

Access, History, and Engagement at Community Museums
A Practicum at the Sandy Spring Museum

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Statement of Problem

Formerly a rural area, one can drive through Sandy Spring, Maryland today and not even know it. One small area along the commuting corridor of Route 108, Sandy Spring has a gas station, a local hardware store, a few rundown shops, a restaurant, office spaces, new housing developments, a bakery, and a dentist. It melds together with Olney and Ashton; people often do not know the difference. But then in the middle of it all, there is the Sandy Spring Museum, setting it apart from the strip malls, shopping centers, and planned developments of other nearby communities. Why is there a museum for an area that seems no different from the rest of suburbia surrounding it?

Well primarily because in 1981 people in the area cared enough to start one. Noting that “the community’s history was being sold off with every passing of a long-time resident,” a group of residents felt that the history of the greater Sandy Spring area was important and wanted to hold on to it in the face of relentless urbanization.¹ Established in 1728 by farmers belonging to the Society of Friends (commonly known as Quakers), Sandy Spring is a unique place with a rich history in innovation, education, and stewardship. Sandy Spring encompasses both the village of Sandy Spring and the surrounding villages, including but not limited to Olney, Laytonsville, Ashton, Brighton, Brookeville, and Norwood. According to the Sandy Spring Museum website, the neighborhood of Sandy Spring included the 6-mile radius around the village because that was how far a person could drive a horse and buggy to attend the weekly meeting at the Sandy Spring Quaker Meeting House and still be able to return home before dark.² Thus,

¹ “Our Story,” *Sandy Spring Museum*, accessed November 27, 2015, <http://www.sandyspringmuseum.org/about-us/our-story/>.

² “History,” *Sandy Spring Museum*, accessed October 3, 2015, <http://www.sandyspringmuseum.org/collections-research/history/>.

the Sandy Spring Museum, although named after the village where it is located, serves the wider area, incorporating these other villages within the 6 mile radius of Sandy Spring. More background on the area is discussed in the “Project Background and Methods” section.

On their website, the Sandy Spring Museum states, “it’s all about community.”³ The museum identifies as “a place where people can develop meaningful connections by exploring community history.”⁴ In 2012, the Board of Governors hired Executive Director, Allison Weiss, who has since undertaken a big push to increase programming for people in the area of all ages and backgrounds. Since then, the Sandy Spring Museum has been undergoing a transformation in how it labels itself and engages with the neighborhoods surrounding it. It has evolved from a local history museum to a more general community museum and cultural center. “Community” in Sandy Spring represents both the populations living around the museum and also the mindset that exists within the community. More than just the physical locality, community represents the relationships between and among the past, present, and future residents and the physical area.

For my practicum, I worked within the archives of the Sandy Spring Museum from September 2016 to January 2017. Under the direction of the Collections Manager, Helen MacDiarmid, I created an archival finding aid for a set of minutes from one of the local clubs in Sandy Spring, the Mutual Improvement Association of Sandy Spring, an all-women’s group that has been meeting monthly since 1857. The archival finding aid indexed the meeting attendees, locations, and topics discussed for the first 50 year (over

³ “Our Story,” *Sandy Spring Museum*.

⁴ *Ibid.*

600 meetings). The hope is that this finding aid can serve as a template for future finding aids for other clubs. My other goal had been to write a small booklet, but after discussing this with the Collections Manager, we determined that it made sense to include the brief history that would have been in the booklet as part of the finding aid instead.

This practicum was important because the Sandy Spring Museum is a small local museum where volunteers and interns, under the direction of one or two staff members, are the ones primarily doing historical research. My work played a part in helping the museum toward its goal of bringing the rich information hidden within the pages of the minutes to the attention of the interested public through the finding aid. While the Sandy Spring Museum has recently focused on bringing contemporary communities in Sandy Spring together, it also has a rich history to share with these communities. The social clubs play a large role in shaping the unique mindset of Sandy Spring. I believe that my project played a small part in helping the museum make this history more accessible. Though the practicum is over, I will continue to work with the museum to hold an event to honor the Association's 160th anniversary this spring. The goal will be to hold a monthly meeting that is open to all women in the community, which would advance the museum's goals of helping newcomers learn about and hopefully connect with the rich heritage of the community.

Review of Literature

This practicum was grounded in literature on the challenges that community museums face. There are no real concrete answers to these challenges; only questions inspiring more questions. However, I believe that examining and thinking about these

questions, even without expecting answers, stimulates and motivates conscious actions to make change. In addition to defining key terms such as heritage and community, I will discuss the concept of heritage in museums, community engagement and representation, and the future of small museums.

Heritage in the Museum

Sandy Spring has a core of families who have lived on its lands for many generations. However, its location equidistant between Washington D.C. and Baltimore has made the area an attractive place for commuters to settle. While the old families of Sandy Spring are concerned about losing their history as the older generations die and the younger generations leave in search of jobs, those who move to the area also bring their own stories, traditions, and identities. Thus, Sandy Spring heritage is changing and the museum plays a large role in creating a space for the old and the new members of the community to interact and share heritage. In this section, I will explore the role of heritage in museums.

Laurajane Smith challenges the normative and arguably most common discourse on heritage that views it as a fixed entity to be preserved in its “original” state. Rather than describing it as a value that is unchanging and that must be preserved in a certain state, Smith presents heritage as a “cultural process that engages with the act of remembering that work to create ways to understand and engage with the present.”⁵ She notes that “things” are important, but they themselves are not heritage. “Heritage is something vital and alive.”⁶ It is not the material, but rather the action that is significant.

