

Annual Report 2025 – Ridgefield Historical Society

The Ridgefield Historical Society (RHS or the Society) is a 501(c)3 organization under the Federal Tax Code. The RHS is an independent organization that receives no operational funding from the federal, state or local governments and supports itself through private fundraising, grants and program and product sales. The Society's purpose is to preserve, interpret, and foster public knowledge of Ridgefield's historical, cultural, and architectural heritage.

Founded in 2001 to save the 1714 David Scott House, the RHS maintains state-of-the-art archives, which serve as the principal repository for Ridgefield's historic documents, images, and artifacts, an extensive (and growing) collection of over 10,000 items. The Society has over 400, active paid memberships, 40 of whom are part of the Catoona Circle, a membership tier for individuals, families, and organizations who generously contribute \$1,000 or more annually.

This report covers the year 2025 (July 2024 – June 2025) and provides an overview of the activities and accomplishments of the RHS over that period. We deepened our preservation work, expanded educational programming, and engaged more residents, partners, and visitors with Ridgefield's history. From the successful launch of the Ridgefield Garden Tour in collaboration with the Ridgefield Garden Club, and progress continued on the Branchville Schoolhouse Restoration thanks to significant community support, to the Battle of Ridgefield Archaeology Project's fieldwork throughout town and the culmination of our LGBTQIA+ Oral History Project, our mission came to life through measurable impact and unforgettable community moments. We are grateful to our dedicated board, volunteers, members, donors, partners, and staff for their steadfast commitment. Such advocacy and generosity powered the achievements chronicled in this report and set us up well for the opportunities ahead. We would like to extend a special thanks to our retiring board members, Ray Murphy who was the Chair of our Governance and Compliance Committee, and Laurie Bachmann who was the Chair of our Special Projects Committee. Each gave fully of their creativity and dedication to the RHS and we are better for having had their support. We were saddened by the passing of Founding Board Member and Town Historian, Kay Ables. Without Kay, there would not have been an RHS. We would also like to thank our dedicated and expert staff. Quite simply, without them we are not able to provide the wonderful service to the Town of Ridgefield that is described in the following and felt by so many Ridgefielders of all ages. We are grateful to Stephen Bartkus, our first ever fulltime Executive Director and his staff, Betsy Reid, Collections Manager (who is retiring from this position but graciously staying on the board), Janet Graves, who has recently been promoted to Operations Manager, and Anna Jones our new Collections Manager, having worked

with and received great mentorship from Betsy Reid. The RHS is successful because of its dedicated Board and Staff and their seamless collaborative approach.

Highlights

The RHS achieved its exciting financial goals for FY25 through strong growth in membership revenue, retail sales, fundraising events and generous giving by our amazing community. We rely on continued growth in all these areas to fund our important work in FY 2026. The Board authorized increases in staff time and resources to help us properly manage our continued growth in programming, research and community outreach. The attached charts show our budgets for this current FY26 year. As you can see more than half of funding for operations comes from our fundraising events and unrestricted gifts from our community supporters. These funds are essential to support the important work of preserving Ridgefield's history.

RHS undertakes at least 2 major fundraising events a year. This year, the Ridgefield Garden Tour 2025 generated: net \$101,955 (RHS share \$50,977.50). Thank you to the Ridgefield Garden Club and Ros Hooley President of the Board of the Garden Club, Garden Tour Co-chairs Stacey Schibli and Terry McManus, plus Janet Graves, the entire Garden Tour Committee, Honorary Chair Todd Forrest, garden owners, sponsors, donors, volunteers, and attendees. <https://ridgefieldhistoricalsociety.org/a-beautiful-day-for-the-2025-ridgefield-garden-tour/>

We are working hard on the second major event to take place in December: The Holiday House Tour 2025. We are continuing our partnership with Tiger Hollow after our first house tour together in 2023. Thank you to Llewellyn Cheng RHS co-chair and Presenting Sponsor Karla Murtaugh. Tour 6 homes, plus Holiday Market and Raffle at Lounsbury House. The date is Dec. 6, 2025. Become a sponsor, buy tickets: ridgefieldholidayhousetour.org Over 300 tickets were sold on the first day of ticket sales!

