants and shops, thus enhancing the economic viability of the city.

### 4. *Shaping Future Development*

A city Archive plays a vital role in informing the future development of a city. By studying historical records and understanding past patterns, city planners, policymakers and architects can make more informed decisions about urban development, infrastructure projects and heritage preservation. The Archive acts as a valuable resource for identifying and preserving historically significant buildings, neighborhoods and cultural landscapes, thereby ensuring that future development aligns with the city's historical identity and character.

### 5. *Engaging the Community*

A city Archive can actively involve the local community by organizing educational programs, workshops and exhibitions that promote historical literacy and civic engagement. By connecting residents in the preservation and interpretation of their city's history, the Archive fosters a sense of pride, identity and belonging. This community engagement can also lead to the generation of local historical knowledge, oral histories and personal Archives, which further enrich the city's archival collection and make it more representative of diverse experiences.



### **Archive as Educational Tool for Portsmouth Schools**

A Portsmouth Archive will be an invaluable educational resource in several ways:

1. *Primary Source Material*

Provide a more authentic and direct understanding of the past, allowing students to engage with history on a more personal level.

2. *Local History Education*

Learning about the history of their own city helps students develop a sense of place and community identity.

3. *Research Skills*

Students will learn valuable research skills, such as how to search for and evaluate historical sources, which can be applied to other areas of their education and future careers.

4. *Critical Thinking*

Analyzing historical documents and records encourages critical thinking. Students will assess the reliability of sources, consider bias and form their own interpretations of historical events.



5. *Multidisciplinary Learning*

Exploring materials will help students see the interconnectedness of different aspects of history and encourage multidisciplinary learning.

6. *Project-Based Learning*

Teachers can design project-based learning activities around the materials found in the Archive. Students can create exhibits, documentaries or research papers based on their findings, fostering creativity and deep engagement with history.

7. *Connecting Past and Present*

Studying local history allows students to connect historical events to their contemporary lives. They will see how the past has shaped Portsmouth and the world they live in today.

8. *Cultural Appreciation*

Learning about the history of Portsmouth will foster an appreciation for our cultural heritage. This includes learning about the traditions, customs and contributions of different ethnic and cultural groups in our community.

9. *Hyper-Local Field Trips and Outreach*

Educational programs, tours or outreach activities can be specifically designed for school groups. These opportunities enhance students' learning experiences by allowing them to interact directly with historical materials and local experts.

10. *Career Exploration*

Introduces students to potential careers in fields such as history, teaching, archival science, library science and museum studies, inspiring some to consider pursuing careers in these areas.



## Leadership Recommendations and Goals

Now is the time to collaborate and create a public/private Archive. Organizations are receptive to the idea and are prepared to work cooperatively to make it a reality. A well-designed Archive benefits each organization financially and offers state-of-the-art preservation for items in a central location.

The Task Force recommends that first and foremost the city show its support to move toward the creation of a shared space among the represented groups, acknowledging that such a space would be in the cultural and economic interest of the city and the non-profits. For the first time, the city and non-profit organizations have come to an agreement to support a combined Archive, sharing the overhead of temperature and humidity control, fire protection and other special considerations required to preserve Archived materials.

The first step in this support should be the continuation of this committee under the new Council. Once renewed, this committee should address the following:

1. *Legal entity options*

What would be the best legal entity for a shared Archive? Among the considerations are the legal and financial interests of all parties and ways to keep the consortium viable to receive a variety of grants, donations and other contributions. While some grantors require a grantee to be registered as a 501(c)(3) organization, other grants are available to government entities. How can the Archive best take advantage of available financing and how can each organization's interest best be protected for the long term? What form of organization would allow for new entities to join? What would happen should a member choose to remove its collection in the future?

2. *Space requirements*

The committee should, in the very near future, work with a consultant to analyze more closely the space and environmental needs to sustain such an Archive. The funds should be appropriated to pay for such a study, based on similar studies carried out in the past 10 years.

3. *Funding*

The committee should continue to identify ways in which to pay for the Archive, considering what will come from each organization and what funds might be raised in the community and through grant opportunities.

4. *Organization membership and responsibilities*

The committee should reach a consensus as to the makeup of the new ongoing shared Archive. Will participants beyond those currently represented on the Task Force be considered? Additionally, what will be the responsibilities of each member organization? Based on the determined legal entity, how will each organization be represented on the governing board?

5. *Identification of materials to include*

As indicated above, the number and types of items currently archived differs greatly. The committee will need to set boundaries as to which types of materials should be retained in the shared space, considering object sizes, space limitations and archiving methodologies.

