



Cambridge  
**Historical**  
Society

# 2021-2023 Strategic Plan

Approved by the Governing Council December 2, 2020

# Background

Founded in 1905 by a group of amateur historians, the Cambridge Historical Society (CHS) initially met in private homes and on the Harvard campus to present lectures on Cambridge history. Since 1957, the Cambridge Historical Society has been headquartered at the historic Hooper-Lee-Nichols House on Brattle Street. For its first 100 years, CHS operated as a conventional local historical society, similar to those found throughout the US during the 20th century. Membership was exclusive, and the histories the organization preserved mostly represented elite West Cambridge.

CHS began to expand its mission in the early 2000s, with a goal of serving everyone in Cambridge. In 2015, with the arrival of current executive director Marieke Van Damme, CHS implemented new plans to transform to an audience-centered, inclusive organization. CHS began experimenting with new programming methods, holding events at library branches, bars, and cafés throughout the city. It won a national award from the American Association for State and Local History for its 2016 Fall Symposium.

In December 2019, Cambridge Historical Society engaged Laura Roberts and Rainey Tisdale to develop a new strategic plan that would further transform the organization, expanding its efforts to reach new audiences while maintaining organizational sustainability. Using a new experimental model of creative strategic planning, CHS conducted an audience analysis, interviewed community

stakeholders, benchmarked CHS against other local history organizations, developed a vision for CHS's future, and brainstormed new ways for CHS to serve Cambridge. The result is a living plan, strong in identity, values, goals, and first steps. By design, this plan does not contain prescriptions and absolutes. Instead, this living plan sets up 2021 as a year of prototyping, enabling CHS to continue to iterate and refine the plan as these prototypes yield additional insights, and positioning CHS to respond and evolve through 2023 as audience needs and community opportunities present themselves.

With this new plan, CHS is excited and energized to support Cantabrigians in sharing history with each other, and using history to make a better city together.

## Our Mission

The Cambridge Historical Society engages with our city to explore how the past influences the present in order to shape a better future.

## Our Guiding Frameworks

1. We focus on the City of Cambridge.
2. We bring historical perspectives to whatever Cambridge is exploring, creating, or improving. To identify where historical perspectives are needed, we listen to our community.
3. Through their experiences of Cambridge, every person in our city knows something about Cambridge's history, and their knowledge matters. We support people in sharing history with each other—and weaving their knowledge together—by offering them the floor, the mic, the platform.

# Our Values

- History is everywhere in Cambridge. We bring it to the surface and call attention to it wherever it exists, in situ.
- We weave past, present, and future together in everything we do, recognizing that this is how people experience their city.
- We celebrate all ways of knowing and caring about Cambridge. To that end, we never do history on its own; instead we embrace an interdisciplinary approach. We do “history and…”
- Just as every person in Cambridge has knowledge about its history, every person in Cambridge is a steward of Cambridge history. We inspire people to be caretakers of the city and its history.
- We work with Cambridge individuals and organizations to fill gaps in the historical record, looking out for forgotten stories, untold chapters, unshared knowledge, and silenced voices.
- We use history to inspire and challenge people to be their best selves and actively invest in the future of Cambridge so together we can make a better city.
- By highlighting historical perspectives, we offer Cantabrigians tools to contextualize and critically examine current issues of fairness and equity. With knowledge rooted in history, our city will be better positioned to enact change, strengthening community health and vibrancy.
- We are a community convener. We create “third places” for people of all walks of life to mix, share, and connect. We know our convenings are working when strangers see each other as neighbors.
- We ask questions, nurture open-ended exploration, and foster thoughtful dialogue with the goal of making curiosity about Cambridge infectious.
- It is important for us to *listen* to Cambridge—and help Cambridge listen to itself.
- Even though we are a small organization with limited resources, we operate in the spirit of generosity rather than scarcity when we collaborate and convene. In an increasingly stratified city, generosity and sharing is the way forward together.

# Our Audience

In the coming years, CHS will prioritize the following four audiences in developing projects and allocating resources.<sup>1</sup> We do our best work when we find effective ways to bring together and serve all four of these audiences at the same time.

**History Enthusiasts:** CHS was founded by amateur historians and they have been our most important stakeholders and audience. In the coming years we will harness their research knowledge, passion, and approach to help us engage the other audiences. We serve History Enthusiasts when we empower them to share their love of history effectively and meaningfully.

**Boosters:** Cambridge is full of civically-minded residents who are committed to seeing their city thrive. They love it when CHS's work builds social capital and social cohesion, using history to knit Cantabrigians more closely together, identify community needs, and imagine a brighter future for the city. We serve Boosters when our work helps and improves Cambridge.

**Curious Explorers.** Many Cantabrigians love to learn about the rich and complex layers of their city in unexpected ways. In order to serve them, CHS has to mix it up. They need CHS to connect history to the present and future, and to highlight how Cambridge history can be multidisciplinary, surprising, and/or quirky. We serve Curious Explorers when our work is fascinating, mixes history with other topics, and asks new questions.