⁵ Laurajane Smith, *Uses of Heritage* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 44.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 83.

Heritage is done through a series of actions that remember, communicate, commemorate, and transmit to the next generations. Heritage products are emotions, experiences, and memories that create and re-create social networks that reinforce a sense of belonging and identity. “Identity is not simply something ‘produced’ or represented by heritage places or heritage moments, but it is something actively and continually recreated and negotiated as people, communities and institutions reinterpret, remember and reassess the meaning of the past in terms of the social, cultural and political needs of the present.”⁷ Thus, heritage is not so much thinking about the past, but more the use of the past to engage actively with the present.

In his monograph on Chesapeake heritage, Erve Chambers wrote that heritage is “part of a community’s past, realized in practices and values that the community itself recognizes as being necessary to its continuance and well-being.”⁸ In other words, heritage is a thing of the past that communities recognize as valuable to the present. Chambers argues that people think about heritage in two ways: the mostly cultural and private heritage and the historical and public heritage. The private, cultural aspect of heritage is associated with the idea of “natural inheritance,” and thus its meaning is found in the “codified, inherited practices that provide guidelines for conduct that permit the maintenance of a group as a localized entity capable of recognizing its own distinction in some meaningful way.”⁹ On the other hand, the public, historical aspect of heritage is a product of history, industrialization, commodification, and capitalism, and it tends to alienate the immediate participants from heritage, which gives special interest groups the

⁷ Smith, 83.

⁸ Erve Chambers, *Heritage Matters: Heritage, Culture, History, and Chesapeake Bay*, (College Park, MD: Maryland Sea Grant College, 2006), sec. 6, para. 7, Kindle e-book.

⁹ Chambers, sec. 4, para. 12.

ability to control and define representations of heritage. Both types of heritage, one might argue, can be found in museums, a point that I will address later on.

Museums play an important role in heritage for they are a prominent body through which heritage is institutionalized and disseminated to the public. In his introduction to *The Presented Past: Heritage, museums and education*, Brian L. Molyneaux wrote, “there are two pasts: the temporal one that passes and is gone and the metaphorical ‘past’ that is held in the memories and traditions of a society and its surroundings.”¹⁰ The past was once considered “concrete” and “uncontroversial,” but today we know that the “uncontested past” actually excludes many pasts.¹¹ The past is a “conundrum” for it is both “essential” and “dangerous.”¹² Perhaps this conundrum can never be solved, yet museums still face the complicated task of disseminating the past to the public and making concerned decisions about which pasts are remembered and how.

In doing so, the past becomes institutionalized, and this process lets some in and keeps some out. “Institutions all seem to be designed to keep some people, ideas, and practices out and some in.”¹³ According to Molyneaux, those who disseminate the past must be aware of the diversity of their audience, as well as be conscious of the fact that the past can represent traditions that were a burden.¹⁴ Thus, museums are challenged to present the diversity of the past, but also not burden the public with “received traditions... that they cannot adapt to a changing world.”¹⁵ In doing this, museums need to present alternative histories and excluded histories. To do this, Molyneaux argues that

¹⁰ Brian L. Molyneaux, “Introduction: the represented past,” in *The Presented Past: Heritage, museums and education*, ed. Peter G. Stone and Brian L. Molyneaux (London: Routledge, 1994), 2.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*, 9.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 5.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 10.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

we “need to take the past back to the community, to provide the means for ordinary people to deal with this metaphorical world at least partly out of sight and reach of those who would control it, so that they may reflect on the past, critically, through their own social experiences in their own environment.”¹⁶ This can be done through collaboration between museums professionals, educators, historians, anthropologists and archaeologists, residents, and other stakeholder groups.

Chambers’ ideas on two forms of heritage and Molyneaux’s discussion of the industrialization of the past connect to current discourse on museology regarding how museums should represent their subjects and what to preserve. In representing heritage as history, one often forgets to connect it back to the present and the future. Chambers proposes a move away from the historical, public heritage toward a cultural, private heritage for, like Smith, Chambers views heritage as a cultural process that “encourages us to consider particular associations with the past as they are actually realized in the present and employed as guidelines to the future.”¹⁷ In order to do this, Molyneaux argues, museums need to connect with the communities they are representing, rather than focus on a larger public narrative that is “history.” As Chambers states, “culture, not history, is the glue of human memory, connecting places and value to people’s recollections in ways that make the past not only meaningful but also practically useful to its specific heirs.”¹⁸ Thus, it seems particularly important for community museums to ensure they engage with different populations in the community to empower them to

¹⁶ Molyneaux, 10-11.

¹⁷ Chambers, sec. 6, para. 4.

¹⁸ Ibid.

define their own heritage, their own past, and help them make critical reflections on how their past affects their present and their future.

Community Engagement and Representation

As mentioned previously, the neighborhoods in and around Sandy Spring are changing rapidly as people from diverse backgrounds move in and out of the area. Thus, it is vital for the Sandy Spring Museum to navigate these changes. “The Sandy Spring Museum began when a group of residents noted that the community’s history was being sold off with every passing of a long-time resident.”¹⁹ It was a history museum where long-time residents gathered to remember and preserve the past. However, this began to seem unsustainable as those long-time residents aged, younger generations moved away, and other people moved into the areas. The Board of Governors decided to hire an Executive Director to lead a collective effort to transform the Sandy Spring Museum from a history museum to a place where the people in the areas surrounding it could come together. Reshaping the museum to be more than just a history museum but also a place for people to gather is part of what, I argue, helps it remain relevant to residents.

