

RIDGEFIELD HISTORICAL SOCIETY - YEAR-END REVIEW 2022-2023
(Ending October 2023)

Mission:

The Ridgefield Historical Society's purpose is to preserve, interpret and foster public knowledge of Ridgefield's historical, cultural, and architectural heritage.

The purpose of this report is to summarize and highlight the strategic and tactical achievements of the Ridgefield Historical Society in pursuit of its mission. This past year has been extremely productive for the Historical Society as we continued to develop our team and our planning to better support our mission to serve as a vital organization in the community.

The Historical Society began the year with a thorough board and staff assessment. The objective of the assessment was to take a critical, inward facing look at how we, the society, function on a day-to-day basis and to establish a strong strategic and operating plan for the next three to five years. The assessment helped to establish clear lines between operational responsibilities and high-level board oversight as well as establish clear goals and objectives for the future. These goals include continuing to build a strong and effective board of directors as well as matching our staff to the growing needs of the organization:

This year we are delighted to announce the addition of the following key members to the staff.

Full-time Executive Director, Stephen Bartkus

Executive Assistant, Kendra Menary

Bookkeeper, Cathy Malloy

Financial and Committee Reviews:

Finance

Finance Chair and Treasurer, Steven March oversaw overall fiscal responsibilities which included: budgeting and financial planning, reporting, and monitoring, internal controls and accountability, transparency, and risk management and monitoring other risk management areas. Implemented this year: the migration of financial data from QB laptop to QB on-line, and ability to Code and track all revenues and expenses in QB.

A Finance Committee was formed to draft proposed changes to short and long-term investment strategies and service providers. This committee has also been charged with updating our investment policy for long term investment accounts. RHS bank accounts have been simplified into three accounts: operating, reserve, and restricted.

RHS Grants Received October 18, 2022 to October 17, 2023

CT Humanities Cultural Fund for Operating Support 2023 (January 2023): \$8,900

For general operational support.

Wadsworth Lewis (February 2023): \$2,000

For general operational support.

Ridgefield Thrift Shop (April 2023): \$10,000

To purchase new computers, scanner, TV, and network equipment.

CT Humanities Implementation Grant (June 2023): \$24,998

Two year \$50,000 initiative in collaboration with Ridgefield CT Pride, and student volunteers from Ridgefield High School and the school's GSA Club to record, preserve, and share Ridgefield LGBTQIA+ stories which are underrepresented in the Ridgefield Historical Society's collection, to foster intergenerational conversation, and increase civic pride and awareness.

Goldstone Internship Grant (May 2023): \$7,500

To hire four paid summer interns.

CT Humanities Summer at the Museum Grant (July 2023): \$1,000

To support public visitation to the Historical Society's collection over the summer.

Ridgefield Rotary (July 2023): \$2,500

To support hiring an architectural historian to get the Branchville Schoolhouse listed on the State Register of Historic Places.

National Park Service American Battlefield Protection Grant (August 2023): \$117,714

Two-year project to continue studying the Battle of Ridgefield here and in the British National Archives, including archaeology to learn more about the event and its participants. We thank Senator Blumenthal for his support and interest in our implementing this grant.

Constellation Community Champions Grant (October 2023): \$500

To support hiring an architectural historian to get the Branchville Schoolhouse listed on the State Register of Historic Places.

Membership

Under the guidance of new Membership Chair, Tatjana Witzmann, the 2023 membership campaign was our largest targeted mailing to date. Over 1000 letters were sent to the community at large. This mailing was followed by a press release, a series of eblasts, and personal email reminders were sent to promote the fall Membership Drive. Membership continues to grow each year due to an increase in yearly membership campaigns with targeted follow-up.

Member benefits include priority registration and early access to ticket sales, an invitation to exclusive members-only events, discounts on paid program and our gift shop.

Current membership for 2022-23: 223.

Marketing and Publicity

We have had another year of transitions, as the Ridgefield Historical Society begins a new era with an executive director and a growing list of programs and projects.

Marketing and publicity have supported and promoted the varied activities, from sharing information and helping host the Witness Stones Project installation at Scott House last November to introducing and gaining an audience for our new Ridgefield History Club, initiated by executive director Stephen Bartkus (who handled a live Facebook feed for each session). We've been able to announce several important grants, including the National Park Service American Battlefield Protection Program Phase 2 award, which drew U.S. Senator Richard Blumenthal to the Scott House for an announcement program and reception.

