

There's More Than One Way to Tell a Story: Exploring Alternatives to New Museums

No matter where we live, history plays a significant role in who we are as individuals, as communities and as a nation. We preserve the past to commemorate it and to learn from it.

Historic preservation can take many shapes, but one of the most popular models is the history museum. More than 150 years after the Mount Vernon Ladies' Association saved that iconic site, many historical organizations continue to view museums as the best way to preserve and interpret the past. With more than 560 existing history museums in Texas,

one of the most frequently asked questions the Texas Historical Commission's (THC) Museum Services Program staff receives is, "How do we start a new museum in our community?"

While starting a new museum is a worthwhile endeavor (and our staff can help guide an organization through the process), we rarely answer this question with step-by-step instructions; rather, we typically reply with a question of our own.

After years of experience working with local history organizations on a variety of projects, including museums, we've come to believe the first question to answer is not "How can our organization start a museum?" Instead, the organization's members should investigate, "Is a new museum the right project to best meet our organization's goals and to serve our community's needs?"

If we thoroughly explore the issue, the answer to this question typically is no. Simply put, museums are incredibly complex, expensive and labor-intensive endeavors. Preservation of objects — and the real stories they help tell — is only a small part of museum work. Much of the energy and resources will go toward daily management operations, building maintenance, staffing concerns, legal compliance, fiscal responsibility and the continuous commitment to fundraising to keep the museum afloat.

This is no minor concern. Of all the issues our Museum Services staff consults on, the only one that comes up more often than starting a new museum is sustainability. We hear regularly from museums that are struggling to find enough people and enough money to keep the doors open, let alone produce new exhibits, develop dynamic programming or maintain the building adequately. Thriving museums require carefully researched and developed plans for maintaining support — of both the people and monetary variety — not just for its original establishment, but for its perpetual success.

Our 21st-century society is increasingly complex and fast-paced. Times have changed, technology has changed, and people and their communities have changed. The traditional museum model — a physical building containing a collection of items arranged in exhibits to help tell a story — may not even be the best way to meet the needs of a community anymore.



Heritage-related festivals and web sites are effective and less expensive alternatives to traditional museums.

When we shed the conventional concepts of needing a collection of objects (and the walls on which to display them) to preserve and interpret our past, a world of possibilities opens up. The first step is clearly defining what stories an organization wants to preserve and for whom. Once these two important factors are determined, opportunities begin to unfold. Match that goal with available resources and the community's needs and you may be surprised to find an alternative project is a better fit than a new museum.

So what do some alternative programs or projects look like? The answer will be unique to each community, but the options are as varied and as interesting as Texas' diverse landscapes. We've picked a few to get you started.

■ Produce self-standing banner exhibits that interpret various facets of the community's history using a combination of text and reproduced photos and graphics. The focus can be as simple as a timeline of important historical dates. Or, consider exploring a particular theme (such as the community's railroad history) in greater depth. Similar to a traditional museum exhibit, but without most of the cost, the beauty of this option is the ease of transporting the banner exhibit from one high-traffic location to the next, thus serving a greater percentage of the community than if it stayed in one place. By adding a new topic each year or two, you'll soon have a presence all over town.

■ Ask the local book club or community library to add local history books to the rotation of recommended selections. Make sure someone from your organization is available to lead a discussion and to provide supplemental information. Expand on this option by writing reviews of new history books for the local newspaper or entertainment magazine. Record an audio review or an interview with the author to air on your local radio station or public access cable channel.