The Sandy Spring Museum is just one museum that is re-inventing itself as a new type of museum. Bonnie Pitman writes of the changes in museums,

Museums are more than the repositories of the past, with memories and objects both rare and beautiful. Museums are cultural educational, and civic centers in our communities... The notion of museums as quiet contemplative places of learning where collections are studiously researched and cared for by scholars has changed dramatically in recent decades... Museums serve as gathering places, as forums for their communities. The exhibitions presented and the range of materials

¹⁹ “Our Story,” *Sandy Spring Museum*.

incorporated into collections reflect the multiple voices, needs, and interests of individual communities.²⁰

While not every museum in the United States fits into the image Pitman paints, her picture certainly seems to reflect the trend in museums today. There is a push to move away from the scholarly and “stuffy” image of the museum toward a more inclusive and diverse gathering place to teach, reflect, and engage with communities.

“Community” is often the word that museum professionals use to refer to the public, their audience.²¹ As the role of museums within our society is re-examined, we are called to examine what “public” means, for museums engage in public discourse as they represent and manage culture.²² In *Museums and the Public Sphere*, Jennifer Barrett explores what it means to be public, to represent public, to engage with the public. Museums use the public as their reason for existing for they see themselves as serving the public. Museums exist as a space for representation, for education to make people better citizens, and for a better-informed public. However, the term “public” also carries connotations of authoritarianism by the state, power, and elitism.²³

Barrett views community as an “alternative public” that has its own limitations and advantages.²⁴ “Community” steps in as a concept that stresses diversity, a concept that “democratize[s] the museum.”²⁵ Barrett argues that the “museum is a cultural public sphere” and that what it means to be public will inevitably evolve and change according to the different types of museums as museums move beyond the traditional model to be

²⁰ Bonnie Pitman, “Muses, Museums, and Memories,” *Daedalus* 128, no. 3 (1999): 1.

²¹ Jennifer Barrett, *Museums and the Public Sphere* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011).

²² *Ibid.*, 5.

²³ *Ibid.*, 165-166.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ Gable, 38.

more diverse in how they represent the public.²⁶ She concludes with the idea that it is necessary to continually rethink what it means to be public in order to truly become public.²⁷ Thus, community museums need to constantly re-think and re-interpret who their public is, who their community is, in order to truly be serving their audience.

Michael Frisch uses the term of “shared authority” to reference “interpretive authority and authorship.” “Shared authority” acknowledges both scholarly authority and the “authority of ‘culture and experience.’”²⁸ Frisch suggests that when conversations between “scholarly and experiential knowledge” occur through public presentation, then the products of these conversations “promote a more democratized and widely shared historical consciousness.”²⁹ In other words, shared authority is a way to widen and democratize how history is perceived and to involve communities in the production of public presentation by including experiential knowledge in addition to scholarly knowledge. Shared authority is a perspective that moves away from the polarization of community and scholarship for it demands that both be present.

Mary Hutchison uses shared authority as a way to discuss “the whys and hows of embedding collaboration between museum curators and participants from outside the museum in exhibition making.”³⁰ She argues that by creating space for “egalitarian conversation” from the beginning of the process, an exhibition will be more “dialogue-inviting” and will encourage audiences to respond from their own perspectives. She notes that a problem with this is that “individual experience is framed by wider discourse,

²⁶ Barrett, 164.

²⁷ Ibid., 171-173.

²⁸ Mary Hutchison, “‘Shared Authority’: Collaboration, Curatorial Voice, and Exhibition Design in Canberra, Australia,” in *Museums and Communities: Curators, Collections and Collaboration*, ed. Viv Golding and Wayne Modest (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 145.

²⁹ Ibid., 145.

³⁰ Ibid., 143.

including stereotypical views of ‘others.’”³¹ She presents the research project called “Migration Memories” that explored Australian migration history as a case study.

Thinking of the exhibits as the research rather than the outcome, the project utilized methods such as collaborative development of content and design, the awareness and allowance for an evolving process, the presentation of personal stories alongside the historical context, and the promotion of agency and shared authority in determining subjects of exhibition in order embed shared authority. The project also emphasized the importance of setting up the researchers and visitors in an egalitarian relationship.

Hutchison was interested in how visitors felt and what they thought about when viewing the exhibit, not what they thought of the exhibit. Some of the challenges during the collaborative development process included the inability of the “storytellers” to envision the final exhibition, which limited the shared authority, but they still had agency and saw their role “as an exciting and meaningful aspect of skills and knowledge exchange.”³²

Hutchison concludes with the idea that shared authority is a space that is not “colonized by ‘community engagement,’” which she argues has been commandeered as a marketing strategy rather than a democratic process.

The idea of “shared authority” is one that the National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI) grapples with when curating exhibits. The first sentence of its mission statement states that the museum “is committed to advancing knowledge and understanding of the Native cultures of the Western Hemisphere—past, present, and future—through partnership with Native people and others.”³³ Cynthia Chavez Lamar, a

³¹ Hutchison, 143.

³² Ibid., 160.