## Conclusion

The Blue Ribbon Task Force on Historical Archives has invested significant time and effort to perform due diligence regarding the viability of a public/private partnership to provide a museum quality historical archival facility. The Archive is intended to collect, preserve and provide access to the critical components that document the rich history of Portsmouth. Portsmouth's history should be readily available to all who have an interest in its early native American inhabitants, the emergence of democracy and the fascinating path in time that paved the way to the vibrant community we enjoy today.

Currently the four primary stewards of Portsmouth history, (The City of Portsmouth, The Portsmouth Athenaeum, Strawberry Banke Museum and Portsmouth Historical Society) are all struggling with the quality and quantity of space needed to meet their ever-growing collection needs. The Blue Ribbon Task Force is made up of executives and board members of all four of these key institutions, as well as concerned citizens and representatives of the city. Since 1979, several past efforts to create a historical Archive for Portsmouth have failed for two primary reasons: an unwillingness for institutions to collaborate and no commitment to funding. Separately each institution has made legitimate efforts to solve their archival challenges. However, each of these attempts has been isolated and most often set in motion by crisis. As a result, they have been costly and have fallen short of meeting the comprehensive needs of the community.

**The City of Portsmouth and its leading historic institutions have a unique opportunity to work together to solve Portsmouth's historical archival challenge through a well-planned, comprehensive approach. The entities involved are unanimous in their support of continuing to pursue the viability of this vision. They recognize this opportunity will provide needed cost efficiencies, expand future funding opportunities and improve resource allocation by allowing them to better execute their individual missions.**

Should the shared Archive become a reality, the community wins by being a good steward and limiting the risk of losing valuable historic documents and artifacts. The consortium's effort would make researching Portsmouth's history more efficient for all and enhance educational opportunities for students of all ages. A concerted effort to preserve and provide efficient access to Portsmouth's past will leave an ongoing legacy for future generations.



## Recommendations

As history continues to unfold, the urgency for proper archival space will increase exponentially, as will the cost and space limitations required to solve the issue. In time, the current leadership will change in the city government as well as the boards and executives of the core historical institutions. To take advantage of the key components in place today that can move this effort to fruition, The Blue Ribbon Task Force on Historical Archives strongly recommends the following:

1. City Council vote to continue the Blue Ribbon Task Force on Historical Archives to pursue the following recommendations;
2. The city and participating institutions jointly pursue a conservation assessment in 2024 to quantify the amount of archives to be stored from each participating institution and the space required to properly steward them. The estimated cost is \$150,000;
3. The Task Force develop and recommend to the City Council the most appropriate legal entity under which the Archive will operate;
4. The Task Force review and recommend which organizations will make up the consortium and how they will be represented in the operations of the Archive;
5. The Task Force develop and recommend a funding plan that includes the city and participating organizations, as well as the availability of public and private resources;
6. The Task Force recommend suitable locations to house the Archive and the City Council earmark the preferred location for future development as the Archive;
7. The Task Force pursue such other issues and make other recommendations that are related to the establishment of the Archive.



## **Appendix A**

### **Blue Ribbon Task Force on Historical Archives**

On September 19, 2022, the City Council voted unanimously to establish a Blue Ribbon Task Force to Study the Establishment of a Private/Public partnership to Properly Archive Historical Documents relating to the City of Portsmouth.

The proposal presented by Councilor Vince Lombardi noted:

#### **Rationale**

The history of Portsmouth is:

1. Nationally recognized as important to the history of the state and the country
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 historians from all over the world
6. A repository of information about the people and cultures have lived here
7. Important for how citizens shape Portsmouth in the future

#### **The Issue**

The city and many organizations (and individuals) currently own and store documents and other materials relevant to the history of Portsmouth.

The city and these organizations do not have adequate facilities to properly store and preserve these materials.

#### **Goal**

Mayor McEachern created this Blue Ribbon Committee to study the feasibility of a public/private document Archive that would provide the city and private organizations with a proper climate controlled and fire protected facility to preserve these records.

#### **Purpose/Charge**

This Task Force is charged with exploring options to create a public/private Archive to preserve documents related to the city's past, present and future.

The Task Force will look in particular at:

1. How the city and Portsmouth private historical organizations can join together to create a facility that meets the needs of archiving important records.
2. How the pertinent materials are identified and judged as vital; what should not or cannot be included? What qualifies as Portsmouth history? What counts as historical significance?
3. What archiving methods should be used for each type of material to assure each type is protected effectively?
4. What space will be required for such an effort? How will the space be identified, procured and maintained?
5. How will the ongoing efforts be funded? What are the opportunities for establishing trust funds, local and state monies and private contributions?
6. How will the Archive ongoing leadership and management be structured and Implemented?

This Task Force will not be responsible for a plan to determine the maintenance and preservation of city records required to be archived under State and Federal laws and regulations.

