

# Ridgefield Historical Society

## 2018 Annual Report



Year Ending October 2018

This has been a year of transition for the Ridgefield Historical Society. The primary focus for the first 18 years of the Society's existence has been on the collection, preservation, and cataloging of materials documenting the town's history. We now have an excellent database of local historical material. Early in the year, the Board recognized the need for the Society to focus on community outreach and bring the contents of our excellent archives to the community.

We began a massive project to promote community outreach by increasing programming and developing new marketing strategies. We want to educate the public about the rich history of Ridgefield while increasing our visibility in the community. Our intent is to draw new volunteers, members, and donors.

We have accomplished a lot in a short period of time but there is still a long road ahead. A consultant with professional expertise in development and fundraising has been hired. In consultation with the Board, a plan has been developed and numerous new systems have been implemented.

### **By Laws Updated**

We have updated our By Laws to make the Society operate more efficiently. The Board of Trustees which met infrequently has been dissolved. A new Board of Advisors has been created. The hope is the new, community-based Board of Advisors will provide more expertise to help us fulfill our mission. Other minor changes were made to accommodate the latest technological advances.

### **Website**

A new website manager was hired who meticulously went through each aspect of our website along with the RHS Administrator and the Development and Marketing Consultant. The website was completely revamped, reorganized, and rewritten. Hyperlinks were added for easy user access. It is now a state-of-the art site that accurately describes our Society, its services and events. Traffic on the website has more than doubled in the last few months, as our engagement with the community has started to increase.



## **Information & Technology**

The Historical Society's PastPerfect database was re-certified and its capabilities updated. In-house and online elements were enabled via our new website's capabilities.

We investigated a new area of development for the RHS - the implementation of a series of smartphone based "historical & cultural" tours of Ridgefield, via the My Tours application and site builder. This exciting new program will launch in spring of next year and a Google Ads grant was obtained to help promote this new community outreach program.

## **Collections**

A Collections Policy Committee has been formed and is close to completing policies and procedures.

This year we received two excellent donations for our archives from the Acorn Press, which donated all their old hard copies of the Ridgefield Press. These bound volumes date back to the 1930's. The Ridgefield Press also donated nine file cabinets of historian Jack Sanders' files.

Considerable time was spent evaluating other donations. A large Silvio Bedini collection (mostly from his book) was sorted and catalogued. Some interesting items received are a large watercolor painting of the Hauley House, an antique wooden ballot box, Native American artifacts, and primitive paintings. A group is still working on the Jesse Lee Church files.

## **Genealogy**

Genealogy requests have held steady over the past year. Our in-house library offers easy access to information and reference sources – census documents, vital records indexes, cemetery data, and local history books. Other important local references are the records at Town Hall and newspaper information at the Library. Most requests come from out-of-state via phone or internet, but occasionally, people come in person to pursue their searches. Sometimes, an enthusiastic respondent will come visit us after finding that long lost relative who once lived in our town!





## **Historic Preservation**

This year the Society was a key player in the restoration of the “widow’s walk” on top of Town Hall. Board member Dave Scott drew up the architectural plans for the project, and the Society gave a significant financial contribution. We are happy to report the project has been completed and has had great visual impact. Restoring the “crown” on top of Town Hall changed the architectural look of the Main Street building.

## **Scott House**

We have been busy problem-solving HVAC systems and resolving new and on-going maintenance projects. The town recently repaved part of our driveway apron and provided soil and seed for the entranceway.

## **Field Trips**

This year we ran two field trips – one in June to Arthur Avenue and the Cloisters and one in October to Sagamore Hill. Both were excellent trips from a historic education perspective.