³³ “Mission Statement,” *National Museum of the American Indian*, accessed November 27, 2015, <http://nmai.si.edu/about/mission/>.

curator at the NMAI, wrote an article about an exhibit they created under this mission statement that emphasizes “partnership” with American Indian communities. This exhibit, called “Our Lives: Contemporary Life and Identities,” was one of the first exhibits at the museum when it opened in 2004. It was the result of a collaborative effort between the Smithsonian and eight American Indian communities to show how American Indians live today. The collaborative effort dredged up issues and negotiations over power and authority.³⁴

Lamar highlights different problems and shortcomings of the exhibit in connection with the attempt to work with the different indigenous communities. For example, although the community curators suggested non-conventional curatorial ideas, they were not implemented because they fell victim to time, budget, and curation tradition.³⁵ Choices had to be made because topics that the community curators wanted prioritized did not necessarily fit with in the “framing device” of the overall exhibit.³⁶ Lamar notes that while the exhibit did “resound with the voices of the co-curators and other community members,” there were certain aspects that were diluted because the community curators had to reach consensus and compromise in order to avoid presenting conflicting messages in their exhibit.³⁷ In conclusion, she argues that “community involvement further complicates issues of representation because the roles of all players are not as simple as the dichotomies earlier museum critiques suggest: Native/community

³⁴ Cynthia Chavez Lamar, “Collaborative Exhibit Development at the Smithsonian’s National Museum of the American Indian,” in *The National Museum of the American Indian: Critical Conversations*, ed. Amy Lonetree and Amanda J. Cobb (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2008), 144.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 158.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 157.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 157-158.

and non-Native/museum.”³⁸ Including American Indian voices does not necessarily mean that issues of power, authority, and ownership are avoided; rather these issues can be complicated. So perhaps it is not a matter of simplifying, but rather a matter of embracing the complexity and being transparent about the process in order to highlight these issues of power, authority, ownership, and representation.

Serena Iervolino describes a project that successfully incorporated community engagement, yet she is careful to highlight its shortcomings in order to illustrate the challenges that accompany community engagement. Iervolino argues that when museums work with migrant communities, they “promote intercultural dialogue and cross-cultural understanding and . . . foster interaction between majority and minority groups.”³⁹ Using the project, “Creatures of Earth and Sky,” organized by the Natural History Museum at the University of Parma and the Cultural Association Googol in Italy, as a case study, Iervolino described the work that the project did to open dialogue with African migrants in Parma. This project, according to Iervolino, shows that museums can work with communities without compromising the curatorial practice. This can be done by “re-displaying objects” and reinterpreting the meaning of their collections. While the project failed to uphold the active participation of the migrant communities in the long run (largely due to funding), it still was successful in that it showed how a museum can successfully engage with communities, even if it was short-term. The project can also

³⁸ Lamar, 158

³⁹ Serena Iervolino, “Museums, Migrant Communities, and *Intercultural* Dialogue in Italy,” in *Museums and Communities: Curators, Collections and Collaboration*, ed. Viv Golding and Wayne Modest (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 115.

serve as a lesson to museums in that it demonstrates the need for museums to build intercultural activities and dialogue into their “institutional fabric.”⁴⁰

Stephen Long explores the benefits and costs of practicing civic engagement. The American Alliance of Museums describes a museum that practices civic or community engagement as “a center where people gather to meet and converse and an active, visible player in civic life, a safe haven, and a trusted incubator of change.”⁴¹ Challenges to engaging with communities include the justified fear that people won’t work together, increase in programming costs, lack of support from colleagues, absence of strong leadership, and the amount of time needed to implement community engagement activities effectively. Long cites Harold Skramstad and his message that museums implement “caregiving” into their mission for caregiving implies relationship building and social service. They argue for a reciprocal relationship with the public, for without one, caregiving and community engagement efforts would fail.⁴² After all, collaboration is a two-way street.

But in order to be caregivers and engage with their target audience, museums need to define what community means. Who is their community, their audience? How can they reach out to people who would not normally feel they have “stake” in the museum?⁴³ Then after defining the community, they need to figure out what they need. Long argues that this attempt to figure out what the needs of the community are should to be a staff-wide effort, not just a concentrated effort by a director or curator. One should

⁴⁰ Iervolino, 115.

⁴¹ Stephen Long, “Practicing Civic Engagement: Making your Museum into a Community Living Room,” *Journal of Museum Education* 38, no. 2 (2013): 142.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid., 147.

figure out how the museum is perceived and how museum staff want it to be perceived. Evaluating these perceptions will guide the museum toward stronger community engagement.

Long concludes with an anecdote where a woman pulled him aside to say that their museum was not actually a museum; “it’s a community living room.”⁴⁴ This brings out questions of how museums identify themselves. What makes a museum a museum and not a community center? If the museum actively takes on community engagement programming and the community as a result does not see them as a “museum,” is that a bad thing? Is this all related to the idea that museums are changing but people’s perceptions of museums are not? These are questions that small museums are discussing amongst themselves.

Rather than fading away as a “stodgy” dusty museum of a one-sided past, community museums, like the Sandy Spring Museum, need to find innovative ways to move beyond that mold. Many argue that in order to do this, museums need to engage more with their public. Yet engaging with the public is inherently political and often dredges up issues of power, ownership, authority, and representation. Thus, there has been a push to “share” authority – to engage the community in the curatorial process. This should be done with caution for engaging with the community is not always a positive experience. So how do museums proceed? They need to continually re-define who and what their public is, as well as who they are as a museum within the larger context. Engagement may not always be positive, but it is necessary to embrace its complexities in order to increase representation and to share authority.

