Why Maine's Museums Matter

Delivered by Jessica Skwire Routhier
at the annual meeting of the Pejepscot Historical Society
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I am so pleased to be here with you tonight to recognize and honor another important year in the history of the Pejepscot Historical Society. And it has been a big year for you all, as you know, so that makes tonight particularly special and gives us plenty to celebrate. But then again, when we're talking about Maine history and Maine museums and Maine cultural institutions, there's great stuff to celebrate every year, and that's why I think it's so important and really exemplary that organizations like the Pejepscot Historical Society make time to acknowledge and appreciate that truth through their Annual Meeting, to make it a real event and not just a rubber-stamping of the year-end finances and swearing in of new officers—though of course you have to do that too. But using part of your annual meeting to reflect on your achievements and challenges of the previous year, to anticipate what will challenge and inspire you in the coming year, and to frame what you do as part of a larger sphere of community efforts—it's just essential for understanding who you are and where you're going.

My remarks tonight are actually derived from a *different* annual meeting address I gave last fall at the annual meeting and conference of the Association of Maine Archives and Museums, or MAM, as we like to call it, for which I currently serve as President. MAM is the state's only membership organization dedicated to supporting and promoting Maine's collecting institutions, and Pejepscot Historical Society is one of MAM's 300-some members. So Jennifer was there for my talk, and she must have liked some of what I had to say; at least enough to ask me to come here tonight and share some of it with you. Part of what I did that day, of course, was to tick off a list of all that MAM had accomplished in the previous year, how much we had traveled both inside and outside of the state, the steering and advisory committees we serve on, all the plans we'd written and all the surveys we conducted—and while that was all good work, and I'm proud of it, that's not what tonight is about. If you are interested, you can find it all in a "Year in Review" article on our website: mainemuseums.org.

What I want to do tonight is talk a little more broadly about some things that MAM as an organization has been thinking about a lot as we work to serve Maine's community of collecting institutions. Specifically, I want to think about how we, meaning we individual museums and archives, define and assess our value and how we communicate that message to those who need to hear it. Those activities fall generally under the heading of "Advocacy" as it relates to museum work, but a lot of people when they hear the word advocacy think of lobbyists on the senate floor, and that's not what I'm talking about today. The conversation MAM is interested in starting is the conversation about why what we all do is important, why it matters, and we're working hard to lead and fuel that conversation by first turning the microscope on ourselves.

Like any membership organization, MAM doesn't exist autonomously. We do have one paid staff member (who isn't me), but for the most part we function purely on the steam of hardworking people who have actual day jobs in museums and libraries and universities; they volunteer the extra time and effort to serve leadership positions in MAM because they feel like

there is a payout for them, like they are part of a community that MAM serves and benefits. To use an analogy that's particularly appropriate for this audience, and that I also used last fall, MAM, you could say, is *of* its members, *by* its members, and *for* its members. In that way, we're really not unlike any town historical society that draws most of its support from the people whose lives and homes and histories it documents.

So, like a historical society, MAM has long held that a really important part of the work that we do is to find out as much as we can about who *we* as collecting institutions all are, what we do, and why it's important. We are now in the third year of MAM's grant-funded Maine Cultural Institutions Outreach Project, or MCIOP, where our goal, ultimately, is to create a comprehensive, searchable public database of all collecting institutions in Maine, not just MAM's members but *all* 1,000+ of them. I know; it's amazing that one doesn't exist already, and it's also amazing to think how many opportunities are lost simply because we don't know about each others' existence. This effort dovetails with another initiative we're working on in collaboration with the Maine State Museum, a statewide values-assessment program that will, in part, result in a statewide *collections* database that will operate much like the state's library databases—so that, for instance, you'd be able to search for any museum with collections relating to Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain or Harriet Beecher Stowe. Both the MCIOP and Values Assessment initiatives also include professional development workshops throughout the state, which of course are another way for us all to share skill sets and learn *from* each other as well as *about* each others' institutions.

But these are sort of long-term, ongoing initiatives, with benefits that, as clear as they may be to museum professionals, can be somewhat difficult to articulate and quantify. It's one of the real challenges inherent in advocating for cultural and educational institutions. All of us who are already involved believe so fundamentally in their intrinsic value; for us, preservation of history is its own reward. When we envision a world without history, without art, without a material knowledge of its past, the value for us is self-evident, from the macro level to the micro level. But it's not self-evident to everyone. For people who are working on a shorter time frame, who are maybe struggling to balance a municipal budget without laying off teachers, or who are trying to make the most of their annual charitable donations—even as the state is telling them they're not tax-deductible anymore—the intrinsic value argument is less compelling, especially in the absence of any evidence that there's an immediate, tangible value inherent in doing what we do.