Additionally, mentioned below are some other exciting highlights for the year, some of which are described in more detail in the Committee sections:

- Annual scholarship awarded to Alma Abraham

<https://ridgefieldhistoricalsociety.org/news/>

- Hosted four senior interns from Ridgefield High School and thirteen summer interns made possible through the generous support of the Goldstone and Kasuli families.

<https://ridgefieldhistoricalsociety.org/meet-historical-society-summer-interns/>

<https://ridgefieldhistoricalsociety.org/ridgefield-high-school-students-reflect-on-their-historical-society-internships/>

- Record Annual Appeal driven by matching gifts, personalized outreach, and media.

- Membership and Catoonah Circle growth due to increased visibility and cultivation. Catoonah Circle cultivation events (Vault Party, Lounsbury House private reception, East Meets West Party, Cocktail Party at Meyers House) strengthened stewardship. Catoonah Circle: 40 households at \$1,000+
- Culmination of LGBTQIA+ Oral History Project with a full-house public program in June 2025 and book in development.
- Launched Battle of Ridgefield archaeology fieldwork in April 2025 with significant discoveries.
- Branchville Schoolhouse Restoration advanced design and pre-construction thanks to community contributions and support from the Leir Foundation, Richardson Foundation and NSDAR.
- Arthur Cottage: managed tenant transition, repairs, and upgrades; re-leased at market rate.
- Historic Resources Inventory funded by State Historic Preservation Grant continues and advocacy for Modernist treasures like Veterans Park School auditorium progressed in partnership with the town.
- Ridgefield History Club continued to meet monthly delivering well-attended sessions and livestreams.
- School partnerships expanded: Native American Archaeology program at Ridgefield High School; Civil War letters program with Ridgefield 8th grades; living history programs at Peter Parley Schoolhouse, a museum of early education in Ridgefield, plus the continuation of the Witness Stones Project with the Ridgefield 8th grades.
- Garden, architecture, and battle-themed programs engaged broad audiences; walking tours sold out and drove memberships.
- Collections & Access: numerous artifacts added to the collection, oral history interviews digitized and cataloged, hundreds of Korky Korker photos scanned, all accessible online: <https://ridgefieldhistoricalsociety.org/collections/online-archive/>
- The Plaque Program remains very active, thanks to the generous contributions of April Pereyra of Stoop Sleuths and Melanie Marks of CT House Histories, who volunteer their time to conduct the historical research for each home.

Grants

RHS managed and renewed existing grants and sought and obtained new grants that have broadened and will broaden capacity for preservation and education. Thank you to the Ridgefield Thrift Shop, Goldstone Foundation, Lewis Fund, Morganti Foundation,

Leir Foundation, Richardson Foundation, National Society Daughters of the American Revolution.

- Ridgefield Thrift Shop for oral history digitization and equipment
- Goldstone Foundation for internship program
- Lewis Fund for oral history project
- Morganti Foundation support
- Leir Foundation for Branchville Schoolhouse
- Richardson Foundation for Branchville Schoolhouse
- National Society Daughters of American Revolution for Branchville Schoolhouse made possible through the support of the Cannon Ridge DAR.

Community Engagement

- Opening of the Vault parties welcomed new audiences and converted visitors into members and donors (Catoonah Circle, Ridgefield Newcomers, Founders Hall)
- Collaborations with Lounsbury House, Ridgefield Library, Ridgefield Garden Club, Ridgefield CT Pride, The Meetinghouse in Ridgebury, St. Stephen's Church, Keeler Tavern, Tiger Hollow, and Be Historic Coffee with Queen B Coffee Co. broadened reach.
- Community events (Town Party at the Playhouse, Memorial Day Parade, Pride in the Park, Summerfest, Giant Pumpkin Weigh Off) amplified visibility.
- Continuing programs to commemorate America 250

Collections

The Collections Committee has worked hard this year to digitizing and transcribe over 100 recordings from the early years of historical society. Collections also transcribed and made digitally available 26 interviews that were done as part of the The LGBTQIA+ Project. A significant cache of town photos was donated to RHS and Collections went to work to digitize fifty years of Clarence Korker's Ridgefield photo shop negatives. The collection includes a virtual interview with Mr. Korker. The Society has also received the honor of curating much of the work of acclaimed local architect, Warren Arthur. Collections set to work scanning and organizing Mr. Arthur's architectural plans, many of which represented projects for several important local structures. Collections also worked to create a reference list of important Ridgefield artists and many of their works. RHS was honored to receive a collection of Native American artifacts, which was excavated at Richardson Park. The Town of Ridgefield donated these artifacts to the