⁴⁴ Long, 153.

The Future of Small Museums

As Sandy Spring and the areas surrounding it continue to change physically and demographically, the museum will play an important role in involving residents with the community. Those who have been in Sandy Spring for generations will be challenged to connect with newcomers in order to share the heritage of the area with them, while at the same time accepting and engaging with the heritage they bring with them. In order to continually engage with the localities surrounding it, the museum will need to continually reinvent itself as the population changes, older generations die, technology becomes more prominent, the economy fluctuates, and public interest waxes and wanes.

Museums today play many different roles and are expected to serve as multi-purpose community service institutions. John W. Jacobsen writes of the “community service museum.” “Museums are increasingly providing public and personal values beyond their mission statements.”⁴⁵ Jacobsen argues that the idea of “mission purity” is never actually achieved in practice. He notes that umbrella missions, wider and more general missions, actually weaken the museums ability to guide specific decisions, and thus museums with umbrella missions actually state their real missions as a series of goals, strategies, objectives, or purposes. Jacobsen proposes that museums change “mission” to “missions” and embrace the reality that today is “more pluralistic, horizontal, and diverse.”⁴⁶ “Multiple missions explain a vitally active museum’s diversity of revenues, while a traditional, mission-based analysis has to deal with all the ancillary

⁴⁵ John W. Jacobsen, “The community service museum: owning up to our multiple missions,” *Museum Management and Curatorship* 29, no. 1 (2014): 6.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 8.

income from off-mission services as guilty pleasures needed to make the mission outcomes possible.”⁴⁷ Thus, Jacobsen proposes that museum evaluation move beyond the idea of a single-purpose mission and look at community service-oriented missions intentionally rather than as side notes on the overall mission.⁴⁸

Jacobsen concludes with the proposal that museum evaluation needs a “framework that can encompass the full range of impacts along a scale of measurement, from those that are easily measurable, such as those with tangible, market value to impacts that are difficult to measure.”⁴⁹ He suggests looking at the museum operating revenue and engagement counts because they are strong indicators of value. However, evaluation should not solely focus on that. It should pair the examination of numbers with the humble act of focusing on what the community wants from them rather than their original intentions.⁵⁰

According to Stephen Weil, “museums matter only to the extent that they are perceived to provide the communities they serve with something of value beyond their own mere existences.”⁵¹ He discusses the question of whether museums can and do make a difference. The question of “so what” has inserted itself into museological discourse and looks as if it will stay. Weil challenges museum scholars to systematically explore the different public-service roles that museums can and do play.⁵² He argues that what makes a museum good is the “intent to make a positive difference in the quality of people’s lives and, through its skillful use of resources and under determined leadership,

⁴⁷ Jacobsen, 8.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 12.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Stephen Weil, *Making Museums Matter* (Washington D.C.: Smithsonian Institution, 2002), 5.

⁵² Ibid., 56.

its demonstrable ability to do exactly that.”⁵³ Weil says that museums do matter and they have the ability to matter “in so many marvelous ways” for the opportunities to have a mixture of purposes that serve the public good are “virtually endless.”⁵⁴

As communities change, how do small museums keep up with the demand to meet more needs and matter to a more diverse community? Perhaps the best way for these communities to do this is to stay connected with other like institutions grappling with the same types of issues. There are numerous resources available to small museums, such as the Small Museum Association, the Small Museum Toolkit blog, the American Association for State and Local History, and the American Alliance of Museums. Utilizing resources available and maintaining connections with other institutions seems vital today for many small museums. Thus, I would argue that engagement does not and should not only happen between the museum and its community. It also needs to engage in dialogue with other museums and museum-like institutions in order to discuss these issues of preservation, power, authority, representation, and the actual engagement itself, to name a few.

Project Background and Methods

Project Background

Since Sandy Spring is no longer a physically distinguishable place, the old families of Sandy Spring often refer to the “mindset” of Sandy Spring. The website of the museum alludes to this mindset that makes Sandy Spring distinctive today: “Together across the centuries these neighbors interacted to spin the distinctive web of relationships

⁵³ Weil, 73-74.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 74.

and institutions that define today's Sandy Spring—an admittedly peculiar entity often referred to as 'a state of mind.'"⁵⁵ In his introduction to the sixth volume of the *Annals of Sandy Spring*, Sandy Spring historian Thomas Canby describes different values that can be attributed to the creation of the Sandy Spring mindset. Among the values described are an emphasis on education, participation in social organizations, and equality of women.⁵⁶

Although Quakers established the village, Sandy Spring was not solely a Quaker community. However, the values described above clearly stem from the influence of Quakerism felt throughout the area. Quakers conduct their meetings for worship and business with an emphasis on unity. There is no hierarchy in their religion.⁵⁷ "Friends believe that the Holy Spirit may speak to any man, that all men are on an equal footing before God, and that all ecclesiastical distinctions are of man's device."⁵⁸ This unity is reflected in how Quakers treated one another; men and women were equal in the eyes of God. According to Susan Mosher Stuard and Elisabeth Potts Brown, "education consumed the energies of a number of Quaker women who sought education themselves and participated in educating the next generation of women and men."⁵⁹ Thus, in addition to unity and equality, Quakers believed that men and women should both strive to improve themselves through education.

