



# Year-End Review 2021

(Ending October 2021)

It has been another extraordinary year at the Ridgefield Historical Society. In June, we officially opened our doors at the Scott House to staff and volunteers after more than a full year of being closed. Following all public safety precautions, we have successfully transitioned from Zoom meetings to in person gatherings again.

During our physical closure, thanks to our terrific team, we were able to pivot to increased virtual programming partnering with other organizations. This virtual presence has significantly broadened our reach in the community and even internationally. We also have been able to increase productivity through the growth of the Board of Directors, hiring an additional staff member, and utilizing more local volunteers and interns.

### 20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Year (October 2021 – December 2022)

This fall marks the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Ridgefield Historical Society as a vibrant non-profit organization that both preserves our town’s history and provides residents and visitors with a better understanding of the legacy of this community’s 300+ years.

To celebrate, we are planning a year-long series of fun and family-friendly events that tell our story, honor the visionary founders who saved our 18<sup>th</sup> Century headquarters, reflect on the relevant work we have accomplished over the last two decades, and announce new and exciting initiatives and partnerships that are yet to come. To date, 20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary programming is generously supported by Lead Sponsors Liz & Steven Goldstone, with additional funding provided by Fairfield County Bank.



Ridgefield High School Jazz Ensemble performs at *A Scott House Celebration*.

The anniversary kick-off event, *A Scott House Celebration: RHS Turns 20*, took place on Saturday, October 2. This free open house drew approximately 125 people to our headquarters for an afternoon of live music, information tables, trivia contest with prizes, celebratory program with a lemonade toast and snickerdoodles, coloring station, exhibits from our archives, and much more. Special thanks to our event in-kind sponsors Deborah Ann’s Sweet Shoppe, Squash’s Ridgefield Office Supply, The Cake Box, DNKL, St. Andrew’s Lutheran Church, Zoe & Co Sugarbeads, and Ridgefield Library.

As we move into our next twenty years, we continue our efforts to foster public knowledge of Ridgefield’s heritage with programming that sheds light on what we have learned from the past, how it relates to the present, and how it shapes and inspires our collective future.

## Strategic Planning

In early 2021, we began updating our strategic plan. With the plan set by the board in the previous year and taking into account the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, a survey of board members and committee chairs was undertaken to identify their top priorities for the next three to five years. Our mission statement continues to describe accurately our aims and values. Our vision remains to be a vibrant community organization with exhibits, collections, and programs that attract Ridgefield residents and visitors from near and far. With that, the main goals set forth in the previous plan were updated and identified as: Preservation & Archiving, Community Engagement, Financial Security, and Evolution of the Organization. These goals will drive our activity as we build on our strengths and further develop as a relevant organization in the community.

## Marketing/Publicity

During the past year, the Historical Society's marketing efforts have increased and expanded exponentially. In addition to our weekly eblasts, regular press releases, event listings in regional calendars, and the engagement of local press with featured news items, the marketing team has bolstered the Society's presence on Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube. Of note was the redesign of our website, which includes a more user-friendly interface and consistent branding with a refreshed organizational logo and the creation of a 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary logo celebrating the Society's founding in 2001. The new website now properly formats for mobile use (approximately half of all visitors), has greatly improved content categorization, and contains thousands of pages of historic resources free and available to the public.



RHS home page on newly designed organizational website.

Our Constant Contact Year in Review (September to September) showed 59 eblast campaigns (a 23% increase over the previous year) with 61,295 emails sent. The average open rate was 39% (as compared to the non-profit average of 22%) and the average click-through rate was 19% (an increase of 111% over last year and 138% higher than the industry average). Our eblast list grew 54% over the past year. We are continuing to increase our reach by accumulating email addresses from online and in-person programs, event participants and visitors to the Scott House

and the Peter Parley Schoolhouse as well as mailing list signups on our website. Our Facebook page reached 55,652 during the past 12 months, a 181% increase over the previous year, and is a combination of direct followers and those of Old Ridgefield and Ridgefield CT, which also host our posts. We are rapidly growing the number of Instagram followers, which jumped 52% since last year. According to Google analytics, for the period 9/30/2020 - 9/30/2021, total users increased 21.6% compared to a year prior. For the same period of comparison, Connecticut website traffic grew by 49%. Segmenting traffic by age, we noticed we are attracting a more diverse user base with marked increases in the following age groups 18-24, 25-34, and 35-44. The launch of the new website in September 2021 showed huge increases over the same month last year with Users up 28%, Pageviews up 55%, Sessions up 45%, and Session duration up 28%.

Over the last year, the marketing team expanded to include volunteer Garrett Breslin who posts on Instagram and participates in weekly team meetings along with board member and marketing chair Sally Sanders (Facebook, press releases, Scott House Journal, and feature articles) and development and marketing director Kathryn Tufano (weekly eblasts and website updates) with support from webmaster Rick Pereira.