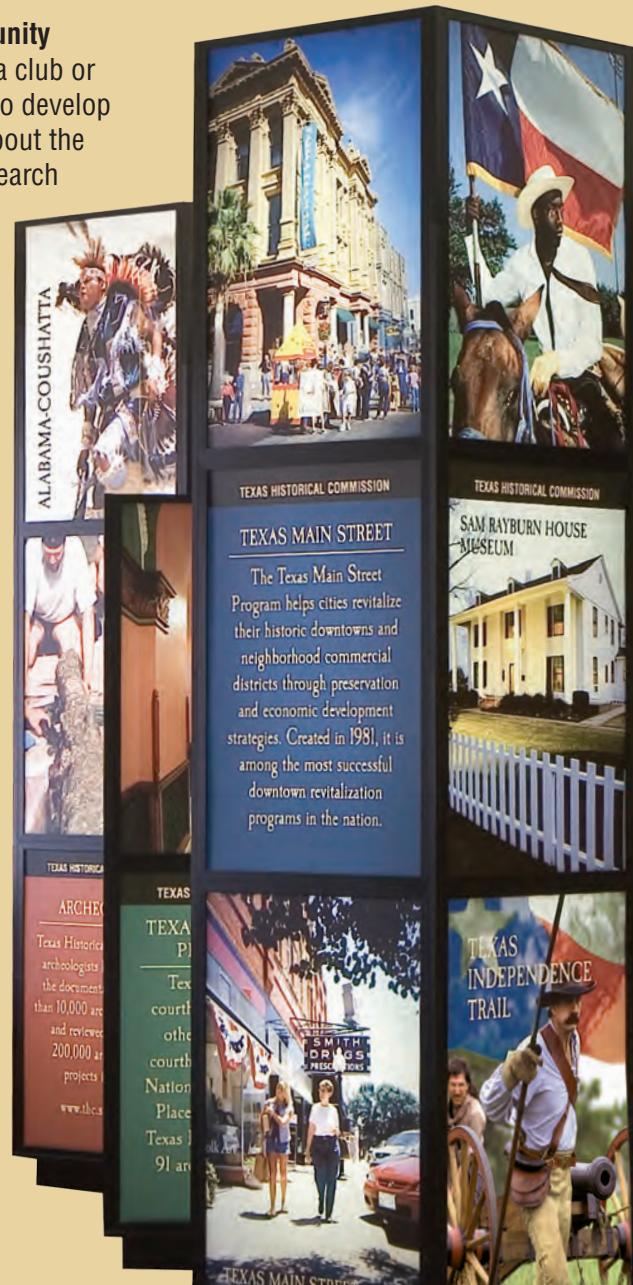
■ Work with your community theater group, local drama club or high school drama class to develop historical plays or skits about the community's history. Research and write the scripts, build accurate sets and props, sew period-appropriate costumes — there are many ways to promote historic preservation with this kind of venture.

■ Organize an annual heritage festival centered on a particular historic event, person, industry or culture. This is a big project requiring a substantial amount of upfront planning and money, but it allows for a wide range of activities and participants and can be a great fund raiser.

The THC's traveling exhibit educates people in libraries, courthouses and other public facilities throughout the state.

■ Develop programs for use in the classroom. Develop history kits that provide students hands-on experiences with history. Dress in period costume, demonstrate historical skills or act out a historic event with the kids. Be sure to coordinate with the school district and teachers on these kinds of projects to make sure they address curriculum and lesson plan needs. Other ideas include working with an audio-visual class to develop a

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documentary or oral history project, or helping kids write mock historical markers.

■ **Place interpretive signs** at places of local historical significance. Use newer signage materials that allow for maximum use of graphics and color. Historic photos and maps can be juxtaposed with current views. Kick the technology up a notch and make audio clips available through associated podcasts or cell phone presentations.

■ **Build a web presence** for your community's history. Create online exhibits, post oral history interviews, digitize photos and documents for online research, and shoot short documentary videos. Allow the community to contribute items and stories of their own — a digital version of the conventional "show and tell."

Developing a new museum is always resource intensive, requiring a long-term commitment of time and funds, so it's always a good idea to consider other approaches to preserving and presenting local history. Sometimes these alternatives can be stepping stones that will eventually lead to starting a new museum, but they don't have to be. Organizers may discover that one of these projects — or a combination of several projects — is all they need to effectively tell their community's story.

Want more alternatives? Want to share a great idea with our staff? We're always happy to hear from you. Email history@thc.state.tx.us or join us at the THC's Annual Historic Preservation Conference in Lakeway, Apr. 15–17. In one of the sessions, we'll continue the conversation with museum consultant/HELP Project Director Brian Crockett and Texas

Association of Museums Executive Director Ruth Ann Rugg.

In the meantime, we recommend two additional resources for anyone considering a new museum or rethinking an existing one. To learn more about what it takes to make a new museum successful and how to identify other projects that can help accomplish your goals, consult the following documents:

■ *Thinking About Starting a Museum?: A Discussion Guide and Workbook on Museums and Heritage Projects* produced by Museums Alberta (available free at www.museumsalberta.ab.ca/starting.html).

■ *Starting Right: A Basic Guide to Museum Planning* by Gerald George (available at www.altamirapress.com). ★

This article was written by Laura Casey and Carolyn Hammons of the THC's Museum Services Program.

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