Given this emphasis on equality and education, it is not very surprising that educated women in Sandy Spring felt empowered to form a group where they could

⁵⁵ "History," *Sandy Spring Museum*.

⁵⁶ Thomas Y. Canby, *Annals of Sandy Spring*, vol. 6 (Sandy Spring, MD: Sandy Spring Museum, 2002).

⁵⁷ William Wistar Comfort, *The Quaker Way of Life* (Philadelphia: The Blakiston Company, 1945).

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 10.

⁵⁹ Elisabeth Potts Brown and Susan Mosher Stuard, eds. *Witnesses for Change: Quaker Women over Three Centuries* (Piscataway Township, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1989), 17.

mutually improve their minds. The Mutual Improvement Association of Sandy Spring began as a place where women could gather to converse and learn from one another. Their mission, as stated by their secretary during their meeting in November 2011, is “that we shall offer for the benefit of the Association such information as we may have obtained by experience, or otherwise, in any way calculated to elevate the minds, increase the happiness, lighten the labor, or add to the comfort of one another, our families, or neighbors.”⁶⁰ The essence of this mission has not changed since the Quaker women who started the group 160 years ago first wrote it down in May 1857.

The women of the Association believe that they are the oldest continuously meeting all-women’s group in the country. At their meetings, they work to improve their minds by sharing information, asking questions, and telling stories. Their mission is to inspire life-long learning. Thus, the minutes are full of information about homemaking, allusions to large historical events, and glimpses into the mindset of the time. In 1867, William Henry Farquhar wrote an entry in the *Annals of Sandy Spring*, “So well as the Ladies’ Association fulfilled its mission, gaining honor and interests not only by the subjects which it selects, but also by those which it avoids.”⁶¹ This quote illustrates how women of the Association avoided discussing controversial topics of politics and religion. They did not want these topics to interfere with their learning nor drive wedges between members. This sentiment, along with the lack of one leader of the group, illustrates the emphasis on unity and equality that most likely stemmed from the Quaker influence.

⁶⁰ Fieldwork by author, November 3, 2011.

⁶¹ William Henry Farquhar, *Annals of Sandy Spring*, vol. 1. (Baltimore: Cushings & Baily, 1884),

Meetings were kept small to promote intimate conversation and to practically allow for meetings to continue at their homes. While the group was not explicitly service oriented, their mission implies that they believed improving the mind through knowledge-sharing increased the well-being of not only themselves, but also of the people associated with them. Their never-ending mission, as well as the limit on membership size, contributed to the sustainability of the group. This is illustrated by the fact that the women of the Association have met almost every month (with exceptions due to illness in the community, death of a member, and the gas and food rationing during World War II) since 1857.⁶² The fact that these meetings continuously occurred in the same area with members of the same families, as well as newcomers who were voted into the group, gives their meeting minutes a unique longevity. The Quaker values of equality and education that contributed to its structure as well as the topics discussed contribute to both the uniqueness and the significance of these minutes to the area's heritage and history.

Methods

Working under the guidance of Executive Director Allison Weiss and alongside Collections Manager Helen MacDiarmid from September 2016 to January 2017, I reviewed the monthly meeting minutes of the Mutual Improvement Association of Sandy Spring. The goal was to make the first 50 years of the minutes accessible and searchable for a broader audience. To do so, I created an archival finding aid in a style agreed upon with the Collections Manager. We referenced a finding aid that had been created for a

⁶² Fieldwork by author, November 3, 2011.

previous collection, as well as other examples of finding aids at other institutions, such as the Maryland State Archives, the Library of Congress, and the Maryland Historical Trust. As I read the minutes for each month, I tracked who was in attendance (members and guests), where the meeting was located, and the topics discussed. I created a coding system to code the topics, as the breadth and diversity of topics discussed was astounding. Ultimately, the finding aid I created goes beyond a traditional finding aid in that it indexes meeting attendees, locations and topics discussed. The purpose of creating such a detailed finding aid was to do justice to the rich and diverse content of the minutes and to guide researchers to particular meetings of interest. The introduction of the finding aid contains general information on the collection, the history of the group, and the scope and contents of the minutes.

These minutes are a rich resource for the museum to share with researchers working on future exhibits about Sandy Spring history. In the beginning years, the members talked about handwork, making soap, dye, and other household goods and solutions, as well as growing, preserving, and cooking food. While the group was never explicitly an aid society, they often spoke about different philanthropic institutions and undertook charity work during meetings or special organized events, such as sewing garments and providing aid to wounded soldiers on both sides during the Civil War, to orphan asylums in the city, to victims of natural disasters, to Indians out west, and to other such missions.

As the years progressed, the contributions grew more literary in nature, often focusing on topics about prominent people, education, travel and foreign cultures, faith, health, current events, family and childrearing, and self-improvement. They discussed

topics that ranged from science in the Arctic to electricity and the automobile to marriage customs in China and Japan. Poetry and other literary prose were often read or recited, with some of the favorites being Whittier, Ella Wheeler Wilcox, and Longfellow. The group in general promoted optimism, with an emphasis placed on cultivating happiness, cheerfulness, courage, and benevolence to create happier homes and communities. They believed that little things led to great things, a sentiment often expressed throughout the first fifty years. The group discussed issues related to women's rights (e.g. equal pay, equal work, right to vote), the temperance movement, child labor, education reform, war, and other topics related to social justice.

