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# Local History: A Gateway to 21st Century Communications

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# Local History: A Gateway to 21st Century Communities

By Stephen Bromage

**B**roadband infrastructure is emerging as the essential and defining public utility for the 21st century. Like water and electricity a century ago, the flow of digital information, still in its infancy, is reshaping virtually every aspect of our social, educational, cultural, and economic lives. The inevitable arrival of (near) universal broadband access will facilitate the continued transformation of work patterns and industries, education and entertainment, social relationships, and where and how we access information. It will also heighten the public's need for access to digital resources, training, reliable guidance, and context. While it often seems as if the changes wrought by the digital age play out beyond our control, the impact is felt and experienced locally. This presents a unique opportunity for museums and libraries in Maine. By identifying where their communities are vulnerable, where they are poised to thrive, and mobilizing around the needs and opportunities presented by the digital age, museums and libraries can play a vital role in ushering their communities into the 21st century.

## THE GROUNDWORK: BUILDING DIGITALLY INCLUSIVE INFRASTRUCTURE

**M**aine has made a pioneering investment in digital infrastructure over the past 15 years. The initial results are suggestive and point to the opportunities and value created within digitally prepared communities. Three particular investments are worth noting that have helped set the stage for the work we at Maine Historical Society (MHS) are doing to help communities build capacity through the exploration and sharing of their local history. First, in 1996 the Maine Public Utilities Commission began providing

broadband access to every public school and library in the state through the Maine School and Library Network (MSLN). Today, MSLN provides internet access to approximately 950 schools and libraries statewide (see Welch, this issue).

Second, in 2001 the Maine Department of Education launched the Maine Learning Technology Initiative (MLTI), a program that provides every seventh and eighth grade student in Maine with a laptop computer and provides training and support to their teachers. MLTI was the vision of former Governor [now U.S. Senator] Angus King who saw the program as an opportunity to transform Maine's education system and prepare students to thrive and be competitive in a rapidly changing world.

Both of those investments support and are reinforced by a third, the Maine Historical Society's development of the Maine Memory Network (MMN). Maine Memory was conceived in the late 1990s as an online digital archive whose primary goal was to (radically) expand access to historical collections across the state. Launched in 2001, Maine Memory has evolved into a robust online museum and flexible platform for a wide range of historical interests and activity. It now includes more than 40,000 historical items contributed by 250+ organizations from throughout Maine; hundreds of online exhibits; a comprehensive introduction to Maine history; and much more.

Each of these investments share a core principle: a commitment to inclusion, universal access, and boundary-less participation. All three seek to ensure that even the most remote, economically disadvantaged communities have at least basic access to digital resources, learning, and opportunity. No part of the state, no student, no citizen is expendable.

## EXPLORING LOCAL HISTORY, MOBILIZING COMMUNITIES

**T**he presence of this infrastructure, its universality, enables us to focus on our programmatic goals—building statewide participation, representation, use, value, and content—rather than wondering whether people can get to and take advantage of Maine Memory. It has enabled extensive collaboration at both state and local levels, and informally, provided

a laboratory for exploring the potential social, cultural, and educational impact of technology on communities.

The most remarkable characteristic of Maine Memory is the degree of autonomy it gives local historical societies, museums, libraries, and other contributors in sharing their collections. The Maine Historical Society provides training, support, and the technological infrastructure. “Contributing partners” (CPs) choose what material to share, and then all work is done locally. Contributors select items in their collection; scan or take digital photographs of those items; and through their own (free) MMN account, use a web browser to upload, catalog, and manage the material in MMN. This model recognizes the expertise of local partners, and empowers them to participate and be represented in the telling of Maine history in previously unimagined ways. Still, the process of contributing requires a few essential resources: basic technical skills, access to computer equipment and the Internet, access to and willingness to share historical collections, and time. Most historical societies are eager to contribute, but many need help.

