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The Maine Memory Network: Re-Imagining the Dynamics and Potential of Local History

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At a time of major shifts in technology, the economy, and the expectations of the public, institutions in all sectors are going through substantial transformations. This is certainly true of humanities organizations. At Maine Historical Society (MHS), the digital age has provided a remarkable opportunity to reimagine many aspects of our work, ranging from how our own institution engages and serves the state, to our sense of how history can be practiced.

This article will briefly explore the MHS's experience creating, nurturing, and sustaining the Maine Memory Network (http://www.mainememory.net/), our statewide digital museum. Launched in 2001, the Maine Memory Network (MMN) began as an online digital archive whose primary goal was to expand access to historical collections across the state. It has continued to evolve and has since become a flexible online museum and an exceptionally robust platform for a wide range of historical interests and activity. The most remarkable characteristic of MMN—and the one that distinguishes it from other online collections initiatives—is the degree of autonomy it gives historical societies, libraries, museums, and other contributors in sharing their collections. MHS provides extensive 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 then, through their own free account, use a web browser to upload, catalog, and manage the material in the MMN. At the same time, we strive to ensure and maintain the quality and accuracy of material in MMN: once uploaded, each item and its catalog entry is reviewed carefully by a project cataloger before it is made public. The model recognizes local knowledge and expertise, helps local partners to build capacity, and radically expands the perspectives that are included in the telling of Maine history.

The relative simplicity of this model—and the extent to which it facilitates local representation and participation—has proven remarkably adaptable and effective. More than 270 organizations across Maine have become contributors. Each has received extensive training and support and established collaborative relationships with MHS staff. In many cases, they have also developed partnerships with other local and regional partners. Maine Memory Network now offers access to more than 50,000 historical items, hundreds of online exhibits, websites built by community teams, educational resources, and much more. It has become a gateway, a jumping off point, and shared space where individuals and communities can explore their experience as part of broader narratives of Maine and U.S. history. The site receives 20,000 visitors per month on average and is recognized as a key piece of the state's cultural, educational, and technological infrastructure.

Maine Memory Network represents a flood of local material, resources, and information. The contributors described above are essential to MMN's identity and vitality: they are 270+ moving, contributing parts, continually adding new material that deepens MMN's online content and enriching the site as a whole. Maine Memory Network collapses traditional geographic and institutional boundaries, and opens a vast new interpretive landscape. For example, *Maine History Online* (MHO), a major feature of MMN, provides a comprehensive introduction to key themes, topics, and events in Maine history through illustrated essays written by scholars, an extensive collection of online exhibits, and close study of hundreds of primary documents. MHO provides broad context for all MMN content and enables the public to explore history at multiple levels: work created by scholars is presented alongside, and provides context, meaning, and relevance for, the contributions of local historians, students, community volunteers and others. Maine History Online, like MMN itself, strives to continually plumb the connections between local, state, and national history.

Participation in MMN also creates opportunities for and encourages local organizations—historical societies, libraries, and schools in particular—to collaborate, share resources, and develop skills. Consider the

following ways that local organizations contribute to the process of getting their history online, and to exploring, celebrating, and vastly expanding access to their community's history. Each has unique resources to share:

Historical Organizations: Local historical organizations have rich collections, extensive knowledge about the community's history, and incredible stories to share. Participation helps them to develop relationships and close working partnerships with schools and libraries; to increase awareness of and support for their organization within their community; and to learn to care for, digitize, interpret, and share their collections via the Internet.

Public Libraries: Public libraries are the center and crossroads of information in most communities and can play a key role in local history projects, convening people, organizations, and resources. They bring professional staff, consistent hours, and a strong orientation to the general public. Participation helps libraries to expand their capacity to provide information about local history; improves technology skills of staff; and extends their relationship with schools and historical organizations.

Schools: Schools offer technology-savvy students, up-to-date computer equipment, and high-speed Internet access. Participation provides students with opportunities to do research, think critically, write,

The Maine State Building at the Poland Spring resort was built of various types of Maine granite, slate, and wood for the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago. At the end of the fair, the owners of Poland Spring bought the building, had it taken apart, and transported it on 16 rail cars. The building was reassembled and modified somewhat. It was opened in the summer of 1895 and housed a library, the "Hill-Top" newspaper office, art gallery, and a museum. (Collections of Poland Spring Preservation Society, Maine Memory Network Item 25525)
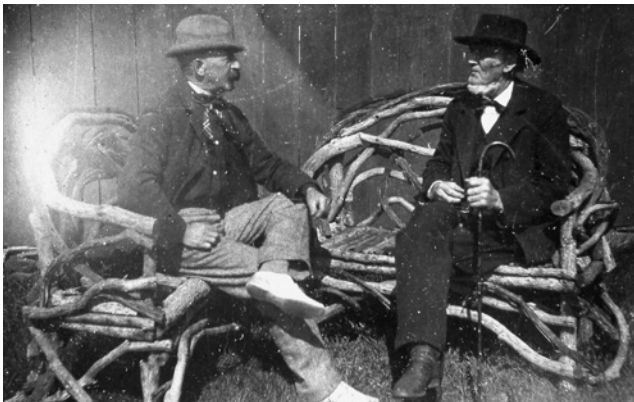
Artist Winslow Homer and Frank Coolbroth, ca. 1900, outside Homer's studio in Prouts Neck. Homer moved to his family's summer home, the Ark, sometime after 1882. He didn't like his living arrangement at the Ark so had the stable redesigned to make a studio, with his living quarters on the second floor. Many of his marine paintings were done from this studio. Coolbroth was a family friend and legal adviser to Homer. (Collections of Scarborough Historical Society & Museum, Maine Memory Network Item 33655, scanned by a student from Scarborough Middle School)