**Social Facilitators.** These folks are the hosts, the connectors, and the social glue. They scan Cambridge's calendar listings and their social media feeds looking for opportunities to gather their friends and family for memorable quality time. We serve Social Facilitators when our work fosters enjoyable or meaningful experiences for the people in their group, and helps them share parts of Cambridge they know and love with people they know and love.

<sup>1</sup>Rainey Tisdale developed these audience profiles by applying John Falk's model of museum visitor identities to local history audiences (Falk, *Identity and the Museum Visitor Experience*, 2009). Thanks to Laura B. Roberts and Katie Wright for their input.

## Our Goals for 2021-2023

1. Broaden and diversify CHS's community, participants, and the history we share
2. Be the most relevant and responsive historical voice in Cambridge
3. Remake CHS as an open and inclusive institution
4. Ensure long term financial and organizational sustainability

# Strategies We Will Undertake to Meet Our Goals

## I. Grow Stakeholders and Audience

- Design programming that appeals to multiple audiences (History Enthusiasts, Curious Explorers, Social Facilitators, and Boosters).
- Acknowledge all the possible “doors of entry” to CHS—and equally value people regardless of which door they use—to broaden the pool of people who benefit from, care about, and support the organization.
- Reformat our membership structure to make it a “friendship” structure, uncoupling loving CHS from contributing to it. You don’t have to donate to CHS to be affiliated with CHS; we will know you and love you even if you don’t donate.
- Partner with a range of organizations to offer free CHS “friendships.”
- Share and distribute authority by offering people our platform to share their Cambridge history.

## 2. Increase Relevance

- Continue choosing a timely yearly question to focus programming.
- Develop ongoing methods of scanning for issues where a historical perspective could be useful.
- Develop ongoing strategies for responding to the Cambridge Zeitgeist.
- Develop strategies for making Cambridge history feel personal.

## 3. Step Up DEAI Efforts

- Implement a yearly anti-racism action plan.
- Increase diversity of staff, board, and volunteers.
- Significantly increase the diversity of the people who affiliate with CHS (friends, donors, partners).

## 4. Align Our Facilities with Our Mission and Vision

- Experiment with ways to use the Hooper-Lee-Nichols House that reframe its eliteness.
- Assess how the Hooper-Lee-Nichols House serves CHS's mission and vision.
- Continue to develop projects around the city in every neighborhood.

## 5. Align Our Collection with Our Mission and Vision

- Prioritize researching and sharing parts of the collection that diversify Cambridge history, speak to a democratized notion of local history, or tie the past to current issues in the city.
- Review the composition of the object collection in relationship to our mission and vision.
- Start the seven-year clock on the “found in collections” process to clarify collections recordkeeping.

## 6. Harness Additional Assets

- Draw on Cantabrigians' love of Cambridge, connecting the dots between loving Cambridge, loving Cambridge history, and loving CHS.
- Mobilize volunteers, developing a *History Cambridge Corps* of volunteers who field local history research requests for CHS projects or for individual Cantabrigians
- Collaborate with kindred spirit organizations whose mission and values align with CHS's to more effectively serve Cambridge and grow our presence.



## 7. Build our Reputation, Brand,

### Marketing, Networking, and Profile

- Rename the organization to History Cambridge to reflect our new vision and leave behind our old, elite model.
- Invest in social media & marketing and reach out to media to spread our new vision and brand.
- Assign director and Council members to attend events and meetings across the city to share our work and offer our historical resources.
- Make friends with potential partners to build strong, ongoing relationships leading to active collaboration.

## 8. Increase Resources

- Move people up the engagement pyramid to become donors, with attention to what motivates their involvement in CHS.
- Use our new vision to attract new donors and grants, especially among Boosters.
- Create earned income streams from programming for Curious Explorers and Social Facilitators.
- Experiment with developing a few special #CambridgeLove retail items.

## 9. Fine-tune Governance

- Diversify the Council by age, race/ethnicity, and neighborhood.
- Balance the representation of History Enthusiasts, Curious Explorers, Social Facilitators, and Boosters on the Council.
- Redefine membership/friendship in the CHS bylaws as a non-voting role that doesn't require a donation.

Cambridge Historical Society

is now

**History Cambridge**

# Thank You

## **CHS Council**

Amy Devin, President  
Doug Hanna, Vice President  
Ed Rodley, Vice President  
Doug Brown, Secretary  
Marni Clippinger, Editor  
Lauren Harder, Treasurer  
Elizabeth Adams  
Tod Beaty  
Frank Kramer  
Bruce Irving  
Heli Meltsner  
Katherine Rafferty  
Kyle Sheffield

## **CHS Staff**

Marieke Van Damme, Executive Director  
Beth Folsom, Program Manager  
Maggie Hoffman, Archivist  
Amy Marquis, Social Media Manager

## **Strategic Planning Committee Members**

Amy Devin  
Beth Folsom  
Doug Hanna  
Maggie Hoffman  
Ed Rodley  
Marieke Van Damme

## **Strategic Planners**

Laura B. Roberts  
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