Press releases plus social media have been aimed at sharing the story of the Ridgefield Historical Society and the ways that our members help fulfill the mission of preserving and promoting Ridgefield history. The Scott House Journal, presented quarterly, takes a deeper dive

into specific topics, from the work volunteers are doing with the Couch family collection to the lives of Ridgefielders during the Gilded Age (coinciding with the successful, sold-out Gilded Age Tea at Lounsbury House), to a curious 1925 court case uncovered in our archives.

Our Facebook following continues to grow; our average post engagement is over 3500 and our reach is close to 10,000 in the month of September 2023.

The Ridgefield Historical Society marketing team is taking the lead in preparing and sharing publicity materials for the 2023 Ridgefield Holiday Historic House Tour, a joint venture by the Ridgefield Historical Society with Tiger Hollow Inc., which had traditionally offered a tour without a partner. Sally Sanders and Nancy Rowe have been greatly aided by the work of Steven March, Finance Chair and Stacey Schibli, Co-Chair. Many thanks to Steven March for brokering this joint venture with Tiger Hollow as well as creating the website that supports the event.

We look forward to another busy year sharing the news of the Ridgefield Historical Society.

Technology

Since the last annual meeting, the Technology team has been building upon the great work that had been done previously, the primary focus areas of the Technology team over the past year have been:

- A major upgrade of the PCs, scanners and networking infrastructure at Scott House. Thanks to a generous grant from the Ridgefield Thrift Shop, the Society was able to acquire 4 new HP state-of-the-art all-in-one desktop PCs, 2 new Lenovo laptop PCs, a scanning station for large format photo negatives and slides, a scanning station for large format documents (e.g., maps, posters, newspapers, etc.), a set of mesh WIFI routers (for fast, reliable WIFI networking) and a Roku smart TV (for use during Society meetings, exhibitions and other events). The Society also upgraded its Internet connectivity and bandwidth by switching to a Comcast Xfinity Internet and Phone Business Service that supports download speeds of up to 1 Gigabits / second. The net result of this is an order of magnitude improvement in the productivity of the Society's staff, volunteers, and interns that can now leverage a fast, reliable network of state-of-the-art computers, scanners, and printers, etc. together with super-fast and reliable WIFI and Internet connectivity.
- Working with Betsy Reid and the Collections team to increase (and enhance) use of the PastPerfect Collection Management System. The use of the new HP all-in-one desktop PCs, Lenovo laptop PCs, and scanners, together with a fast, reliable WIFI network and an upgrade of the PastPerfect software (to a networked version of the software) meant that up to 6 staff, interns and / or volunteers could all use the PastPerfect Collection Management System at the same time. Previously, only 1 person could use the PastPerfect system at any one time! Amongst other things, this enabled the team to eliminate a backlog of the Collection-related information that needed to be entered into the PastPerfect system after the COVID-19 pandemic. The team are also able to scan in images (that are of excellent quality) of the many hundreds of large format photo negatives that have been donated to the Society by the former Korker Photographic Studio in Ridgefield.

- Making access to the online (external) and on-site (internal) collections information easier, and more widely known, useful and used. This included acquiring and installing a Networked version of the PastPerfect software so that the Collection information in the system can be accessed and updated via more than one PC, adding multimedia files (e.g., oral histories, audio / video recordings, etc.) to the PastPerfect system and then publishing these to the public-facing website, etc. so that they could be accessed by the public. 45 audio recordings of local veterans of World War 2 were digitized and had their content transcribed. The audio recordings and the associated transcripts were then published on the Society's publicly accessible online website, so that the public could listen to the audio recordings and read the transcripts. A list of these WWII related oral histories may be viewed here ...
https://ridgefield.pastperfectonline.com/Search?search_criteria=ww2oh&onlyimages=false .

The Board of Directors would also like to acknowledge the contribution of Jason Zides. Mr Zides recently stepped down from the Board but is continuing to contribute to the technology-related efforts of the Society as an active volunteer.

Programming and Collaborations

Witness Stones: The Witness Stones Project worked with the historical society and East Ridge and Scott's Ridge Middle Schools to honor the lives of two of the five enslaved persons, Lidia and Quash, who lived in the Scott House during the 1700's. Collections did the research and provided the primary documents for the students to study. The brass plaques were installed in the ground in front of the Scott House.

A Gilded Age Tea The Ridgefield Historical Society and the Lounsbury House presented a Gilded Age Tea at the Lounsbury House featuring a performance by Kandie Carle, "The Victorian Lady" — plus tea and treats

COVID-19 Memorial Tree Dedication The ceremony included words and a plaque dedication by Ridgefield First Selectman, Rudy Marconi, and Pastor Beth Anderson of St. Andrew's Church in Ridgefield. The COVID-19 Memorial Tree was initiated by the Commission on Aging of Ridgefield and was generously donated by Steve Zemo of Ridgefield Apartments.