RHS, confident in our ability to ensure that the artifacts will be well researched and understood so that the people of Ridgefield will have access to them and can be educated about them. As part of this effort, Collections worked with Ridgefield High School teachers in exhibiting and presenting an educational program led by RHS volunteer, member and archaeologist Lynn Marie Wieland, about the Native American artifacts at the high school. For middle schoolers, Collection worked with East Ridge Middle School and Scott's Ridge Middle School teachers and students providing research on enslaved persons in Ridgefield as part of the Witness Stones Project. Memorial stones were placed at the Scott House during a ceremony held at the historical society with student participation.

Historic Preservation

Historic Resources Inventory

The Historic Preservation Committee (HPC) continued to manage the town-wide Historic Resources Inventory (HRI) on behalf of the RHS and the Town of Ridgefield Historic District Commission. Unfortunately, in August 2023, during the early stages of the project, Commonwealth Heritage, now Chronicle Heritage, produced a historic context, which needed substantive revisions and took a great deal of time and effort on behalf of the HPC to address. After conversation with Chronicle Heritage management, the company agreed to withdraw from the contract. With the remaining funding, the HPC engaged a new consultant, Sawdust and Strata, to improve the historic context and revise the HRI forms. The contract was signed earlier this year and is in process. A second, \$20,000.00 Survey and Planning Grant with matching amount for HDC for a total of \$40,000.00 (new state-mandated maximum) will be sought from the State of Connecticut for the contractors to create 500 more HRI forms in 2026/2027.

Upgrades to Veteran's Park Elementary School

The HPC worked to inform and encourage the Board of Selectman to consider the historic significance of the Mid-Century Modern building. Additionally, the Society has met with school officials and with First Selectman, Rudy Marconi, recently and over several years to consider the historic fabric of Veteran's Park School when planning renovations and to adding the building to the new proposed historic preservation district, which will help highlight its importance in the timeline of our town's architectural history. In May 2025 Betsy Reid, Stephen Bartkus, and Tracy Seem met with School officials and two selectpersons to discuss the school's plans to gut the auditorium. Conversations continued throughout the summer and the superintendent met with Bassam Fellows for advice on how to update the space while keeping the integrity of the original aesthetics. All painting of the original Mahogany paneling has been removed from their plan and removal of original chairs has been put on hold until next year with advice from the HPC to provide guidance as the school researches new seating. The

Ridgefield Press wrote a positive article on the partnership, and the article was picked up by USModernist, and was included in last month's eblast. USModernist is the nation's largest digital archive on Modern houses.

Gateway Project

In late February 2024, RHS, continuing to be a go to resource in the town for advice on projects of historical significance, was asked to join a meeting with Rudy Marconi and longtime Ridgefield benefactor and project proponent, Steve Hicks to discuss plans for three separate site improvements dubbed *The Gateway Project*, consisting of town-owned sites, including the Cass Gilbert Fountain, the so-called watering trough, and the Peter Parley Schoolhouse. Participants in the telephone conference meeting were Rudy Marconi, Steve Hicks, Landscape Architect, Jane Didona, RHS Executive Director, Stephen Bartkus, and RHS board members Sally Sanders, Phil Esser and Tracy Seem. The committee has continued to meet to discuss and review the landscape architect's plans for the Schoolhouse site as well as watering trough. Feedback was given by RHS to create a simpler landscape design rather than the very formal garden in 1st draft. The most recent meeting took place on site, with Stephen Bartkus, Sally Sanders, Tracy Seem and Steve Hicks. Mr. Hicks presented a simpler more modest landscape plan that was more in line with a rural landscape of the time. Mr. Hicks also reported on his progress with the Town, and tree warden. Several trees were tagged for removal the below work is scheduled to be completed this fall: 1) install a compost out house to replace the port a potty, 2) replace existing roof with a new cedar roof, and 3) reface exterior chimney with a stone façade to cover the now exposed cinder blocks. - gravel-resin walkway will be installed for paths at both sites.