Recently, the Society was featured on the front page of the Ridgefield Press in an article announcing our 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary as well as the online version of the paper. In addition, over 20 press releases have been sent year-to-date to a variety of outlets including The Ridgefield Press, Hamlet Hub, Danbury News Times, and the Ridgefield Patch, among others. Our quarterly Scott House Journal, which features the President's Message and upcoming events, adds some historical research to our publications, with topics often based on materials in our collection.

## Grants

In the last year, the Historical Society has had an unprecedented year of increasing grant revenue, for both capital and programmatic initiatives, by 126%. We have successfully received funding from Fairfield County Bank, Wadsworth Lewis Trust, Ridgefield Thrift Shop, CT Humanities, Ridgefield Rotary Club, and the Meserve Memorial Fund. To date in FY22, the Society received the second payment of a two-year capital grant from the Anne S. Richardson Fund as well as major support from the National Park Service American Battlefield Protection Program for ongoing research and stewardship of the Battle of Ridgefield project.

## Georgianne Kasuli Intern Program

In spring of 2020, Liz and Steven Goldstone created and provided the seed money for this Fund in honor of the Historical Society's late Treasurer, Georgianne Kasuli. Over the last two years, the Goldstones, along with a handful of other individual donors, supported six paid summer internships. This year's program took place from June 14 through August 13, 2021, when we worked with one college student and two recent college graduates: one currently living in Ridgefield, one originally from Ridgefield, and one living in New Fairfield. Due to the



2021 Georgianne Kasuli Interns (L to R) Garrett Breslin, Alexa Rome, and Keillor Mose.

continued pandemic, work was primarily done remotely with regular check-in meetings via Zoom. Two interns worked on the Historical Society's 20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Celebration and were managed by Development & Marketing Director, Kathryn Tufano. The other intern worked on a Historic Preservation project under the direction of RHS board member and architectural historian, Phil Esser.

## Membership

Membership grew over 47% from the previous year due to an increase in yearly membership campaigns with targeted follow-up. Our fall 2021 drive, which helped to mark the kick-off of our 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary year, was professionally

branded and designed and subsequently printed and sent through a third-party mailing house. This attractive membership appeal included three targeted solicitations sent by first-class mail to current, lapsed, and not-yet members as well as a member invitation to join or renew. In addition, a press release, a series of eblasts, and personal email reminders were sent to promote the fall Membership Drive. Member benefits have been enhanced for this year and now include priority registration and early access to ticket sales, an invitation to



The Historical Society proudly receives a grant from the Ridgefield Rotary Club. Pictured (L to R) Joseph Cleary, Kathryn Tufano, Tracy Seem, and Kip Schibli.

exclusive members-only events, discounts on paid programs and our gift shop, and a 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary branded coaster as a token of our thanks.

### **General Contributions**

In the past year, the Historical Society increased revenue from general contributions by 32%. Funds were received from an increased pool of individual donors as well as through the Society's annual fund campaign and Fairfield County Giving Day. Due to the overall increased exposure and profile of the Historical Society, many donations continue to be received from first-time contributors.

### **Volunteers**

The Historical Society is happy to report an increase in volunteers, particularly high school students who helped over the summer, after school, and on weekends. Volunteers are an essential part of the work we do and over the last year served on the 20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Committee and as part of the Battlefield Project and the COVID-19 Taskforce, in addition to supporting the efforts of the Archival, Historic Preservation, Peter Parley Schoolhouse Committees.

### **Battle of Ridgefield: Research and Long-Term Stewardship Grant The National Park Service**

In 2020, the Ridgefield Historical Society in partnership with the State Office of Historic Preservation was awarded a two-year National Park Service grant to study the Battle of Ridgefield and begin to develop a long-term stewardship plan. The first year of the grant has been implemented. The grant Advisory Board met quarterly and developed three sub-committees – Marketing Committee, Research Hiring Committee, and Facilitator Hiring Committee. Heritage Consultants was hired as the primary researchers and has completed many tasks set out in the grant. They have collated existing Battle of Ridgefield research and began identifying additional research which needs to be done. They developed an extensive database of internationally, previously existing primary and secondary documents. This will serve as a core for the development of a RHS Battle of Ridgefield Library. Extensive mapping research has been done and information has been gathered from numerous field surveys. A draft of the final report for the Advisory Group's approval is in the final stages. Initial analysis shows the battle area is more extensive than previously thought.



Dr. David Naumec of Heritage Consultants demonstrates how researchers unobtrusively dig up any finds detected in the ground.

The Advisory Group is currently in the process of hiring a facilitator to engage the community in a discussion of the Battle of Ridgefield and what steps should be taken to honor and celebrate Ridgefield's important role in our Nation's founding.