Since Maine Memory’s inception, MHS staff have spent a significant amount of time training local organizations to use and contribute to the site. That experience has enabled us to observe the issues that affect the use of Maine Memory and the ways that communities use and share technology and cultural resources. We soon realized that Maine Memory could serve as a bridge. It was clear that the skills and resources needed to participate existed in every community, but that persistent obstacles made collaboration between local organizations difficult. Historical societies, libraries, and schools, in particular, have clear mutual interest, significant resources to offer each other, and a strong desire to work together. Participation in Maine Memory created opportunities for these organizations to connect, develop relationships, share resources, and learn to work together.

Skowhegan was a key early partner in this work. From 2004 to 2006, MHS staff helped foster an ongoing partnership between Skowhegan Area Middle School (SAMS) and the Skowhegan History House. History House staff were eager to participate in Maine Memory, but had limited technology resources and their organization was housed in an unheated building

that is closed in the winter—a typical scenario. SAMS teachers were excited by the prospect of students helping share their town’s history, and eager for students to use their laptops in meaningful ways. With the support of MHS staff, volunteers from the History House began to regularly bring historic photographs to the school to be scanned by students. Over several years, the students scanned and helped catalog nearly 150 items that are now in Maine Memory, researched and created 15 online exhibits, embarked on a campaign to save a local grange hall, and presented their work at a number of community forums. Students collaborated closely with community members, developed a wide range of skills, and played a significant role in making their town’s history accessible online.

We have since developed and piloted a rigorous program designed to provide local organizations with the support needed to effectively participate in Maine Memory. This program, which includes in-depth training, regional workshops, and when funds are available, small grants, helps libraries, historical societies, and schools to develop local partnerships, share resources, and promote the development of 21st century skills. The opportunities created by participation are described in detail at [www.mainememory.net](http://www.mainememory.net). Since 2007, we have helped more than 40 communities digitize collections, create online exhibits, and/or build full websites that explore their history. This work has repeatedly drawn national recognition. The Institute for Museum & Library Services (IMLS) recently cited this work as a model for how museums and libraries can serve and engage their communities in its recent report “Museums, Libraries, and 21st Century Skills” ([www.imls.gov/about/21stCSkills.shtm](http://www.imls.gov/about/21stCSkills.shtm)). The Maine State Library has been an essential partner in this work, which has been supported primarily by a series of major federal grants.

#### MOVING TOWARDS A MORE DYNAMIC HISTORY

Maine Memory is helping MHS reimagine its relationship to the field, the roles that our staff and institution can play, and the very nature of how history is practiced, presented, and engaged in Maine.

Maine Memory has given MHS a structured way to share staff expertise, institutional resources, and to broadly support the practice of history across the state. Through Maine Memory and other activities, MHS is helping lead a fundamental shift in how many people perceive, experience, and contribute to Maine history: we are striving to make Maine history active, participatory, representative, and part of people's daily lives.

When we think about technology, we often focus on the device, or the impact the device has on our culture. One of the most powerful aspects of technology, though, is the opportunities it provides to bring people together. The act of mobilizing around a local technology project or initiative—whether it relates to history, the environment, economic development, or another local issue—encourages organizations to think beyond their purviews, to find common cause, and to work together to develop capacity and habits of partnership. This process, in fact, creates community. In Scarborough, 7th and 8th grade students taught senior members of the historical society to Skype so that it would be easier to have weekly conversations about collections and research. In Guilford, a collaboration during the school year turned into a part-time summer job for students helping digitize collections and build a PastPerfect database. In Biddeford, at-risk high school students experienced their first academic success when they were captivated by the story of a Civil War canteen. The activities and experiences described here are the product of digitally prepared communities. They are made possible because museums and libraries have reached out, been open to new approaches, and recognized that technology provides the context for their future.

We hope that you will visit Maine Memory Network, and explore all of the ways that it helps connect Maine. If you find your community there, please reach out to and thank the local organization who made the effort to participate (and for all of the other work they do). If you don't find your community, consider reaching out to a local historical organization or library and seeing what you can do to support their efforts to make history a dynamic part of your community's life. 🐟

## REFERENCES

Welch, Tom. 2013. "The Maine School and Library Network." *Maine Policy Review* 22(1): 41–43.



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