Demolition Delay Ordinance

We saw only four applications under the Demolition Delay Ordinance this past fiscal year. We objected to one but received no response. Melanie Marks graciously volunteered to research properties and keep the records of the Demo Delay requests for HPC.

Archaeology

This year we began our second National Park Service-funded archaeology survey of locations where engagements and skirmishes took place during the 1777 Battle of Ridgefield. An Advisory Committee created to oversee the process met quarterly and, after seeking responses to an RFP, chose Heritage Consultants to do the archaeological work. Heritage has made significant discoveries since beginning field work in May, including the exact location of the Battle's Second Engagement, as well as evidence of fighting near West Lane and Main Street that may be the first indication of an "organized" Patriot effort to confront the British following the engagement at the

barricade. Using ground penetrating radar, Heritage also found several additional remains where five remains were found in 2019. Heritage has written monthly blog posts for our website and social media sites. Members of its staff are making three public presentations during the survey. The first was an April lecture by David Naumec about the key elements of the Battle and the archaeological techniques to be used by Heritage. In September, Heritage and the RHS staff presented an Archaeology Day at the Scott House. Families were given demonstrations of Heritage equipment and then they had a chance to use the machines themselves for some surveying of their own. Forensic analyses of the remains found in 2019 have continued at several universities around the country. We're hoping to get results shortly from labs studying isotopic signatures, soil samples, DNA samples, and more. Coinciding with the NPS survey, volunteers at Scott House have been attempting to compile the first list of every combatant on both sides of the Battle. We're researching Continental Army participants by transcribing Colonial-era pension requests. To receive their pensions, "Continental" had to declare where they served and if they saw action. Then also had to describe the action so, in addition to providing us with names of combatants, the requests are offering first person accounts of the Battle. The RHS has been videotaping elements of the survey. We're presently speaking with a production company about creating an hour-long documentary on both the archaeological work and the forensic analyses of the 2019 remains. CPTV has expressed interest in airing the finished product.

Peter Parley Schoolhouse

The Peter Parley Schoolhouse continues to attract visitors during its Sunday afternoon open houses. The mix of guests includes random passersby and longtime Ridgefielders who have never been inside the schoolhouse. Jack and Sally Sanders host the Sunday afternoon open houses, putting out the "Schoolhouse Open Sunday 1-4" signs at the beginning of the weekend to increase visibility. Their project for 2026 will be to find reliable back-up volunteers for the open houses, after a medical emergency caused one to be cancelled recently. We have hosted classes from Branchville School and home schoolers in the past year, giving the children a taste of how children were taught during the years this district school operated (1756-1915). In the coming year, leading up to the national Semiquincentennial, the triangle on which a schoolhouse has been standing since 1756 will be landscaped to give the building more visibility, while maintaining the rocky terrain that's part of its character. The schoolhouse will receive a new cedar shake roof, and its cinderblock chimney will be faced with fieldstone. Perhaps most exciting, the current Port-a-Potty will be replaced by a composting toilet in a period-appropriate outhouse on the school grounds. (All this work is part of the Gateway Project, referenced above in the Historic Preservation section).