Findings and Analysis

My experience working at the Sandy Spring Museum not only give me in-depth knowledge of one of the oldest social clubs in the area, but I was also exposed to glimpses of how a small community museum functions. The overarching question I had as I started the practicum was how does a small museum reconcile its old identity as a place of history with its new identity as a cultural center. Does it need to reconcile this? Does the history of the community still have a place within the new mission of the museum?

The Sandy Spring neighborhoods have changed rapidly along with the rest of the metropolitan Washington D.C. area as the population expanded and grew more diverse in ethnicity and religion. Museums have also changed as questions about power, representation, and diversity come to the forefront of museological studies. It became apparent that in order to maintain its relevance and survive, the Sandy Spring Museum

needed to reinvent itself to be more than a small history museum focused only on the past.

Over the last several years, the museum staff and volunteers have focused on creating diverse programs that highlight art, music, and a multicultural conversation. This has been very successful, but as a result, the history of the community is no longer a focus. Their website does say that it is a place “where people can develop meaningful connections by exploring community history” yet the opportunities do not seem to be there quite yet.⁶³ One of the first things that the Executive Director admitted to me in our early meetings was that the history of the community has not been at the forefront of their focus. She knows that the collection is rich with the history of the community, but they have been focusing on other programming instead. She expressed a wish to connect the current programming and programming related to the collections and the history of the area. She hoped that my project would serve as a bridge between work in the collection and programming with the community.

I openly admit that I have a biased view as I come from a family that has been in Sandy Spring for more than seven generations and who values our history and our past. My area of focus is heritage: how it connects the present with the past and may be used as a tool for the future. However, as a museum scholar, I also recognize the need for museums to remain relevant in order to be sustainable. In Sandy Spring, the museum needed to be re-identified as more than a history museum, but also as a cultural center in order to keep up with the changing demographics in the area. After all, heritage should

⁶³ “Our Story,” *Sandy Spring Museum*.

actively engage the past, in many forms, with the present. Thus, I come back to the question of how Sandy Spring Museum might fill both roles.

While my project was only one small project in the grand scheme of what the archives has to offer, it focused on an aspect of Sandy Spring's history that sets the area apart from other parts of the county: the social clubs founded in the 19th century that still meet today. By creating a finding aid to serve as a template for future research and to share with the community, the product I created can serve as a bridge to connect newcomers and longtime residents to the history of this particular group. In the months I spent reading the minutes in the library, I overheard several people come in to talk to the Collections Manager and a number of them asked questions about the Association, marveling over the group longevity. Now the finding aid will be a document that the Collections Manager can share with those interested patrons. It gives an overview of the group, but also breaks down what types of topics they discussed and how that evolved over the first fifty years. The finding aid serves as an example that fills the "history" part of the questions – but what about the museum's mission to be a cultural center where conversation among different groups can occur. How can the history of the community as represented through its collections serve the other part of the museum's mission?

As Jacobsen discussed, museums should have multiple missions.⁶⁴ The Sandy Spring Museum can embrace both the public programming that focuses on the present with the history contained within the collections. According to Laurajane Smith, identity, which is often represented by heritage in different forms, is continually created and recreated as the meaning of the past is renegotiated and reinterpreted to fit the needs of

⁶⁴ Jacobsen, 8.

the present.⁶⁵ Just as identity is continually changing, so must museums if they wish to fit the needs of the present. As Weil alluded, museums only matter if they are considered valuable by their communities.⁶⁶ They have to continually provide answers to the “so what” question. Museums should expand the public narrative to include the alternative and excluded histories, as Molyneaux discussed.⁶⁷

Museums build connections with the community by providing opportunities for engagement, both between the museum and its communities and between different groups within the community. Engagement at the Sandy Spring Museum commonly takes the form of programs. I would argue that it is through attending a program that people first connect with the museum. Then as they build their connection with the museum, they may become involved in other ways, such as through volunteering. Of course, engagement is inherently political, and should be considered with caution. But it must be done in order for the museum to remain relevant and matter to the changing communities around it. Thus, if the museum defines its community as those who are alive today as well as those who lived in the past, it can incorporate the past into its programming. Doing so would engage the present peoples with the past peoples by drawing on the connections between them, and perhaps even influence how the future people in the community perceive the museum.

This brings me back to the questions I posed at the beginning – why put a museum in Sandy Spring? It does not seem like much when you drive through; there is no designated historic district. The Executive Director said they have had to work hard to

⁶⁵ Smith, 83.

⁶⁶ Weil, 5.

⁶⁷ Molyneaux, 10.

show the community how the museum is relevant to them, because the former perception of the museum was that it was a place solely focused on a certain history and not the present (which is largely true). However, if the past is not included in the story that the museum presents to its community, then that question of “why put a museum in Sandy Spring” is hard to answer.

The people who founded the museum felt it was important to preserve the stories and history that made Sandy Spring so unique, as they saw the surrounding towns swallowed up by suburbia. A neighborhood of innovators and progressives, citizens of Sandy Spring continually moved forward and adapted with the changing times to make their little town sustainable. In a way, the museum followed in the footsteps of Sandy Spring’s past citizens to adapt to the changing times and present itself as a cultural center. The museum does not need to define itself as a history museum, as that proved hard to sustain, but I would argue that it is important to the museum to remember its roots and find innovative ways to include its diverse history in its programming. It needs to include a space for the newcomers and the old-timers to come together and share heritage as the identity of Sandy Spring is continually reshaped.

