

101 Ideas for New Revenue at History Organizations

By AASLH Members and Staff

Nearly every organization faces financial challenges of some kind. Whether the challenge is pursuing a new strategic direction or just keeping the lights on, history organizations often have to think creatively about bringing in new sources of revenue. Beyond admissions and memberships, there are myriad ways history organizations can bring in additional revenue to help them advance their missions. AASLH, through the help of our State Historical Administrators Meeting—which brings together the leaders of major state history organizations throughout the country—as well as our Historic House and Small Museums affinity group committees and the AASLH Council, has compiled more than a hundred ideas for new revenue that we hope will serve as models and inspiration.



Darah Fogarty

Start an annual Christmas or holiday ornament series that features a different historic structure or event in your community each year.

Whether it's new products, programs, tours, reevaluating existing offerings, or seeking out new business or community partnerships, the list that follows offers proven, scalable examples of ways that history organizations of all sizes around the country have brought in new revenue to support their work.

Maybe you could serve as “home base” for a vintage baseball team, offering discounted admission and selling refreshments on game days. You could partner with a local winery or brewery for a special edition beverage to sell at your site—and share the returns. Even something as simple as replacing free admission with a suggested donation can make a big difference in the bottom line.

This Technical Leaflet has dozens of other ideas, provided and tested by colleagues in all corners of the profession. We've organized them into six different categories:

1. Programs and Tours

2. Facilities and Policies

3. Partnerships

4. Reevaluating Existing Offerings

5. Community Relations

6. Products

Peruse the examples that follow and imagine: what could your site do with a little more cash flow?

Programs and Tours

- Do a special eighteenth-, nineteenth-, or twentieth-century “date night” event where couples try period-authentic courtship rituals, dances, and writing different types of love letters to their partners. Schedule the event early enough in the evening so couples can go out to dinner afterwards.
- Host a classic movie night in the museum or on the lawn. Charge admission, or make admission free and charge for snacks that fit the movie theme.
- Do a summer outdoor concert series on the lawn (\$5/guest), or try a limited entry indoor “unplugged” concert series using an indoor venue (\$25/guest, only 30 tickets).
- Offer archaeology tours by the state or local archaeologist. For one site that did this, the events sold out repeatedly. People love to participate in and do archaeology in the field.
- Become “home base” for a vintage baseball team. On game days, offer discounted admission and sell refreshments in your museum store.

- Offer a Civil War bus tour, which is always popular for history buffs.
- Design a historically themed escape room at your institution, and sell tickets to this adventure experience wherein small groups of guests must work together to solve the mystery by finding clues and figuring out puzzles.
- Create and sell a small boat cruise tour, with your (and neighboring) historic sites as the stops along the route.
- Have a tiny museum, tiny kitchen, tiny whatever-room or whatever-location concert, modeled on NPR's Tiny Desk concert idea, featuring local musicians in a cozy space. This uses your location's uniqueness and broadens your audience by featuring a special experience.
- Open some of your historic sites for family camping.
- Establish behind the scenes tours—people love the greater access and it makes them feel special.
- Make two lists: one of things your team and/or your institution excels at and one of topics in which your community and/or the field needs training. Identify the overlap and cultivate the skills to train others in that area, and begin offering workshops or one-on-one training for a fee.
- Create a series of historically-inspired social events, focusing on the history of food and alcohol. In many cases, you can use historic recipes from your archives to recreate drinks and dishes for modern enjoyment.
- Offer antique car rides for a fee.
- Start a pre-school program at your site—many of the families involved will join your organization at the “family” level of membership.
- Organize a simple date night for couples with open exhibits and serve alcohol and chocolates. This can not only be profitable, but also generates new members.
- Develop a book-reading experience in your historic space keyed to a title that was written or popular during the period of your site. Participants might read Jane Austen for several hours in an early nineteenth-century setting you establish in your site, or have gin while reading F. Scott Fitzgerald on a day when the space is closed to the public. Pair with historically-appropriate lighting, refreshments, and perhaps a group discussion at the end, and price accordingly.
- Host 21-and-up after-hours events combining history, unique hands-on activities, discussions, and drinks, music, or games. Ticket sales and sponsored or in-kind support from local partners will turn a profit. Give people a place other than a loud sports bar to gather in your community.



Stanford Museum & Nature Center

Start a pre-school program at your site—many of the families involved will join your organization at the “family” level of membership.