The grant implementation is currently within budget and meeting its targeted objectives in a timely manner. The Ridgefield Historical Society is honored to have received this federal grant and is appreciative of the many experts that have joined us to gather this research and investigate what steps should be taken to honor this important Revolutionary War battle.

### **Programming**

Programming was offered this year in mostly a virtual format. Here are a few highlights:

*Heroes of Ned's Mountain* webinar by Jack Sanders

*The Cultural Phenomenon of Home DNA Testing* webinar by Libby Copeland

*Tracing Ancient Plagues*. A six-week webinar taught by Alexa Rome  
*Deemed a Runaway: Black Laws of the North* webinar by Judy Russell  
Colonial Expressions: Why Do We Say That video series by Candiss Cowen  
Ridgefield and Fairfield County's Native Populations video series by Kate Mozier-Tichy

For the full list of programs, please visit <https://ridgefieldhistoricalsociety.org/programs/>

### **Peter Parley Schoolhouse**

After more than a year, the Peter Parley Schoolhouse reopened in June for Sunday at the Schoolhouse, hosted by Jack and Sally Sanders. A new alarm system is in place. Visitors this season have been steady during open houses, a mix of out-of-town guests and Ridgefielders, many attracted to the open house by the signs always posted around the grounds on the day of the event. There was a front-page feature in *The Ridgefield Press* before the first open house in June and we also posted stories on Hamlet Hub and Patch and numerous reminders on Facebook and Instagram before every Sunday event.



Visitors gather at the Peter Parley Schoolhouses hosted by Sally and Jack Sanders (far right).

The town completed repairs to the front porch in September and a new enclosure for a port-a-potty is in place, organized by Geoff Harrington; next step is some landscaping.

We anticipate being able to use the schoolhouse, which is heated, for some events this fall and winter.

### **Exhibits**

As part of our ongoing series of exhibitions from the archives, we continued to offer the following exhibits online and in person at Town Hall.

*Clarence F Korke: Photographing Ridgefield for Forty Years*,  
*Our Town in Lego: LEGO Sculpture Contest*  
*Looking Back: One Hundred Years at Ridgefield High School*  
*In Memoriam, 9/11 at Town Hall*

### **Collections**

We have added a new paid position to this department, Betsy Reid who has been working at the Ridgefield Historical Society as an Administrative Assistant and sits on the Board, has been assigned to Collections Manager and will continue to work with our Board Chairs and volunteers.

The Historical Society vault is undergoing changes. Over twenty file cabinets have been removed from the vault and six new carriages will fill that space. The installation began on October 18 and should take about a week to complete. This improvement will add much needed space to house our collections and will provide a workspace for our volunteers as well. These improvements are made possible by a grant from the Anne S. Richardson Fund.

The collections cataloging teams have not been able to be at the Scott House over the past year due to the pandemic. We have recently welcomed them back as they begin cataloging our archives again. These



A recently demolished old home on New Street.

volunteers will use the more recent Version 5 of Past Perfect Museum Software for entering information into our online collections.

### **Historic Preservation Committee (HPC)**

The HPC has been active on two primary fronts in 2021: the processing of Demolition Delay Ordinance applications and organizing for the updating of the 1979 town-wide Historic Resources Inventory (HRI).

Demolition Delay Ordinance applications come fairly regularly and, with the Historic District Commission (HDC) we have been active in engaging applicants to reconsider demolition to properties we consider to be architecturally, culturally, or

historically significant to Ridgefield. Eight properties have come before us this year, two of which are in process as of early October. While we have lost a few, we were influential in bringing the owner of the Granary at 34 Bailey Avenue to the table and he is now engaged in recreating the building in his plan of development. Board member Melanie Marks has brilliantly produced historic reports to educate and hopefully convince applicants to reconsider demolition.

Melanie also succeeded in getting the state to scan the 1979 HRI so it is legible. Our webmaster, Rick Pereira, has been instrumental in putting all the searchable documents on the new website. We have been in communication with the state and HDC to coordinate funding for the updated HRI. The SHPO has tentatively agreed that we can combine efforts with the town to raise \$100,000 in non-matching funds over a two-year period to hire consultants to undertake the updated HRI project.

Summer intern Keillor Mose organized hundreds of photos of Ridgefield architecture by street taken by Phil Esser some 20 years ago. This was accompanied by historical architectural information about Ridgefield properties from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

### **Warren Arthur Architectural Archives**

The Architectural Archives Committee was created in 2019 and seeks to collect architectural material for the Warren Arthur Architectural Archives at the RHS. Mai Arthur has contributed funding for the creation of this new archive, named in honor of her husband.

Last year we used partial funding to purchase flat file cabinets to safely house collections. A space has been set aside in our archive for these materials.

