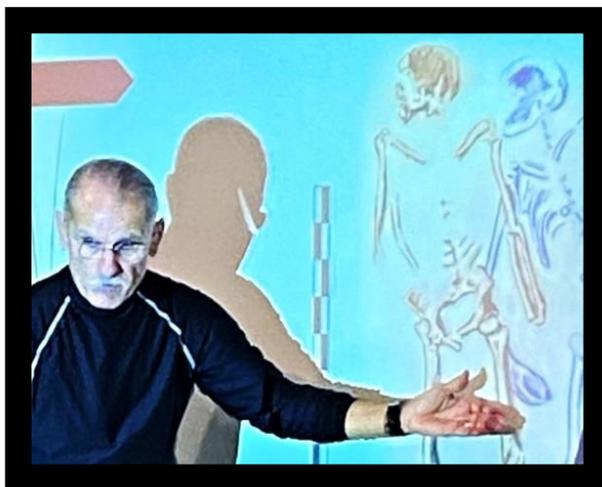


Year-End Review 2020

(ending October 2020)

Please note this report is enhanced from the one presented at the October 2020 annual meeting. Additionally, it reflects a different time period, October 2019 through October 2020, rather than the Historical Society's fiscal year ending on June 30, 2020 as previously reported.

The most exciting event of our fiscal year, and arguably of Ridgefield Historical Society (RHS) history, occurred in December 2019 when skeletons were found near the major engagement site of the Battle of Ridgefield. Ridgefield First Selectman Rudy Marconi asked RHS to take the lead in representing the town with local and state officials, homeowners and the press, and, of course, to provide historical context for the finds. This event generated publicity for Ridgefield all over the state and beyond. Unfortunately, due to the pandemic the laboratories evaluating the skeletons have been closed. The emeritus State Archaeologist, Nicholas Bellantoni, gave a presentation via Zoom on December 8 with news on further developments.



Emeritus State Archaeologist, Nick Bellantoni

With the support of our First Selectman, the emeritus State Archaeologist, the Connecticut State Historian, the Ridgefield Historic District Commission and others, RHS, together with the Connecticut State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO) applied for a grant from the National Park Service's American Battlefield Protection Program. We were awarded a two-year \$50,150 grant for battlefield research and consensus building.

COVID-19

In March 2020, the pandemic forced the closing of the Scott House. It was immediately necessary to rethink how RHS could survive and remain vital and relevant. Our task was to assess our needs and deal with basic issues such as maintaining our two historic buildings, paying our staff, preserving our collections, and retaining our membership. We are pleased to report that RHS has managed to function during this period and to continue our mission of preserving, interpreting, and fostering Ridgefield's historical, cultural, and architectural heritage. Upon shutdown, we formed a Crisis Management Committee and held weekly meetings via Zoom in which all Board members were invited to participate and most members did.

Our Crisis Committee quickly realized that preserving Ridgefield history included preserving how Ridgefielders dealt with the current pandemic so this information would be available to researchers in the future. We formed a COVID-19 Collections Committee and created an online form for residents to contribute to our archives. Weekly e-blasts have featured images and videos made by many citizens of Ridgefield, including our First Selectman, who was himself a victim of the virus.

Marketing/Publicity

Meanwhile, we understood that it was critical to our mission that we remain visible to the town of Ridgefield and reassure the public that we continued to be focused on preserving Ridgefield's history. Our first initiative was to strengthen our marketing communications. We decided that content was key and undertook to provide weekly electronic "blasts" with ever-changing content. These colorful informative e-blasts have increased our visibility in the community and are an important part of our marketing strategy. Additionally, we have kept up a steady stream of Facebook posts and press releases to the Ridgefield Press, HamletHub, and Ridgefield Patch. In the month of June, for example, our Facebook reach was up 14% to 6,500. Our e-blasts consistently have an open rate of 35%, compared to the average rate for non-profits reported in *The Non Profit Times* of 25%. Our website has kept up with our initiatives and has seen an increase of 250%. We have also continued to publish our quarterly *Scott House Journal*.