## **Programming**

Our program offerings increased dramatically, doubling in number. During the last year, we have served hundreds of residents educating them on a number of different topics in a number of different venues. We partnered or co-sponsored events with a number of local organizations to raise our visibility in the community. These include the Ridgefield Library, Founders Hall, Keeler Tavern, The Ridgefield Playhouse, the Discovery Center, the Graveyard Committee, and the Wilton

Grange. Our programming included the following events: *WWI: Ridgefield Answers the Call* Opening Reception and Exhibit for two months at the Ridgefield Public Library. The exhibit went on for a successful run at Founders Hall and the Schoolhouse. On November 6, it is slated to show at the Playhouse. In addition, we co-sponsored numerous programs with the Ridgefield Library such as *Alone: Churchill & Dunkirk with Michael Korda*, *The Tragedy of*



*Benedict Arnold with Dr. Joyce Lee Malcolm, and Hate: Why We Should Resist It with Nadine Strossen. We ran Battle of Ridgefield Walking Tours – one for teachers, a Digitalization Day for WWI Material co-sponsored with Keeler Tavern and also exhibited at Keeler’s Family Day. The Board had four presentations this year – two on development and marketing, one on The Battle of Ridgefield from a larger context perspective, and one on baseball’s Doc Adams. The Historical Society participated in SummerFest in Ridgefield and the Cannon Grange Agricultural Fair in Wilton. We also ran an excellent Silhouette event last December.*

### **Peter Parley Schoolhouse**

Hundreds of people young and old have passed through the Schoolhouse this year. The Historical Society was awarded a grant from Fairfield County Bank for *Sundays at the Schoolhouse*. For six months reenactors, antique cars and fire engines, an ice cream truck, exhibits, and a play enlivened the Schoolhouse. The little old Schoolhouse had not seen so much action in years!



### **Membership**

This fall three separate membership letters were composed: one to lapsed members, one to current members, and one to not-yet members. State of the art practices were used in composing the letters. Each mailing contained not only the letter, but literature regarding our activities, services, and upcoming events as well as a membership form and return envelope.

The results thus far have been quite successful. We have seen an encouraging response from all three categories.



A donor database has been developed where all information is now in one place and easily accessible to staff.

### **Development and Marketing**

Over the last year, dramatic changes have occurred in marketing and development with new systems created.

1. A weekly Marketing Timeline was instituted in June to outline and coordinate

the schedule for website, press releases, email blasts, and Facebook communications. Content is identified and written and then reformatted for each of these media outlets. This system has created clearer communications internally and externally and helped with workflow and roles and responsibilities among team members. The team meets weekly to review and prioritize.

2. Press releases are developed and typically sent bi-weekly to the Ridgefield Press, Hamlet Hub, TownVibe, Ridgefield Patch, Destination Ridgefield, Ridgefield Town Calendar, and other local outlets. RHS is now mentioned regularly in the press with consistent messaging, helping to increase visibility and participation.
3. Our Constant Contact list has doubled in the last six months. E-blasts are sent bi-weekly and typically alternate with press releases.
4. RHS now has a Facebook page.
5. All our printed brochures have been updated. For example, trifold brochures for the Historical Society and Peter Parley Schoolhouse, flyers for Genealogy, Historic Plaque Program, and Membership Invitations, among others.
6. A Press Book has been created as a repository for all of the press coverage we receive.
7. Logo Placement and RHS branding has been used wherever possible.



## **Budget**

Over the last fiscal year, the Board has decided to put an emphasis on developing and investing in systems to improve our community outreach. As a non-profit organization we have good assets. The Board felt this year it was in our best interest to hire a consultant to help us develop long-term strategies and systems to make us a more viable institution in the future.

## **Fundraiser**

This December we plan to hold a festive fundraising cocktail party at our charming Peter Parley Schoolhouse. Plans are being developed.



## **Annual Fund Campaign**

A timeline has been created to implement our first Annual Fund Campaign which is scheduled to arrive in local households in late November/early December.

## **Volunteers**

Our volunteer pool has grown significantly. Volunteer opportunities were publicized in the local press and are posted on our website. The response has been excellent! We have new volunteers in fundraising, Facebook, archives, clerical work, and publicity. This has been a great boon to the organization.

## **Conclusion**

In summary, it has been an exciting year at the Ridgefield Historical Society. Change is in the air! New volunteers have been added, new systems developed, and we are becoming a more integral part of the community. The energy level is high and “good things” are happening. We hope to sustain this enthusiasm and build a model going forward that will make the organization a strong, vibrant, sustainable force in the community dedicated to preserving the history of our charming New England town.