The Ridgefield History Club, A program of the Historical Society, started by Executive Director, Stephen Bartkus meets regularly throughout the year to discuss the history of Ridgefield and all its villages. The Ridgefield History Club is an informal story telling session (it's not a presentation or lecture) where everyone sits in a circle and shares memories related to a specific topic in Ridgefield's history. The discussions are recorded and cataloged in the Historical Society's archive to preserve the memories of all of Ridgefield's people, places, and events for future generations.

A JOURNEY: A One-Woman Musical with Kimberly Wilson Presented by the Ridgefield Historical Society and the Ridgefield Library. An in-person performance about the Black experience in American history. In this musical event, Kimberly Wilson represents seven women — including Harriet Tubman, Sojourner Truth, Rosa Parks — whose lives spanned hundreds of years and laid the foundation for future generations.

Official Taking Down of the 20th Anniversary Banner with Boy Scout Troop #76

Patriots & Loyalists in Olde Town Cemetery, featuring 27 graves of note. A self-guided tour with the Town of Ridgefield Graveyard Restoration Committee self-guided tour.

Life in Ridgefield—Before it Was Known as Such – A special program, held in collaboration with the Ridgefield Library featuring lecturer Drew Shuptar Rayvis, focused on early days — Life in the Eastern Woodlands and Life in the Connecticut Woods from the 1670s to the 1730s.

Hand-Cut Silhouettes- Annual program highlighting the artistry and talent of Silhouette artist Deborah O'Connor.

Eccentric Women of Ridgefield - Co-presented with the Ridgefield Theater Barn and the Ridgefield Historical Society, the play is based on narratives created by Dr. Darla Shaw, adapted for the stage by Stephen Robbins and directed by Linda Seay.

Bennett's Pond State Park Walking Tour - Covered the history and people who once inhabited the Bennett's Pond area. The walk, which was researched and led by Benjamin Hume, covered the history of the land with a focus on the Conley family who owned the largest tin foil company in the world and established Outpost Farm, one of the largest estates in Ridgefield, totaling more than 1,500 acres, which grew into one of New England's biggest nurseries in the 1920s and 1930s.

Battle of Ridgefield walking Tours – An annual event lead by Darla Shaw.

Walking Tour of Ballard Park Gardens – In collaboration with the Ridgefield Library, presented by Terry McManus President of the Ridgefield Garden Club

Ballard Park Gardens Then and Now Lecture by Terry McManus, President of the Ridgefield Garden Club, presented in partnership with the Ridgefield Library and Ridgefield Historical Society.

"The Jeffersonians" by Kevin Gutzman - Presented at the Ridgefield Library, a program with Kevin R. C. Gutzman, author of *The Jeffersonians: The Visionary Presidencies of Jefferson, Madison, and Monroe*. Presented in collaboration with the First Principles group.

Community Outreach:

Pride in the Park

Summerfest

Cannon Grange Fair

Ridgefield Historical Society Scholarship

The 2023 Ridgefield Historical Society Scholarship was awarded to graduating senior, Kate Tebbe, at the Ridgefield High School Award Ceremony in June. The scholarship — founded in 2022 — encourages students to share their individual perspectives on our Town's history.

Internships

Ridgefield Historical Society offers two paid internships, through the support of the Goldstone Family Foundation and the Kasuli Family.

The Kasuli Internship honors the memory of the late Georgianne Kasuli, a long-time member of the Board of the Ridgefield Historical Society. The *Goldstone Family Internship* is part of a program which supports the hiring of interns across several Ridgefield non-profit organizations. Both internships provide growth and learning opportunities for the intern, and a much appreciated 'extra set of hands' for the organization.

2023 Interns:

Sam Bazarian – Goldstone Family Foundation Intern – Sophomore Gettysburg College
Francesco Carro – Georgianne Kasuli Memorial Fund Intern - Junior University of Connecticut
Jane Prusko – Georgianne Kasuli Memorial Fund Intern - Ridgefield High School Senior
Sara Shepherd – Goldstone Family Foundation Intern – Sophomore Vassar College
Ainsley Hoemann – Volunteer Intern
Sebastian Utomo – Volunteer Intern

Volunteers

Thanks to our continued efforts in community outreach and programming, the Historical Society's volunteer base continues to grow. We are delighted to have attracted many new volunteers this past year including the increase of support through our High School students. We have continued to work with the Boys and Girls club, the National Charity League. Volunteers continue to be the key to our success.