Staff and volunteers at the Scott House

Membership

As the pandemic began, we felt it was inappropriate to solicit memberships and donations, even though a spring 2020 membership drive was scheduled. We extended all memberships through the end of August and successfully restarted our membership campaign in September. Our membership is not only stable, but is trending upward at a rate of 25%.

General Contributions

In the past year, the Historical Society more than doubled its budgeted goal in general donations. Funds were received from an increased pool of individual donors as well as through the Society's anticipated third Annual Fund Campaign. Many donations continue to be received from first-time contributors.

Programming

Probably the area most impacted by the pandemic has been our programming. In the early part of the year we had one or two programs each month, notably Ed Hynes lecture on the Revolutionary War on Long Island Sound and the *Votes for Women* programs with our partners the Ridgefield Library, League of Women Voters in Ridgefield (LWV), and Keeler Tavern Museum & History Center (KTMHC). To date, we have posted over 110 online programs available 24/7 on our website and YouTube channel, including weekly Historical Nuggets from local historian Jack Sanders.



Dr. Darla Shaw portrays Alice Paul

In addition, we have created numerous multi-segment video series on topics such as Ridgefield Women To Be Remembered, Inside the Exhibit, CT Relic Hunters, Ridgefield and Connecticut's Native Populations, Battle of Ridgefield, the African American Experience, and Treasures from the Archives, among many others.

As part of the *Votes for Women* program, we hosted a four week mini course taught by Dr. Darla Shaw via Zoom, which focused on the women of Seneca Falls, NY and the first Women's Rights Convention, the work of Ridgefield's own Alice Paul, and her strategic campaign in Washington, DC in which she organized protests in front of the White House. This interactive course, presented in partnership with the Ridgefield Library, was live streamed and featured local residents who knew Miss Paul and other area suffragists and linked to women's issues today and the status of the Equal Rights Amendment.



West Lane Schoolhouse

West Lane Schoolhouse

While the Schoolhouse has been closed to the public due to the pandemic, we have been offering virtual tours presented by our volunteers Sally and Jack Sanders, guided by historian Jack Sanders, in place of the monthly programming we normally organize at the Schoolhouse during the May through October season. To date, four podcasts have been created covering topics such as school days at the Schoolhouse and its unique features and furnishings, notable scholars who attended the school in the early years, and how the Schoolhouse operated during the fall and winter seasons.

Exhibits

As part of year-long *Votes for Women* partner programming, the exhibit *The Road to Victory* provided a chronological and visually stimulating overview of Suffrage history for all ages. Researched by LWV and RHS, created by local artist Bil Mikulewicz, and curated by Professor of History Dr. Heather Prescott, the exhibit included ten collage-style panels and one introductory panel depicting various themes and periods of the American Suffrage movement.

The exhibit was on view in-person briefly at the Library before the COVID-19 shutdown and had a limited engagement, by reservation only, at the KTMHC in August 2020. In response, we successfully reformatted it as a virtual program with added features such as artist interviews.

In addition, we presented the following exhibits online, in-person at Town Hall, or both: *Ridgefield Remembers 9/11*, *Clarence F. Korker: Photographing Ridgefield for Forty Years*, and *Votes for Women* related materials.

Collections

The Archives Committee gained two new volunteers in 2020 who worked on documenting materials in the vault. Other volunteers worked on sorting through not yet catalogued donations in the attic, clearing space so that tours can eventually be brought through.



Image from the Clarence F. Korker Collection

Since the Scott House has been closed to the public, members of the Archives Committee have been busy taking part in webinars to update their skills. For example, in anticipation of our Warren Arthur Architectural Archives, volunteers participated in webinars learning about how to best preserve architectural records.

Volunteer archivists have been researching sites to share our digital online collection with a wider audience. The CT Digital Library Collection is one of the online sources being considered. That work should be completed in 2021.

