

# Exhibition Development Guidelines

Chester County Historical Society

Revised 2008; previous version 1990s

*Here in America, we enjoy the freedom to keep, study, and interpret for ourselves our nation's past. This is a precious freedom, one vital to a free and open society and to the success of the American experiment in self-government. You who work for history organizations or on your own in history's cause are, I believe, guarantors of this freedom.*

*- Cokie B. Roberts, Honorary Chair, AASLH Leadership for the New Century Endowment Campaign, 2008*

## Mission of Exhibitions

Exhibitions are our primary interaction with the general public and the principal way of providing access to the collections and their multiple meanings. CCHS' diverse collections are the material evidence of Chester County's past, and exhibitions place them within a meaningful context.

CCHS selects, develops and designs exhibitions to

- explore the diverse stories of Chester County history,
- to examine objects, manuscripts and photographs for their distinct physical and intellectual qualities,
- to present multiple perspectives on the past,
- to provide insights into the relationship between past and present, and
- to stand as a centerpiece in a comprehensive approach to educational programming.

## Standards for Exhibitions

Successful exhibitions will be physically, intellectually and emotionally engaging to those who experience them. Efforts will be made to make the subject matter come alive through attractive presentation and opportunities for establishing personal connections and meaning.

- Decisions about content, means of expression, and design are based on decisions about the intended audience(s).
- Subjects are appropriate to an exhibition format, with its use of collections, environment, phenomena, and other means of physical presentation.
- Significant ideas, based on appropriate authority, are clearly expressed through reference to subjects in the exhibition and content reflects current knowledge of the subject.
- Innovation, risk taking, controversy and/or emotional impact should sharpen understanding.
- Conservation and security measures are integral to the installation, including appropriate object mounts, light levels and environmental controls to ensure that future generations have similar opportunities for connection and meaning.
- Design elements (e.g., color, graphic treatments, exhibit furniture, lights) contribute to and support the exhibition's ideas and tone.
- For each element of the exhibition (furnishings, audio-visuals, sound, printed materials, graphics), the materials used and the quality of production are appropriate to the design concept, audiences, duration and budget of the exhibition.
- Exhibitions should be evaluated on both intellectual and practical levels.

## Permanent and Changing Exhibitions

Permanent installations are *Chester County: A View of the Past*, *Chester County Decorative Arts*, and *The History Lab*. Each of these exhibitions has been installed for a long-term period, with the expectation that only minor changes or additions will be made on a limited basis. Major changes are undertaken in conjunction with the institutional strategic plan. The permanent exhibitions are presently located on the second floor of the History Center.

Four first floor galleries are open to changing exhibitions, which may occupy one or more of these spaces, usually for a period of 6 to 9 months. CCHS draws most exhibit materials from its own holdings permitting maximum public access to the breadth and diversity of these collections. Periodic loan exhibitions or objects enable CCHS to reach out to the community and are selected for their relationship to Chester County history, CCHS collections, or important regional cultural themes.

## Exhibition Topics

In determining the exhibition schedule, CCHS strives to create a balance of topics, appealing to the varied interest, ages and learning styles of diverse audiences. Exhibitions may be object-driven, relating to a single type or range of objects, or thematically developed, exploring historical topics that may be interpreted through objects and manuscripts. Exhibit topics, whether for in-house or traveling shows, must relate to CCHS' mission, provide a balance with other exhibits, be timely, and of significant appeal to a variety of audiences.

CCHS also has nationally-known and locally favorite collections and we seek ways to keep such collections consistently available.

## Exhibition Personnel

Exhibit planning and implementation takes place across the institution. An exhibit team, coordinated by the Collections Department, is responsible for developing the exhibition schedule in connection with the Education Department and including the Development, Marketing/PR Departments and other areas when appropriate. This approach ensures coordination of related programming, publication, funding and marketing needs. The team, representing curatorial, research, development and educational functions, determines whether the exhibit is the responsibility of a single or multiple departments.

All exhibits rely on the collaboration of the professional staff to apply expertise to object care and installation, aesthetic and interpretive design, label content, and visitor needs. This collaboration is overseen by the Director of Collections who meets with the exhibit team twice a year and schedules these meetings, maintains the exhibit schedule, coordinates staff responsibilities and manages follow up. Outside exhibit contractors (e.g., designers, fabricators, evaluators) are hired as appropriate to the scope and budget of particular exhibits and participate as necessary in team meetings to assure the design's conceptual integrity.