Peter Parley Schoolhouse

The West Lane District/Peter Parley Schoolhouse increased its number of visitors this year, thanks in large part to volunteers Darla Shaw, B.G. Brown, and Barbara Kaplan, all retired teachers who came in to educate youngsters in the ways of early 19th Century district schools. "Mistress Shaw" and "Mistress Brown" hosted the three Farmingville Elementary School third grade classes on three mornings in the spring. Each session lasted about two hours and included singing, recitation, geography, vocabulary, "cyphering" and a taste of penmanship. There was even a recess period to explore some old-fashioned toys and a chance to ring the schoolhouse bell.

"Mistress Kaplan" joined "Mistress Shaw" for a shorter program during the May "Last Sunday at the Schoolhouse" and gave guests a taste of early education. Darla Shaw returned in August to give a talk about Abigail Goodrich Whittelsey, the very accomplished sister of Peter Parley (Samuel G. Goodrich); she was one of the first women editors and magazine publishers in the United States. Like her brother Samuel, all her formal education came at the West Lane District School.

A class from the Creative Children's Korner Preschool also visited in May and the five-year-olds enjoyed a short talk about the school and had many questions for their hosts, Jack, and Sally Sanders.

We have a group of home-schooled students coming to visit next spring and this November, a troop of Daisy Girl Scouts will visit the schoolhouse.

With the addition of a seasonal porta-potty, the Schoolhouse has been a better fit for groups of youngsters. Work during the spring and summer by Geoff Harrington and Jack Sanders filled in the bare dirt around the new grass. Pete Nichols added a low step at the front porch to make access easier.

There was some damage to the roof during a spring storm, which the town had repaired; the interior needs some painting where water came in.

Last Sundays at the Schoolhouse continue to draw a steady visitor stream; signs posted on grounds are very effective at attracting visits.

Buildings and Grounds

The Society maintains three historic buildings and properties. These buildings include the David Scott House, The Peter Parley Schoolhouse, and a recent gift of a Bauhaus inspired post World War II property. This recent bequest will be maintained by the Historical Society and serve as a place for future educational programs, specifically tied to Post WWII architecture, history, and design.

Geoff Harrington our buildings and grounds chair has tirelessly looked after these properties by constant oversight and inspections. Maintenance from the past year include:

David Scott House:

Completed water drainage issues in the basement to ensure ongoing protection of historic documents.

Completed replacement of undersized rear gutter and downspouts.

Attended to installation & removal of window screens & storm windows as needed.

Secured landscaping services as required.

Attended to pruning and removal of vegetation encroaching on the parking lot.

And, a myriad of small/incidental "fixes", improvements, requests as they occur during the year.

Peter Parley Schoolhouse:

Arranged for the installation of the temporary toilet outside the schoolhouse.

Installed the concrete tile walkway from the front door to the toilet.

Arranged for the town to make minor repairs to the siding.

Made minor repairs/adjustments to allow the school bell more freedom of motion.

Arranged for the town Parks & Recreation crew to perform the landscaping, as needed.

Exhibits

As part of our ongoing series of exhibitions from the archives, exhibitions this past year at Town Hall, The Scott House and online included:

If These Walls Could Talk - original shingles from the 1714 Scott House featuring hand-drawn designs and drawings from the Scott House's earliest inhabitants.

Gilded Age; The Patrons and the Builders

Battle of Ridgefield Reenactment Weekend – A Photographic Journal by Bing Liem

In Memoriam, 9/11 at Town Hall

Collections

Collections worked with Chronicle Heritage to provide research about historic homes for the new Historic Resource Inventory.

The Witness Stones Project worked with the historical society and East Ridge and Scott's Ridge Middle Schools in November to honor the lives of two of the five enslaved persons, Lidia and Quash, who lived in the Scott House during the 1700's. Collections did the research and provided the primary documents for the students to study. The brass plaques were installed in the ground in front of the Scott House.

In the spring we received a \$10,000 Thrift Shop grant for new PCs, laptops, scanner and monitor expanding the use of Past Perfect software from one to six workstations including the vault.

Summer Interns helped to catalog the large backlog of donations caused by the pandemic. They also organized our oral history collection of over 200 interviews. Twenty-five of the WWII oral history collection were digitized, transcribed and cataloged with the help of interns Sam Bazarian, Francesco Carro, Sara Shepherd, Jane Prusko and Sebastian Utomo.

Work has begun on the Clarence Korker negatives. This collection has been stored in the vault uncatalogued for many years. Volunteer Keith Russell is working on digitizing this important collection of images of Ridgefield people, buildings and events that span 40 years; from 1950-1990.