- Organize a “Wine, Eats, and Artifacts” event built around a spectacularly interesting piece in your collection about which you can tell a deeply moving story. People are hungry to have this intimate connection to the past.
- Introduce tours of the historic landscape as a discrete element to combine with the historic house. One site does this in three versions (digital \$5, walking \$12, and electric vehicle \$25) and has created \$25,000 in new revenue in the first two years, as well as new opportunities for sponsorship.
- Improve the visitor experience and the quality and range of options for interpretation with highly specialized tours led by senior staff. These can go for \$50 per person. These tours are in addition to many free and low price options for general audiences.
- Have your State Historic Preservation Officer (SHPO) lead tours. These specialized events are very popular.
- Create motor coach tours to historic sites outside your city, county, or state, to destinations such as your state capital, a large museum in your region, or a national attraction like Colonial Williamsburg or

New Orleans. One site netted \$50,000 in one year doing this. The focus of the program is mostly history outside the local community.

- Deck the halls of your site for a holiday lights tour.
- Train local seventh-grade guides to give “For Kids by Kids” tours, a short, twenty-minute program designed by the student volunteers for other children.
- Create a historically themed miniature golf course at your site. You can still serve your core audience while attracting a broader one.
- Open at night on Halloween for tours and treats, or a more elaborate special event.
- Purchase the franchise for the local tourist trolley and use it as an opportunity to create a museum without walls in your community while making more visitors aware of your organization. Place your interpreters on board to offer engaging material.
- Create a golf series combined with historical tours, visiting nearby or faraway courses.
- Plan a trivia night fundraiser. Sell tickets by the table or individually (individuals are formed into teams). Teams choose a creative name and bring decorations for their table. Add a wine pull raffle,

silent auction, craft beer tasting, or other fun activities that increase the total amount of money raised.

- Try an “Attic to Basement Tour” that not only opens up the whole museum and its normally off-view spaces to public tours, but that lifts the curtain on questions and challenges your staff are facing: “Why is this artifact displayed but not those ten other similar items? What used to be exhibited in this space thirty, fifty, or one hundred years ago?”
- Start a Relevant History Coffee Talk to catch people on their way to work. Invite a guest historian to help put the day’s or week’s news in historic context or to lead a conversation that unravels a present-day local issue’s historic roots (thirty minutes maximum).

Facilities and Policies

- Establish a “suggested donation” admission program in place of a free admission program. Install coin-operated lockers, which you can buy online in a stack of various sizes. Twelve lockers rented for fifty cents each, three times a day, six days a week, over fifty weeks a year is \$5,400.
- Create a simple form to send to special event rental clients who are owed their full security deposit after the event that gives them the option of donating it in whole or part as a tax-deductible contribution.
- Rent out your facility every Sunday to a church group that doesn’t have its own building. One site does this and generates \$35,000 annually. Lots of church congregations across the country are interested in renting space.

- Have a full-service conservation center and run it on a pay-for-itself basis.
- If your organization does not already offer planned giving, research the topic and begin offering it as another option for donors.
- Make your rental space available (for a fee) for legislative or other government office receptions, particularly if the location is convenient, historically inspiring, or visually stunning.
- Hold high school proms at your facility. Surprisingly, proms can be less messy and intrusive than weddings!
- Open your site for wedding rentals (even if it’s just the barn or lawn).
- Rent spaces in your institution’s parking lot for other special events to use. Partner with an outside parking company to handle the logistics.
- Put together corporate retreats (including programming, not just renting space) for local businesses. Those folks don’t mind paying a premium for a unique experience, and this might be a way that your board members can contribute by shepherding their business contacts in this direction.
- Require that book printing be sponsored, so money has to be raised in advance of the book’s publication. Books are easy to attract sponsors for, and then these sponsors can be on your radar for other fundraising needs.
- Merge multiple vendors into one contract to lessen administrative headache and increase profit margins for the vendor and you.

National Park Service



Work with area scouting groups to offer badge workshops and/or modify existing programming to align with badge requirements. Scouting Councils might be able to handle workshop promotions.

- Make the time to finally focus on a capital campaign, which bring in much larger one-time gifts and bequests.
- Sell ad space on the scrim/mesh covering on building construction or renovation sites. These very large, very visible spaces can be prime real estate for major sponsors, corporate funders, and other advertisers.
- Charge for processing family collections, with digital images created by the historical society becoming part of its overall collection.



Have a tiny museum, tiny kitchen, tiny whatever-room or whatever-location concert, modeled on NPR's Tiny Desk concert idea, featuring local musicians in a cozy space. This uses your location's uniqueness and broadens your audience by featuring a special experience.