As museums are one of the primary places where heritage is disseminated to the public, I believe that a museum like Sandy Spring has the responsibility of embracing its multifaceted heritage and sharing it with the public in such a way that it is not forgotten but it also not the only story that is told. Heritage, according to Smith, is “vital and alive” and thus it will always be changing.⁶⁸ The Sandy Spring Museum does not have to only be a history museum, but they also do not need to forget about the history to remain

⁶⁸ Smith, 86.

relevant. The challenge is to find innovative ways to connect history with the present times.

One such way that the future of my project will work toward this goal is through a public programming event that will utilize the work I did but also bring in current members of the community. The Association is a bit mysterious to many who visit the museum, as the group can only accept a certain number of members and that is usually done through word-of-mouth (and thus confined to certain social circles). However, one of the earliest goals of the Association was to inspire other women to create their own groups of mutual improvement. This was evidenced in the minutes as former guests would return several years later to report that they did in fact form their own mutual improvement groups in their own communities.

In order to bridge the past and the present, the museum will host one of the Association's monthly meetings this summer in honor of the group's 160th anniversary. The meeting will be open to all women in the community who wish to attend. They would be invited to bring something to share, something that avoids the controversial topics of religion, politics, and sex, as the group prides itself on being a place of neutrality. Since it would be in honor of the 160th anniversary, a review of the group's history will be presented, but otherwise it would follow the same proceedings of a normal meeting. This program would be the perfect example of how to connect the past, the present, and the future of the community. Current members of a group that has been meeting continuously for 160 years will come together with other women in the community to share their history and their tradition. It may even inspire other women to

start their own group, where conversation and the improvement of the mind through sharing is emphasized.

Significance

The work I did worked toward making these important minutes more accessible to the public and academic researchers. Creating this finding aid also set up a framework for future volunteers and interns at the museum to use to make the minutes of other social groups accessible. This work is important because the museum is a small local museum where volunteers and interns, under the direction of one staff member, are the ones primarily doing historical research in the archives. Creating finding aids in the format I used helps the museum toward its goal of bringing the rich information hidden within the pages of the minutes to the attention of the interested public. While the Sandy Spring Museum is moving toward a focus on bringing contemporary communities in Sandy Spring together, it also has a rich history to share with these communities. The social clubs play a large role in shaping the unique mindset of Sandy Spring. I hope that my work and the work of future interns and volunteers will help the museum make this history more accessible and find ways the museum can use this information to help newcomers learn about and hopefully connect with the rich heritage of the greater Sandy Spring area.

In 2012, Allison Weiss, Executive Director of the Sandy Spring Museum, worked with the Board of Directors to write a three-year strategic vision that focused on programming and outreach. These goals are highlighted on the first page of the Strategic Vision published on the museum's website:

Imagine that the museum buildings and grounds are filled with people...
artists who are creating works inspired by the museum's collection;
storytellers who are recreating scenes from Sandy Spring's past;
people who are visiting a farmers or crafts market;
people who are enjoying music in the Dr. Bird room or at an outdoor concert;
and families who are recording their own stories at the Sandy Spring Museum Story Corps booth.
Imagine that the Sandy Spring Museum is used by the entire community...
that the museum preserves the past and documents the present through outreach and engagement,
that the museum is a gathering place where people can develop meaningful connections by exploring community history through the visual, literary and performing arts.
Imagine a new kind of history museum.⁶⁹

This vision speaks to and highlights the challenges that I would argue many museums are facing today, namely how does one attract the public to a community museum? How do community museums remain relevant to their constituents? How does one foster dialogue and engagement among different generations within the Sandy Spring community? The Sandy Spring Museum is working to reinvent itself to be a “new kind of history museum,” one that is a gathering place where the present meets the past.

The Sandy Spring Museum, originally started as a local history museum that preserved a certain past, is undergoing this process of self-evaluation, as demonstrated in their strategic vision. However, as with many things, it is not so easy. There is tension between those who wish for the history of the long-time residents to be remembered and

⁶⁹ Allison Weiss, “Strategic Vision 2013-2015,” *Sandy Spring Museum*, accessed October 4, 2015, <http://www.sandyspringmuseum.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/08/Sandy-Spring-Museum-Strategic-Vision.pdf>.

shared, and those who wish the museum to incorporate the heritage of the newcomers. The museum faces the challenge of confronting these desires by finding balance.

It seems that current museological scholarship is calling for museums to continuously re-examine their missions, their role in the area, and their definitions of heritage, preservation, and the community itself in order to stay relevant within the digital age. In order to branch away from the museum as a dusty place where certain messages are preserved in a frozen state, community museums should work to capture a multitude of voices by sharing authority, creating engagement zones and opportunities for co-curation, and opening the museum up to dialogue through programming.

Museums, particularly small ones, have the difficult task of keeping up with their rapidly changing audiences. In order to stay connected, they need to ensure they fill a certain role within the lives of their audiences. I argue that perhaps the best way for these museums to stay connected ultimately is communication. This includes both communications with their audiences and communication with other museum professionals. It is challenging for small museum staff to keep up, given the small number of resources available to them and the multiple hats they wear. But it seems vital that knowledge and experience sharing across the field be encouraged and nurtured. The future is unknown for all, but at least museum professionals will not be alone if they are connected through different avenues with other people asking the same questions, confronting the same issues, and handling the same complexities.

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