You've heard these arguments over the past year, and you've heard them from some seemingly credible sources. Virginia Postrel, a writer of respected works about art and fashion history, went on record on Bloomberg.com saying that the Detroit Institute of Art should sell its collection to Los Angeles in order to pay off a portion of the City of Detroit's debt. Bill Gates told a reporter that to give money to a museum capital campaign instead of giving money to prevent illnesses that cause blindness would be the moral equivalent of *actually* blinding people. These may strike you as sort of stupid things to say—maybe not—it depends on your views—but regardless, it's an unavoidable and uncomfortable fact that these are not, in fact, stupid people. How did museums get into this predicament—where the perception of what we do has become so abstract and one-dimensional that otherwise intelligent people, people who actually believe in art and history and charitable giving, have come not only to question our value, but to craft

statistical arguments to demonstrate how all right-thinking people must ultimately feel the same way?

I am here to tell you that you can blame us, your hardworking museum professionals. Because we're museum people, we're not numbers people. We majored in art history, not business. Now, most of us, and I'm sure Jennifer is no exception, can balance a budget and rake in the grant dollars—some of us are even kind of good at it. But though many of us may be darned good businesspeople, we didn't get *into* this field for the business or the numbers, not one of us did, and so that's not the language that comes most easily to us when we talk about why we have passion for what we do and why it has value. Sometimes, I think, we even feel like it's sort of wrong to distill our concept of worth into a spreadsheet. It's like assigning a value to Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain's medal of honor—it's never going to be OK to buy or sell it, so why put a dollar amount on it? Isn't that just a false premise, to monetize something whose value is measureless?

To some degree, we as an industry have to get over that. And in the end, really, it has less to do with money, with putting a dollar sign on your collection or your building (which I don't in fact recommend that you do, at least not publicly), than it does with time. Most of us can go on and on about how an investment in our museum will pay huge dividends over time, and we mean it and believe it and we're probably right, but this is 2014 and the ice caps are melting and most people just don't care anymore about 100 years from now. What people are hungry to hear now is that an investment in your museum will pay at least modest dividends in the next twelve months. For many of us—I know this was true for me—thinking this way requires a massive psychic readjustment, but believe me when I tell you that we *can* make this case, and we're doing ourselves a disservice if we are not. Nonprofits are businesses, and we need to speak the language of business with the people who make decisions that will affect us long-term.

To that end, I bring you the Economic Impact Statement, and this represents another major effort MAM has recently introduced on behalf of all Maine's collecting institutions. An Economic Impact Statement is a concise way of demonstrating your immediate value: that even in the short term, you give more than you take. It's like an elevator speech version of your annual report, attractively packaged in a way to show that your success contributes meaningfully and tangibly to your community's success and economic health. We wanted MAM's overarching statement to offer a snapshot of collecting institutions throughout the state, and so we conducted a survey of all our institutional members, including Pejepscot Historical Society, and let me take this moment to thank you personally for responding with your data. Your participation helped to make MAM's statewide Economic Impact Statement as accurate as possible, but I hope you also found that it gave you reason to gather together some basic information that you can use to create your own institutional Economic Impact Statement, one that is specific to your organization and your community.

So what did we discover about the economic impact of Maine's collecting institutions? Well, there were 28 respondents to the survey who supplied numerical data, and together, those 28 organizations

- Served 312,348 visitors and patrons in the past year, including more than 18,000 schoolchildren,
- They did so at very little cost to those patrons: fully two thirds of the respondents charge no admission or use fee at all. Of those who did, the average regular adult admission fee was only about $7.50; less than the cost of a movie.
- Those organizations operated on a shoestring, with a total of only 20 full-time and 49 part-time paid staff members among the respondents—but nearly 600 volunteers, who donated more than 38,000 hours of time over the past year. Eighteen of those organizations—nearly two-thirds of those who responded—have no full-time staff at all. The average number of employees, both full- and part-time, was 2.65 per organization.
- The survey participants made ends meet with an average annual budget of about $116,000. Six organizations had no annual budgets at all. Six more were under $5,000.
- Only three organizations received federal funds, and only three (not the same three) received state funds. About a third of the respondents indicated that they receive some amount of funding from their municipalities, but in all, government funds represent only 7.6 percent of operating income.