Some outreach has been undertaken to seek materials from local architects but has yet to produce any substantive interest. However, Mai Arthur has donated her husband's collection which includes properties on Mamasco Road and elsewhere. Another small collection was donated by Helena Hernmarck of her house and studio on North Salem Road designed by her husband, industrial designer Niels Diffrient.

Ridgefield architects John Kinnear and Chris Moomaw of Ridgefield have volunteered to serve in a consultation role and Chris has agreed to write abstracts for the collection as they come in.

### **Technology**

After a year of total pandemic closure of the Scott House to fully remote-only operations; the primary role of the "Technology Committee" over the past year has been to restore, re-initialize and fully upgrade our digital

communications capabilities; re-enable functionality and extend the security capabilities of our in-house computer equipment, whilst continuing to provide universal access to all existing IT resources of the Historical Society.

This involved: the replacement and upgrade of internet/broadband access; the extension of a data-secure WiFi signal, via access points throughout the building; the re-installation with upgrading of Norton Security anti-virus/hacking software, for both in-house and external desktop/laptop computers; and automatic database “backup” support on all our systems, utilizing both hard-file and Cloud resources.

In addition, initiated by Board approved, long-term hardware retirement/replacement program began with our older printers and data storage devices.

Finally, continued established support of our expansion/updating and development of additional IT capabilities for the Society; via new forms of multimedia video and audio content, extended videoconferencing and communications capabilities, new vendor database development platforms and our newly restructured and re-authored Society website/portal.

### **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 of vital record 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.

### **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 had the ground drain under the rear stoop cleaned and mesh screen placed into the opening to prevent further clogs which appear to be the cause of water entry to the foundation and to flooring inside the closet next to the rear entry door.

There is also an issue with water entry to the basement along the front of the house. Two contractors have been contacted to review poor water drainage around the building foundation next to the parking lot and along the front of the building. We are asking for an inspection/evaluation of the existing sub-surface water drainage (which is inadequate) and a proposal for work required to correct (redirect) the flow of water away from the building. The rear gutters on the front and rear of the Scott House may have to be repositioned so water flow from the roof also drains away from the foundation. We hope to receive estimates within the next few weeks.



Our headquarters, the David Scott House, on 4 Sunset Lane.

At the **Peter Parley Schoolhouse**, regular inspections continue with noted issues referred to the Town of Ridgefield’s Director of Maintenance. Those issues are: four animal holes bored into the upper siding boards, replacement of the lower quarter of siding on the front exterior wall since there is decay and could allow water penetration of animal access. The replacement of the rotting front stoop has been addressed by town maintenance people with new flooring boards installed in September 2021.

With increased use of the Schoolhouse for lectures and learning for the public planned for the future, the need for restroom facilities has been requested. In this regard, an outdoor port-o-let has been suggested. The fenced enclosure for this has been erected on the West side of the structure. Site work remains to level the interior of the enclosure and to create a pathway from the front of the schoolhouse, prior to the installation of the modular restroom.

The school bell which would not ring when pulling the lanyard, has been adjusted to ring freely when the lanyard is pulled. The flag lanyard has been adjusted to permit lowering and raising when desired.

### **Financial Report**

The past fiscal year's financial activity was recorded using QuickBooks accounting software allowing for more comprehensive reporting and restricted fund tracking. The June 30, 2021, cash/investment value reflected an 11% increase over June 30, 2020, despite the negative impact of COVID-19 on investment vehicles. During the upcoming fiscal year, the Society has approved a 28% increase in its operating budget as it prepares to celebrate its 20th anniversary.

### **Nominating Committee Report**

Since putting together a slate of Officers and Directors for election for the 2020-2022 term, the Nominating Committee continued to meet throughout the year. Our focus was to enhance committees who lacked members other than a Chair to ensure an orderly transition should the Chair become unable to continue. We have asked the heads of all committees to groom successors or suggest possible candidates. Committees that need at least one other member are Building and Grounds, Technology, and Marketing. Both the Programming and the Fundraising Committees have enthusiastic members but need a Chair.

Job descriptions for all positions will be updated. Kip Schibli has volunteered to interview current Committee Chairs regarding their responsibilities to begin the process. Job descriptions for Officers will also be reviewed and updated as necessary.

With the very successful kick-off event for our 20th Anniversary, it is hoped that we will find members of the community interested in volunteering. We will also continue to use social media to solicit volunteers and ask Board members for recommendations.

Preparing for the 2021-2022 year, the Committee has proposed a slate for the following Director positions:

**Architectural**

**Archives**

**Buildings and Grounds**

**Education (formerly Peter Parley School House)**

**Genealogy**

**Historic Preservation**

**Marketing**

**Membership**

**Technology**

### **Conclusion**

In summary, it has been an extremely active year at the Historical Society. We could not be more proud of our continued growth thanks to the participation and dedication not only from our exceptional staff and volunteers but also the generous contributions from the community at large.