### **Membership**

The Task Force will be made up of representatives from major city and non-profit groups whose missions relate directly to preserving Portsmouth history. This includes:

- City of Portsmouth designee (such as a representative from the Library) The Portsmouth Athenaeum
- Strawberry Banke Museum
- The Portsmouth Historical Society and
- Such other entities as may be proposed by the City Council.

### **Term**

The Task Force will provide written recommendations to the City Council by December 31, 2023, at which point it will sunset and if appropriate, a permanent oversight committee could be created by the City Council.

## Appendix B

### Recommended Methods and Facilities

#### **Recommendations for Storage Conditions**

Current National Archives and Records Administration guidelines move away from set points towards ranges. The guidelines are intended to balance long-term preservation of holdings with energy efficiency.

#### *Environment #1: "Comfort Conditions" for work spaces (70° F. ±5°/ RH 35-45% ±5%)*

These conditions can drift seasonally: warmer in summer, cooler in winter. They need to be maintained only when spaces are occupied, not on a 24/7 basis. Areas include research and collections management spaces that do not include storage.

#### *Environment #2: Low Sensitivity Holdings (50° - 65°F / RH 30 – 50%)*

Most paper including rare books, maps and plans, newspapers, ephemera, pamphlets and manuscripts. Black and white photographic materials including paper-based black and white photographs, polyester-based black and white film, photo albums and glass plate negatives. Electronic and magnetic media including computer tapes and disks, optical disks, video tapes, audio tapes, disk recordings and wire recordings.

#### *Environment #3: Cold Storage for Sensitive Materials (35° F / RH 30 – 40%)*

Cellulose acetate-based media including motion picture and still picture film negatives, microfilms, vesicular microforms, slides and color still picture negatives and transparencies and motion picture film. If there is not much sensitive material, a frost-free refrigerator may be the best solution. In the longer term and depending how the collections grow, a cold storage vault could be considered. *Note that there are special packaging requirements for cold storage of photographic materials.*

#### *Environment #4: Highly Sensitive/Unstable materials (Frozen Conditions 30° F, never above 32°F / RH 30 – 40%)*



Includes deteriorating acetate negatives, deteriorating motion picture film and any nitrate material. A single upright or chest freezer would be adequate for the materials currently held by the Athenaeum only.

For all other items, the following conditions are ideal for long-term preservation and storage, as recommended by the National Park Service and the Department of the Interior:

<b>Environmental Controls</b>	
<i>Temperature</i>	A temperature range of 59-77°F is acceptable.
<i>Relative Humidity</i>	It is generally recommended to maintain environments in the range of 45-55% with an allowable drift of no more than 5% within a 24-hour period, yielding a total annual range of 40% to 60%.
<i>Lighting</i>	Recommended to use LED or UV-filtered fluorescent lighting. Lighting levels should not exceed 200 lux or 20 footcandles.
<i>Pest Management</i>	An integrated pest management system, overseen by paid staff, is essential to ensure the collections remain free from any insect infestation that could cause irreparable damage to natural materials such as paper, textiles, furniture and more.
<i>Fire Safety</i>	Buildings should be built of fireproof or fire-resistant materials. Sprinkler systems are only permitted when floor drains are installed.
<i>Water Mitigation</i>	Storage spaces should not be located in basements or attics.

**Archival Structures**

Many of our organizations must sacrifice public space to create room for collection storage and have a finite amount of space, though our collections continue to grow.

By separating curatorial office, work and research spaces from the space housing the collection, we minimize environmental impacts on the collections and lessen security risks.

<b>Building</b>	
<i>Load Bearing</i>	A live floor load of 350 pounds per square foot is desirable, especially for particularly heavy collections such as paper-based materials such as Archives and herbaria, some fossil collections, metals, heavy equipment and if there are plans to install a moveable aisle (compactor) storage system.
<i>Flooding</i>	Collections storage should be located outside the 100-year floodplain.
<i>Building materials and features</i>	Buildings should have minimal to no windows (or have windows blocked/insulated), be built of fire-resistant or fireproof materials and be insulated with a vapor barrier.
<i>Growth</i>	Storage must also provide adequate space to accommodate reasonable growth of the collection over the next ten years.
<i>Piping</i>	No pipes should run through the storage space with special exception for sprinklers, in which case floor drains are required.

### **Storage Materials**

Museum quality, equipment and containers are made using inert, non-reactive materials that do not off gas (emit) substances that accelerate or cause deterioration of objects. Storage containers are often made of corrugated paper-based boards or plastics. Museum quality corrugated boards are made of acid-free paper and are available in neutral pH (unbuffered) or alkaline pH (buffered) varieties. Other storage material must be acid-free and of neutral or alkaline-buffered pH. Certain plastics are considered museum quality storage material, such as polyethylene and polyester. Museum cabinets, shelving units and other storage equipment are made of metal.