- Rent extra space in a storage facility to a fine art moving company.
- Sell parking passes for your parking lot to a nearby professional firm, restaurant, or other business that needs the spaces on a regular, workday basis.
- Allow a city park system to turn a block of your land into an urban garden/park area which they will now maintain, saving you the costs of mowing or other landscaping services.
- Leverage your history and the fan base for it that might lie far outside your town: try a Kickstarter, IndieGoGo, GoFundMe, etc. campaign backed up with strong social media efforts. Pick a specific goal and raise the cash with a strong pitch, perhaps as a video, and some incentives (e.g., coffee cup for \$25 gift or \$100 for a private tour).
- Repurpose an offsite historic property, which is outside your mission, to serve as a retreat center and event rental location.
- Buy equipment that scans newspapers to make second-generation microfilm (for institutions that purchased your microfilms the first time in 1950s-1980s). Digitize microfilm and sell to institutions and patrons.

- Cater to quinceañeras, bar and bat mitzvahs, sweet sixteens, and related coming-of-age events, offering event space for rentals as well as historic settings for photographs.
- Encourage members and supporters to make purchases through AmazonSmile, Amazon.com's program that donates a percentage of a person's purchase to the nonprofit of their choice.
- If your organization does not have an endowment fund, plan a campaign to start one. Identify potential donors including one or two people who are willing to match all contributions up to a specific total.
- Do you have unused acreage that you have to maintain at your historic site? Work with your local agriculture extension office to lease it to a local farmer to raise a cash crop appropriate to your site's history. In an urban area? Lease space for community gardens.
- Create a grandparent membership that allows them to bring up to two or three grandchildren per visit as part of the benefits.
- Have extra office space, or can you invest in renovating or creating some extra space? Become a small business or nonprofit incubator, and let or sublet workspace to a team smaller than your own.

Partnerships

- Partner with a for-profit tour company for a food tour. They take groups to different sites around town and then end at your site for a tour and a taste of a traditional food item from your town, state, or region. You get a per-person fee for each tour.
- Work with area scouting groups to offer badge workshops and/or modify existing programming to align with Scout badge requirements. Scouting Councils might be able to handle all workshop promotions and registrations.
- Establish digitization agreements with a variety of major library resource vendors, including ProQuest, Project MUSE, JSTOR, NewsBank, Cengage, FamilySearch, and Google Books, which in many circumstances includes both the royalties and complimentary licenses for new electronic resources.
- License and sell visual materials on your website and through a non-exclusive licensing agreement with Getty Images.
- Pay for scanning equipment with a grant or other funding for a specific large project, and then use that equipment to handle additional smaller scanning projects for other agencies or entities, and charge them a fee for doing so.
- State historical societies can create a statewide website into which local history organizations can put their digital images and records. Digital images can be purchased by the public, and the state historical society shares revenue with local organizations.
- Start a happy hour program in which you partner and share the profits with a local restaurant that harvests produce from your historic kitchen garden and uses it on the menu offered at the event. Each program is a different theme, and your organization can connect to a different set of community partners based on the rotating topics.
- Partner with Ancestry.com to digitize your records and work out a deal for residents or members to have limited-time free access.

IMAGINE:
What could
your site do
with a little
more cash
flow?

Reevaluating Existing Offerings

- Bring in a consultant to assess all of your retail operations and help you to segment your offerings based on the specific customers at each retail location. One organization that did this tailored its products to customers and is on track to increase revenue 45 percent this fiscal year.
- Do a regular analysis comparing your services to other entities in your area or state to be sure you are

not undervaluing things such as space and event rentals and admission prices for walk-ins and school groups.

- Shift marketing dollars from traditional media, such as billboards or magazines, to online, which allows you to target audiences and reach outside of your area, state, and country to fans of local musicians, food types, writers, political leaders, etc. One site doubled its online revenue over the past year using this strategy.
- Reexamine a long-ago program that made money, or almost made money, for your institution and recondition it to be more inclusive and relevant to people in your community today.
- Try a “Stay at Home Tea.” Rather than attend another fundraising function, donors can use the teabag you have sent them, make some tea at home, and send a donation to the museum.
- Hire a local artist or clever craftsman to construct a unique collection box related in theme to your site or collection. Maybe it has moving parts to grab bills or allows coins to roll through a model of your building to encourage contributions.
- Scrutinize existing programs and consider if they serve the mission and whether or not they are financially sustainable.

Eliminate those that score low on both counts to make room for something that will generate revenue.

Community Relations

- Make classroom and auditorium space available for rent to other nonprofits and businesses in your community.
- Create an opening reception for trustees and advisory council anytime there is an exhibition, and line up local businesses to be the sole sponsor to cover the full cost of the event. Include special incentives for the sponsor including signage, employee tickets to the event or exhibit, and logo placement on exhibit literature.
- Start a preservation program to advise businesses on archiving their papers, photographs, and records, and then offer to store them for a fee.
- Honor a select number of business leaders in your state or community each year in a program named after people or events significant to the history of your locale or community. Have a gala event for the induction with sponsors (including friends of the inductees) covering costs.
- Build your endowment by allowing individuals to support staff positions, just like named chairs in a university setting. This creates a source of revenue for the endowed position that allows the institution to reallocate funds previously spent on this position to other areas.