Branchville Schoolhouse

RHS plans to undertake the Branchville Schoolhouse Restoration Project (BSRP) which will restore this historic 19th century building and transform into a vibrant community space for arts and cultural exhibitions, meetings, and educational programs. This site holds immense historical significance, representing over 150 years of our town's heritage and the Society will spearhead this project to preserve the building's architectural integrity while equipping it for renewed use. The vision balances faithful historic preservation with carefully considered modern interventions to ensure long-term functionality and accessibility. The project began in April 2025 with a site survey completed by RKW Surveyors. In June, civil engineering work with CCA LLC who provided a design for the septic system in accordance with the State of Connecticut Public Health Code including design criteria and septic analysis. In addition, location for water source was identified and the site plan was submitted, including space for an ADA ramp and entry. In September, we selected an Architect of Record, Doyle Coffin Architects (DCA) after a complete bidding process which included 3 submissions. The Scope of Work (SOW) includes work to restore the roof and cupola to its original form and also ensuring weather resistance and long-term durability; the restoration or replacement in-kind the siding, windows, and doors using historically appropriate profiles and materials; stabilizing the historic envelope - protecting the schoolhouse structure from further deterioration and renovating the interior. The structure will function as a museum and community meeting space. We intend to construct a new auxiliary structure that will replace the small east-side shed with a new modest modern structure, designed to recede visually so as not to compete visually with the historic schoolhouse. The structure will include a bathroom and a small kitchen. One special feature of the project is a Glass Link that will create a transparent connector between the schoolhouse and new auxiliary building. We have retained land use attorneys, Ward Mazzucco and Charles Lichtenauer of Chipman Mazzucco Emerson LLC, to navigate town zoning requirements and assist with obtaining a special permit from the Planning & Zoning Commission and assist with the application and the presentation. The Society is documenting and filming each phase of restoration, through informal interviews, social media reels, and time lapsed filming. And Scott House journals featuring the history of the schoolhouse have been printed for distribution at all public events. This summer, in August, SaVAtree was engaged for a health analysis of the large White Oak tree that was dangerously close to the schoolhouse and posed risk to the site and building. Arborist, Vicky McCarthy, determined that the tree was diseased and could not be treated showing significant rotting in the base. She provided a report to the Town and, RHS was given permission to remove the tree and stump. Vicky also highlighted the next generation of healthy trees close by. Also in August, we installed a time-lapse camera to capture activity and record the overall timeline. All of this work and more to come has been made possible by the following grants and donations: The Leir

Foundation has provided two rounds of funding. We have also received funding from the Anne S. Richardson Fund for capital work. The Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR) provided a Historic Preservation Grant to be applied to Cupola/roof repair. Mitch Ancona, whose father attended Branchville Schoolhouse, created a limited, School House Red wine blend. Part of the proceeds will go to the restoration project. Mitch would like to organize a wine tasting to create more visibility to the project.

Special Projects

FY 2024-25 has seen tremendous growth and variety in RHS Special Projects. There has been a significant increase in the number of RHS Programs and Events that have taken place this year. We have also raised awareness of the Society's mission and vision by increasing RHS's visibility through collaborations with community partners including:

National Park Service (NPS) American Battlefield Protection Program

Downtown Ridgefield

Fairfield County History Museum

Fall in Love With Ridgefield

Friends of the State Office of Archaeology

Granite Church Cultural Center in Georgetown

Keeler Tavern Museum and History Center

Lounsbury House

Ms. President

Neighbors and Newcomers Club

New York Botanical Garden

Pride in the Park

Ridgefield Garden Club

Ridgefield Library

Ridgefield Playhouse

Ridgefield Public Schools

Ridgefield Theater Barn

Ridgefield Thrift Shop
Saint Stephen's Episcopal Church
SHPO – State Historic Preservation Office
Tellabration National Storytelling every November
Tiger Hollow
The Meetinghouse in Ridgebury
The Rotary Club
Town Hall and the Town of Ridgefield
Where's Waldo with Books on the Common

Catoonah Circle

So far this year, RHS has held three events to celebrate and gather members of the Catoonah Circle. We hosted the First event this year for the Catoonah Circle Members on March 13 at the Lounsbury House, prior to the Architectural Gems event. Some Catoonah Circle members (15 out of 28 who signed up for the evening event) joined an exclusive reception and tour of the Lounsbury House guided by Suzanne Brennan of the Lounsbury House. The sunset cocktail event on June 28th at Victor Torchia and Ben Ortiz's residence was successful. We had a nice turnout with about 40 people. All had a enjoyable time. Finally, RHS Board Chair Steven and his wife Cynthia hosted a cocktail party for Catoonah Circle and other donors on October 16, which was attended by about 40 people, generating a good deal of community spirit and generosity.