*Shelving:* Museum cabinets, shelving units and other equipment are raised off the floor at least 4 inches, preferably 6 inches, on metal risers as a precaution against potential flooding and to facilitate cleaning of floors and inspection for pest problems.

*Staffing:* Collections require constant oversight, management and processing, handled by trained professionals. Collections management and archival studies are two degree concentrations offered at the undergraduate and graduate level.

## Appendix C Potential Funding

### Potential Grant Funders

The grants listed here are for the highest awards. Additional opportunities exist at each federal agency.

#### National Endowment for the Humanities

[Humanities Collections & Reference Resources:](#)

\$350,000 for implementation; prefer institutional collaboration

[Sustaining Cultural Heritage Collections:](#)

Planning: \$50,000

Implementation Level I: \$100,000

Implementation Level II: \$350,000

#### Institute for Museum and Library Services (IMLS)

[Museums for America:](#)

\$250,000 for collections stewardship and access

#### National Archives

[Major Collaborative Archival Initiatives:](#)

A grant is for one to three years. Awards will be between \$150,000 and \$350,000.

Nonprofits and local government agencies are eligible.

#### National Parks Service (NPS), co-managed by IMLS

[Museums for America:](#)

\$25,000 to \$750,000 for preservation projects and collections

#### Private Foundations

Penates Foundation

Fidelity Foundation: [Capital Investments or Planning Initiatives](#)

Luce Foundation: [American Art Responsive Grants](#)

[Foundation Grants for Libraries & Archives](#) (Library of Congress)

Mellon Foundation: [Expanding Public Knowledge](#)

Gladys Kriebel Delmas Foundation: [Research Libraries Program](#)

*There are additional opportunities for digitization efforts as well as preserving underrepresented collections.*

## APPENDIX D

# Seacoastonline

## Portsmouth's historic archives in need of a home. Here's what is being done about it.

**Tom Hardiman** Portsmouth Athenaeum.

August 23, 2023

PORTSMOUTH — On Sept. 19, 2022, the City Council voted unanimously to establish a Blue Ribbon Task Force to study the establishment of a private/public partnership to Properly Archive Historical Documents relating to the City of Portsmouth. The committee is chaired by Councilor Vince Lombardi and has 12 regular members who represent the city, multiple nonprofit historical organizations, and city residents interested in preserving local history.



The need for and utility of a central archival facility was recognized as early as 1979 in a report commissioned by then-city librarian Sherm Pridham. One aspect of that report was picked up in the 1982 Athenaeum master plan, written by Richard Candee and Bob Thoresen, which recommended that the Athenaeum open its archives to the public and solicit other organizations to deposit their archives with them. The Athenaeum now administers the historical records of nearly 40 historical, religious and civic organizations.

Multiple efforts throughout the 1980s and '90s to create a true central archive in Portsmouth failed for various reasons. The most recent, begun in 2016 by then-city Library Director Steve Butzel, was derailed by the pandemic, but ultimately led to the collaborative publication "The History of Portsmouth in 101 Objects." Councilor Lombardi felt that with the unprecedented institutional collaboration that went into the book and the rising



appreciation for local history engendered by the Portsmouth 400th celebrations, 2023 was the right time to take up the cause again.

Lombardi is uniquely well suited to the work, having long associations with Strawbery Banke, Portsmouth Historical Society, the Athenaeum, Portsmouth Advocates, and the city's Historic District Commission. The other committee members include current executive directors of the public library, the Athenaeum, the Historical Society, and the chief curator of Strawbery Banke Museum, and many current or past board members of the cooperating institutions. Sue Sterry represents the city Cemetery Committee and frequently reminds the other members of the frustration of having to go to four or five different institutions or city departments to try to find information on a single historical person or location.



The committee held its first meeting in the Levenson Room of the Public Library on Jan. 27, when several members of the public echoed Sterry's aggravation of having to search multiple collections to find documents. Since then the committee has met biweekly and has toured the seriously overcrowded collections facilities of the Historical Society, Strawbery Banke, the Athenaeum, the Public Library, and City Hall. It also heard from Rodney Obien, archivist at Keene State College, Brian Burford, former state archivist for New Hampshire. Both shared valuable experiences with setting up archival facilities. The committee also got a sobering assessment from real estate expert David Choate on the critical shortage of available sites for such a facility in Portsmouth.

Halfway into its work, the committee is now drafting its report of findings of fact and recommendations on how to proceed. It has had one public hearing and plans to hold another in the fall. The good news is that all of the participants are now keenly aware of the need for a new facility and can see that a public/private partnership would be vastly more economically efficient than the current system of having five institutions run their own facilities separately. The members remain optimistic, confident that others will feel the same way once they see the facts.



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