collaborate with people of all ages, and publish their work on a broad stage. Participation helps students to become actively engaged in their community; to develop research, critical thinking, writing, technology, and personal communication skills; and to achieve key academic goals and learning results. Students in many communities have been enlisted and trained to scan materials, under supervision, and in a number of instances students also do the narratrive write-up. Students are not just worker bees, but are contributing significant skills in their own right, for example, training elders to use Skype and other digital tools. Intergenerational collaboration is a key part of this.

Collaboration around MMN has helped organizations to think beyond their institutional purviews and to

find common cause with each other and the communities they serve. Collaboration encourages participants to identify their own interests and needs; to find common goals with community partners; and to identify skills and resources that each has to share. The local history projects they undertake require civic engagement, self-assessment, planning, communication, sharing, compromise, and creativity as well as historical understanding and the ability to use technology.

Most importantly, MMN serves as a connector, bringing together diverse people, communities, and perspectives, all under the umbrella of Maine. Maine Memory Network enables users—both contributors and site visitors—to see and understand their own local, personal experience within the broader context of the state as a whole. Its content simultaneously emphasizes what is unique and distinctive about the contributions of individual Maine people, communities, and regions, and the characteristics and experiences that draw us together and define us as Mainers.

One of my favorite things to do is to watch how new users engage the site. Almost without fail, the first search term that a site visitor enters is either the name of a town with which they have a special connection, or a topic of personal interest (e.g. lumber, Civil War, diaries, clothes, cars). Many people who are not explicitly interested in history come to the site and get pulled in because they find and connect to places and stories that resonate with their own lives. The MHS has remained especially focused on the experience of end-users and on ensuring that the site's content is presented in ways that make the content meaningful. Many other history sites feature more digitized items, but MMN provides descriptions, broad context for the historical items, and diverse tools for saving and using that material. Free accounts enable site visitors to save and annotate items and to create slideshow albums through which they can build and share their own exhibits. Maine Memory Network's sister site, Vintage Maine Images (https://www.vintagemaineimages.com/), enables site visitors to purchase digital or print reproductions. Sales of these items often provide a valuable source of revenue to MMN contributors. Finally, MHS is now developing new tools that will actually enable indviduals to become contributors to the site.

Our experience developing the MMN has been transformative for MHS. In the past, MHS had a difficult time reaching and serving audiences outside of southern Maine. Maine Memory Network is helping reinvigorate the practice of local history in Maine, demonstrating its tremendous value, and defining new ways for historical organizations throughout the state to imagine their work. ❧

Stephen Bromage joined the Maine Historical Society in 2001 and has served as its executive director since 2012. Among other initiatives, he has helped guide the development of the Maine Memory Network. Previously, he helped found the online Disability History Museum and produce the award-winning National Public Radio documentary *Beyond Affliction: The Disability History Project*.
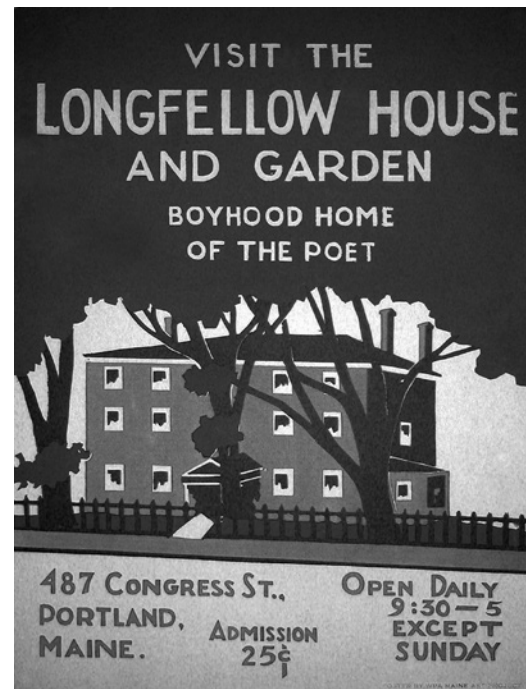
"Visit the Longfellow House and Garden" poster was created by the Works Progress Administration Maine Art Project. The Wadsworth-Longfellow House in Portland was the childhood home of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow and was left to the Maine Historical Society by his sister Anne Longfellow Pierce following her death in 1901. (Collections of Maine Historical Society, Maine Memory Network Item 7957)