Marketing

With nearly 2000 followers of the RHS Facebook page and membership in dozens of social and historical groups on Facebook, marketing messages have a wide reach. In a recent one-month period, the page had close to 65,000 views. The RHS Instagram page is also growing and approaching 2000 followers. We also share accounts for the garden and house tours. An update of marketing collateral, for distribution at events as well as at Scott House and the Peter Parley Schoolhouse, is underway. In the past year, marketing has supported and promoted the many events created by the Special Projects Committee (on which the marketing director serves) with the assistance of volunteer Nancy Rowe; details of those events will be supplied by the Special Projects director. Major events in 2025 have included the Ridgefield Garden Tour, in collaboration with the Ridgefield Garden Club, and the Holiday House Tour, coming up in December, in collaboration with Tiger Hollow Inc. Janet Graves is a major contributor to these marketing efforts and also assembles the monthly newsletter for the historical

society. Two issues of the Scott House Journal, which focuses on a topic of historical significance using material from the archives, were published in 2025: A history of St. Stephen's Church, celebrating its 300th anniversary this year, and the Clarence F. Korker archive, featuring the history of the centenarian's long association with Ridgefield as the owner of the Ridgefield Photo Shop and his generous donation of his negatives to the Ridgefield Historical Society.

Technology

RHS acquired new audio/video equipment (cameras, microphones, lighting, projector, etc.) and software that was purchased using part of the 2025 grant from the Ridgefield Thrift Shop. This equipment has been used to record and edit videos for Battle of Ridgefield Archaeology Project field work, record Society events and oral histories, etc. For the LGBTQIA+ Oral History Project, RHS made oral history-related recorded videos available via the Society's public website and via the statewide Connecticut Digital Archive website. RHS provided access to digital photos taken to document the very successful Ridgefield Garden Tour. The RHS has also provided the technological support to scan the Clarence "Korky" Korker online photo collection. Korky has kindly donated a total of 30,000 to 35,000 photo negatives to the Society. To date, we have scanned roughly 2,600 negatives and published them on the Society's public website. More negatives are scanned and uploaded to the website weekly. Using our recently acquired wide format document scanner, we are scanning documents in the Warren Arthur Architectural Archives and other blueprints, etc. The document scanner, which can be used to quickly scan documents that are up to 36" wide, such as architectural blueprints, posters, newspapers, artwork, etc. was acquired through a donation from Mai Arthur. Finally, the Technology Committee created an experimental AI Avatar called "Ask Dick Venus". Populated the Avatar's knowledgebase with digital text versions of all 300 of Dick Venus's Ridgefield Press newspaper columns (as well as other local historical source data). People can interactively ask "Dick" questions about his time growing up in Ridgefield and about the history of Ridgefield in general.

Nominating

A slate of officers and directors to be elected has been proposed for the two year period 2025 to 2027. There were fewer Directors with expiring terms in this cycle, when compared to 2024. The focus was on ensuring the executive committee was complete with Sally Sanders taking on another year as Vice President and Eric Hutner as Secretary. We are strengthening our development and fundraising capabilities, proposing Carsten Hils, a new director to the board. Carsten worked with the Historical Society and the Garden Club on this year's very successful Ridgefield Garden Tour. He was a key member of team driving funding, sponsorships and outreach. His home and garden also featured prominently on the tour. Phil Esser has been active serving on

committees as Chair or member of a number of committees, including Historic Preservation, Architectural Archives and the Nominating Committee. He is seeking a new term to continue serving as Chair of the Historic Preservation Committee.

Officers:

Sally Sanders, Vice President

Eric Hutner, Secretary

New Directors:

Carsten Hils, Board of Directors 2025-2027

Current Directors, New term:

Sally Sanders, Board of Directors 2025-2027

Eric Hutner, Board of Directors 2025-2027

Phil Esser, Board of Directors 2025-2027

Outgoing Directors: Laurie Bachmann and Raymond Murphy

Laurie McGavin Bachmann is leaving after serving on the Board for five years in the capacity of Recording Secretary and Special Projects. Laurie's experience in art history and museum education, as well as her ability to tie the big picture in with the details, served the Society well during her time as Recording Secretary. As Chair of Special Projects, she coordinated many different initiatives in our community outreach efforts, ranging from marketing and programming to major events. A long time Ridgefielder, Laurie is an active member of the community, and she will be missed. The Board thanks her for her dedication and support of the Society.

Raymond Murphy is leaving the board after serving as Chair of Compliance and Governance and as a member of the Nominating Committee. Ray's law background was great resource for the Board. Among his initiatives was leading our recent updating of the bylaws. As a member of the Nominating Committee, he was instrumental in helping shape the Board with many new directors joining last year. His interest in history lead him to volunteer in our Collections effort, cataloguing Ridgefield's history. Ray too will be missed, and we thank him for his support and service to the Society.

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