Do you have unused acreage that you have to maintain at your historic site? Work with your local agriculture extension office to lease it to a local farmer to raise a cash crop appropriate to your site's history. In an urban area? Lease space for community gardens.

- Launch a business history initiative that discusses the role of business in shaping the state's or region's history. Companies can pay for sponsorship to be involved.
- Is there a local business that has an animal mascot that could be housed in your animal program space? A hotel that has a llama mascot will be paying for a new barn, upkeep and staff time, a management fee, and cross-branding at one urban historic site.
- Find a local business to sponsor field trips for Title I schools in your area. Be sure to include admission/program costs as well as the cost of the bus.
- Solicit local services (such as a cleaning service for someone's business for a year—something that puts a spotlight on the donor's company) and then raffle it off during one of your institution's events. If the service isn't donated, consider purchasing it (at a discount) and then raffling it off at a higher price.
- Do an annual distinguished award banquet and give an award to a local celebrity or well-known figure whose presence will draw a crowd. Have an all-volunteer committee make the arrangements and raise the money for expenses to make ticket sales all-profit.
- Focus on intentionally growing your email list with contacts that are interested in local history and offer them interesting content before making targeted membership and donation pitches.
- Get legislation passed authorizing a new state income tax check-off to support local history. For one state historical society who administers this grant program, contributions from individual income tax returns grew to more than \$25,000 in the second year.
- Volunteer your site as a polling place to increase your visibility in the community and draw return (paying) visitors.

Products

- Find a local winery to create a special edition wine for sale at your site and share the returns.
- Establish your own online store on your website for history-related items, especially ones unique to your organization or locale.
- Create a state history textbook for the grades in your state that focus on state and local history and sell that to schools, including alternate language versions.

Corporate support can help fund the development, along with ongoing financial assistance from individual supporters. An electronic version can be licensed for classroom use on a sliding scale (size of the district, number of students, etc.), with a typical fee of \$10 per student per year.

- Start an annual wall calendar series using images from the collection.
- Launch a proprietary beer based on a recipe associated with your historic site using old-fashioned brewing methods.
- Add your gift shop to Shopify, BigCommerce, Magento, or another e-commerce provider.
- Hire a local artist to paint a scene of a feature of your site, make prints (perhaps with the printmaking donated or sponsored), and sell on site.
- Start an annual Christmas or holiday ornament series that features a different historic structure or event in your community each year.
- Set aside a special corner in your store for donated items from local artists. Handmade pottery, toys, and housewares, premium priced with a tag explaining that all proceeds are used for interpretation. The offerings change over time, but add a very nice 100 percent profit boost to retail sales.
- Find someone to design a “tropical shirt” that includes drawings of prominent lost buildings in the city that you can use for advocacy and sell to raise funds.
- Encourage in-visit purchasing through use of special tokens at a living history site: a “time travel token” can be a \$5 copper coin that guests purchase. Visitors use it to step into the past and interact with the businesses in your outdoor campus, such as a general store or blacksmith’s shop, or for taking a carriage ride. This is an interactive element that puts the focus on guests’ engagement with the people and



Become “home base” for a vintage baseball team. On game days, offer discounted admission and sell refreshments in your museum store.

stories of your museum, while supporting in-visit purchasing, that doesn’t feel heavy-handed or distracting from the sensory-rich environment of your site.

- Invite a local artist, school, or other community group to make a t-shirt design related to your site or collection, which you sell online with Volusion, Teespring, or other companies. Be sure to first research the sourcing and labor practices of the company.
- Work with your state to create a commemorative license plate that generates revenue for historical projects.

.....

Do you have any revenue-generating ideas that have worked well at your organization? Let us know on Facebook or Twitter @AASLH.

.....

Several AASLH groups and committees contributed the ideas that make up this list, including the State Historical Administrators Meeting, Historic House and Small Museums affinity group committees, and the AASLH Council.

© 2018 by the American Association for State and Local History. Technical Leaflet #284, “101 Ideas for New Revenue at History Organizations,” included in *History News*, volume 73, number 4, Autumn 2018. Technical Leaflets are issued by the American Association for State and Local History to provide the historical agency and museum field with detailed, up-to-date technical information. Technical Leaflets and Technical Reports are available through *History News* magazine to AASLH members or to any interested person. Membership information or additional Technical Leaflets may be acquired by contacting the American Association for State and Local History, 2021 21st Ave. S., Suite 320, Nashville, TN 37212, 615-320-3203; fax 615-327-9013; www.aaslh.org.