Avnish Primavera, a volunteer from the Ridgefield jobs program, works in collections once a week. He has been very helpful scanning images into our Past Perfect database.

Ten volunteers continue to work on important donated collections from various sources such as Jesse Royce Landis- actress in plays and movies, George Rockwell -author of the History of Ridgefield, Bob Tulipani- lifelong resident of Ridgefield active in many civic organizations, and Eddie Pickett, Ridgefielder who fought and died at Gettysburg.

Collections has managed to catch up to the backlog of accessions. There are still many items stored in the vault that have not been entered into PastPerfect but we are making progress with them. This work relies heavily on the help of volunteers, and we hope to add more over the coming year.

The Architectural Archives Committee

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.

In 2020 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. Outreach was undertaken in 2021 to seek materials from local architects but did not produce any substantive interest.

In August 2023, local landscape architect Helen Dimos expressed an interest in joining the committee. In September 2023, researcher and President of the Ridgefield Garden Club, Terry McManus and architect Ruth Van Den Nieuwenhuizen also volunteered to join the committee. The committee hopes to meet in person during Thanksgiving to discuss programming initiatives.

Historic Preservation Committee (HPC)

The primary focus of the HPC this past year has been managing the town-wide Historic Resources Inventory (HRI) on behalf of the Ridgefield Historical Society and the Town of Ridgefield Historic District Commission. After a delayed start to the contracts our contractor, Commonwealth Heritage, finally got underway in January.

Commonwealth Heritage produced a historic context draft in August which was very problematic and took considerable effort by the Committee to address the substantive issues. Conversely, the sample Historic Resources Inventory (HRI) forms have been well-received so far. A second, \$30,000.00 Survey and Planning Grant with matching amount for HDC for a total of \$60,000.00 will be sought from the State of Connecticut for the contractors to create 500 more HRI forms.

The revised Demolition Delay Ordinance was finalized and has been codified in town ordinances; Melanie Marks deserves a tremendous amount of credit for spearheading this effort. Notice via signage is now required, and the “built after 1950” component was changed to “anything over 50 years old.” At three, demolition applications were significantly less than last year.

A fortunate outcome of the shortcomings of the historic context was the beginnings of a building photo-inventory by street number and address. This will become part of the electronic database created by and managed by both the Historic Preservation and Architectural Archives Committees

Genealogy

The Genealogy Committee continues to answer queries from avid family researchers. Most requests are from out of towners trying to complete their family trees. Some work is done at the Scott House using our reference and resource materials. Town Hall provides further information in their Vital Records and Land Records archives. Occasionally a cemetery visit will take place to send along a photo and exact transcriptions of tombstone recordings.

This year a small group interested in genealogy have been meeting at the Scott House. The focus has evolved into researching family connections that are useful to the work being done in Collections. By providing family trees, those involved in the reading and cataloging information can more easily determine relationships and certain timelines. This has proven to be a very worthwhile and interesting endeavor both for us, and hopefully, for the Collections volunteers.

The Nominating Committee

The aim of the Nominating Committee is to sustain the RHS board by identifying new board directors and assist in filling current board resource needs. Our focus is to develop classes of future board members to take on seats as individual terms expire every 2 years. An amendment to be voted on by the membership has been added to the by-laws, board seats will have term limits starting in 2024. Currently the only term limits to board members is limited to the President.

Preparing for the 2023-2024 year, the Committee has proposed a slate for the following Director positions:

Executive

2nd Vice President:

Recording Secretary: Eric Hutner

Directors

Buildings and Grounds:

Architectural Archives: Phil Esser
Archives: Kay Ables
Peter Parley Schoolhouse:
Marketing/Publicity: Sally Sanders
Genealogy:

With Appreciation:

The Ridgefield Historical Society is a relatively young organization and unique in that we have been fortunate enough to have had many of the volunteers who helped form our organization 21 years ago, serve on our board for all these years. As we look to the next 20+ years, we welcome the new members that have joined us. And to those leaving this year, want to thank you with the deepest gratitude for all your selfless work and commitment to the Society and hope you will continue to be part of the RHS family.

A very special thanks to:

Monica McMorran Archives,
Gary Singer Past President and Technology
Jason Zides Technology
Sue Law Genealogy
Geoff Harrington Buildings and Grounds

Conclusion

In summary, it has been an extremely exciting year at the Historical Society filled with many important achievements that position us to future success in our mission. We could not be prouder of our continued growth thanks to the participation and dedication not only from our exceptional staff, but the generous contributions from the community at large.

For more information on the Ridgefield Historical Society, please go to our website:

<https://ridgefieldhistoricalsociety.org>