So on a statewide basis, what can we make of all this? Well, Maine Archives and Museums has about 230 institutional members, and so this sampling reflects about a twelfth of that. But the respondents ranged from the smallest of the small historical societies to some of our largest and most ambitious museums, so I like to think that it represents an accurate cross-section of our community. If that's true, then we can begin to get a clearer picture when we extend the numbers to reflect our full institutional membership: Some 2.7 million visitors and patrons served, including more than 180,000 school children. 600 people employed. 327,000 volunteer hours. $26 million each year pumped into our state economy. That's a big deal. As a colleague once put it, "This isn't a hobby, you know." This is an industry. We're for real. We matter.

And even for the organizations who only had zeros to fill up those little blanks on the survey: it's important for us *and them* to realize that they matter, too. Because when somebody goes to that little museum, or historical society, or historic property, or archival collection, they're buying lunch somewhere—they're filling up the gas tank somewhere—maybe they're staying overnight—and they're probably stopping at some other cultural destinations along the way. We know for a fact that nationwide, and especially in Maine, cultural heritage tourists stay longer, spend more, come back, bring friends, and shop local. And museums contribute to that in a real and tangible way, whether their budget is seven figures or none. And because organizations like MAM and the Maine Arts Commission, which did an Economic Impact Study of Maine's art museums in 2009, are out there doing some of the legwork for you, you can assign a real, supportable, documentable value to every single person who walks through your door. Just like they say, it's the economy, stupid. We're all a part of it whether we like it or not; this is our chance to show that the role we play in it has an end value that's positive, not negative, that we are economic engines and drivers, givers and not takers. The numbers show that our municipalities, our state, is better off having us around, rather than having us boxed up and sent L.A.

This isn't all limited to cultural tourism, either: think for a minute about the value of the community services that collecting institutions provide essentially for free. How much does a

historical society save its municipality by acting as their archive, or as their family/senior/pre-K enrichment program? How much do you produce for them—in tax revenue, from sales in your shop and from all the people buying lunch down the street, or in indirect revenue, by attracting tourists to the area in the first place? How much does your existence raise taxable property values? The American Alliance of Museums has even been doing some research to show how museum communities are healthier communities—that health-care costs are statistically lower where cultural organizations are a real presence. It's exactly the opposite of what Bill Gates was talking about—museum support *is* community health support—and people need to hear that story from us, because they're not going to get it from anyone else.

So an Economic Impact Statement can be sort of your magic shield—a not-so-secret weapon that's maybe crafted to deflect perceived opponents or naysayers but maybe also just for people who like what you do well enough but need a little convincing that it's worth the investment. What do you do with it? Well first, you share it with your board. You take it to City Council Meetings, to the Chamber of Commerce. Share it on your Website and through Social Media. Take it to Maine Nonprofit Day in February. Take it to National Museums Advocacy Day in Washington DC. Send it to the American Alliance of Museums; they're compiling an online list of Economic Impact Statements as a resource. Include it in every funding request and grant application. Send it with your annual fund solicitation. Give it to local realtors. And don't forget to leave a stack on your front desk—because whatever else you do, you don't want to forget your visitors, and you never know who is going to walk through your front door. It could be Bill Gates.

At a Cultural Tourism Summit in Northport late last year, Abbe Levin of the Maine Office of Tourism told the group—which represented some museums but also other fields like performing arts and agritourism—that the best and most effective way an individual organization can advocate for itself is to serve its real-life audience. To make sure that each person who walks through your door has a meaningful experience, feels valued, and feels like *you* value your mission and collection. *You* know what you're about, and why you're important—your job is to make sure that everyone who interacts with you knows it as well. Give them a reason to get to know you, a reason to come back, to tell their friends and colleagues, to write about you on their Facebook page. Make *them* your advocates. And that's because no matter how impressive you can make those numbers on your Economic Impact Statement look, no matter how important it is for decision-makers and supporters see and understand them, those numbers begin and end with your commitment to public service. In the end, those lofty, hard-to-articulate, intangible values are still the ones that matter *the most.*