Historic Preservation

The Town of Ridgefield adopted a 90-Day Demolition Delay Ordinance in 2020 thanks to, in large part, the concerted efforts of the Historical Society and the Historic District Commission led by its chairman Dan O'Brien.

The ordinance allows for objections to demolitions of architecturally significant structures in Ridgefield while alternative solutions are discussed. The passage of this ordinance was a major accomplishment for preservationists and adds a layer of protection for the town's historic structures.

Technology

We are continually acquiring, maintaining, and upgrading our computer systems and network, including our Zoom capability and video archives.

Genealogy

Genealogy services continue to investigate queries put forth by interested folks. Most requests come via the internet or telephone now that we are closed to the public.

Services include searching the Society's library holdings which include the vital records indexes, early state census reports, and local family histories and genealogies. Often Town Hall records are looked at to verify vital records, burial reports, and occasionally land records. The Ridgefield Library has digitized newspapers that are referenced, if needed.

This meaningful service is valued and can provide interesting as well as elusive information recorded from many, many years ago. In 2021, the Historical Society will be offering a webinar with author Libby Copeland who will be discussing her book, *The Lost Family*.

Buildings and Grounds

The Society maintains two historic buildings—the Scott House and the Peter Parley Schoolhouse. Over the past year, the Scott House has a new cedar shingle roof, a new HVAC Compressor, a freshly painted interior, and new burner. At the Peter Parley Schoolhouse, regular inspections continue even though the building is closed to the public, assuring that small problems don't become large ones.

Grants

In the last year, the Historical Society has made further progress by securing grants for both capital and programmatic initiatives. Since 2019, we have increased our grant revenue six-fold and have successfully received funding from Fairfield County Bank, Wadsworth Lewis Trust, Ridgefield Thrift Shop, CT Humanities, Anne S. Richardson Fund, and the CARES



Grant received from the Ridgefield Thrift Shop

Act Humanities Relief Act. To date in FY21, the Society is the proud recipient of a two-year capital grant from the Anne S. Richardson Fund as well as additional support from the CT Humanities, and National Park Service's American Battlefield Protection Program. The Goldstone Family Foundation, along with a handful of individual donations, supported the Georgianne Kasuli Fund, created in memory of our past Treasurer. This first-ever paid internship program took place from June 18 through August 21, 2020, when we worked with three recent college graduates: two from Ridgefield and one from Wilton. Their project was to create a Main Street Architecture walking tour to be presented through the ConnTours application, funded by CT Humanities. The Society also received a Paycheck Protection Program loan which has subsequently been forgiven.

Financial Report

The organizational budget has almost doubled this year with an increase in both revenue and expenses. Assets have overall remained stable. Given this turbulent year, we have seen fluctuations, but we are confident that we are on track for the necessary growth required for future activities.

Leadership

In October 2020, the Historical Society held an election and the following slate was unanimously voted in at the Annual Meeting.

Officers 2020-2022

President	Tracy Seem
1st Vice President	Michele Mahland
2nd Vice President	Geoff Harrington
Treasurer	Molly McGeehin
Recording Secretary	Laurie McGavin Bachmann
Corresponding Secretary	Nancy Selander

Directors 2020-2022

Architectural Archives Committee	Phil Esser
Collections Management Committee	Betsy Reid
Governance and Compliance Committee	Sara Champion
Historic Resources Inventory Liaison	Melanie Marks
Special Projects Committee	Sharon Dunphy
Strategic Planning Committee	Curt Schibli

Board members continuing to serve are: Kay Ables, Monica McMorran, Sue Law, Sally Sanders, and Gary Singer.

Conclusion

We would like to reiterate that we have stayed on course through exceptionally challenging times through the dedicated efforts of our Board members, staff, and volunteers who continue to dedicate themselves to our mission of preserving Ridgefield's historical, cultural, and architectural heritage.

