



# Creative Adaptation: Exhibitions in the Downturn

by Regina Faden, Ph.D

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Historic St. Mary's City (HSMC) is a state owned and operated outdoor living history museum that focuses on the story of the first capital of Maryland in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. The original city, largely a collection of post-in-ground wooden structures, disintegrated and disappeared after the capital was moved to Annapolis in 1695 as a result of political shifts in England. For more than three hundred years, farmers tilled the soil where the "ancient city" once stood.

During the 1960s, interest grew in rediscovering the first capital and talking about the seeds of democracy sown on its soil. The St. Mary's City Commission was established by the state of Maryland in 1966 to research, preserve, and develop the site. Archaeologists and historians began to piece together the story of St. Mary's. Their discoveries are now embodied in the museum's exhibitions in a reconstructed 17<sup>th</sup> century Tidewater village. The meticulously reconstructed buildings serve as a context for a living history program about Lord's Baltimore's colony, established to protect "liberty of conscience" or as we might conceive of it today, religious freedom.

Long before the recent economic downturn, staff members were compelled to develop innovative approaches to create interpretive exhibitions within a tightly constrained and sometimes uncertain budget. This article briefly discusses some of these older techniques as background for newer strategies staff developed as a result of the recent recession. The main method of adjusting to limited funds has been to mine the museum's current internal resources. Many of HSMC staff, like other museum professionals, have

worked in other industries before coming to the museum world. By employing their talents and skills, the museum has been able to reduce cash expenditures for a new exhibition because staff members developed strategies to reduce its scope, fabricate it primarily in-house, and construct it to serve multiple purposes.

HSMC has the ability to draw on a staff of 32 talented full-time employees. Its strategies might not work for every museum, but museum professionals are creative and resourceful people. Possibly some of the solutions discussed will remind other museums of how much ability and vision they already have at hand.

## A Compelling Need and Immediate Challenge

Today, one of the most prominent exhibitions on the landscape at HSMC is the reconstructed Brick Chapel of 1667. With its Baroque façade and two-story brick walls, it has an immediate visual impact on the visitor. As a result of a 15-year fundraising campaign, the privately funded chapel rose on its original foundations as a symbol of a religious freedom envisioned by Lord Baltimore at a time when Catholics were often persecuted for their faith. The concept for the Chapel was an exhibition to recreate the 17<sup>th</sup> century experience of the space. To this end, the Chapel would be reconstructed without interior signage. Interpretive panels were to be installed in an adjacent reconstruction of the "Priests' House" where Jesuit priests likely operated a school. The reconstruction of the Priests' House was to be supported by state capital funds.



*The Brick Chapel at St. Mary's City. Courtesy of Historic St. Mary's City.*

In mid-2009, the Chapel reconstruction was nearing completion, but the proposed Priests' House was never included in the state's capital budget; many other projects were pushed back or eliminated due to the economic downturn. The staff were compelled to change plans for the Chapel's interpretation. Several ideas were considered: another capital campaign, exterior signage on the surrounding grounds, or a complete shift to moving interpretation inside the chapel. None of these ideas was feasible for reasons of timing, promises made to donors, and most compellingly, a lack of funding. The staff began to ponder alternatives and looked to their own site for guidance.

### **Reducing the Scale**

In the mid-1990s, staff wanted to help visitors to better understand the density of settlement in 17<sup>th</sup> century St. Mary's City. Fully reconstructing the City was neither feasible nor desirable, because reconstructing a building "requires a large

quantity of information, major excavation of the building remains, and is very costly if done to proper museum standards" (Miller, 2007, p.42). Dr. Henry Miller, director of research, conceived of skeletal frames, known as "ghost frames" to represent 17<sup>th</sup> century structures, modeled after those at the Benjamin Franklin House exhibition in Philadelphia. These ghost frames are still part of the museum's landscape. While they frustrate some visitors who infer that they indicate a lack of funds, others are delighted that the frames help them visualize a "vanished environment" (Miller, p. 42).

In 2008, staff adapted the ghost frame concept and constructed a sturdier, open air, timber frame pavilion adjacent to a newly reconstructed tavern and inn. The intent of the pavilion was to expand the tavern exhibition and expend the remaining state funding allocated to the reconstruction project. The pavilion's design complemented the aesthetic of the

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*Priests' House Ghost Frame. Courtesy of Historic St. Mary's City.*

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17<sup>th</sup> century and provided a site where visitors could read interpretive panels, eat lunch at a picnic table, and take shelter.

Faced with the challenge of interpreting the Chapel with the Priests' House, staff proposed again using the concept of a timber frame pavilion to support interpretation. While some staff objected to adding more structures to the site that did not represent known 17<sup>th</sup> century buildings, the project moved ahead so the Chapel could be interpreted, somewhat as originally planned.

#### **Doubling Your Funds**

HSMC needed to raise funds for the project. The state of Maryland,

fortunately, provides support for heritage tourism through matching grants for capital and program projects administered by the Heritage Areas Authority. Both non-profits and governmental agencies can apply to its local Heritage Area program. During the recent economic crisis the greatest challenge for organizations has been raising the required matching fund. Fortunately, the museum had received a bequest so the Foundation could provide half of the total project expenses of \$58,000. Foundation members voted to use the funds for the pavilion. Staff submitted a grant request which was fully funded by the Heritage Areas Authority July 2009.

Local resources also helped HSMC lower project expenses. The museum is located near a number of Amish saw mills that custom cut lumber at very reasonable costs.

### **Innovative Use of Staff**

In order to reduce costs, staff decided to forgo the assistance of exhibition designers. Instead, they pooled their collective knowledge and skills for the project. The interpretive text panels were written by Dr. Miller and Silas Hurry, Curator of Archaeological Collections. Collections Assistant Don Winter had worked as a professional photographer and was frequently called on to produce documentary and promotional images for the museum. Also known for his gifts in design, Winter was drafted to develop the interpretive panels for fabrication.

Hurry agreed to take the role of project manager, coordinating the development, fabrication and installation of interpretive text panels with the pavilion's builder, also a staff member. In consultation with Hurry and Miller, Winter designed the text panels and incorporated illustrations to tell the story of the Chapel. When the first drafts were completed, the museum's Research Committee reviewed and provided editorial commentary. Winter reworked the panels, and the final design was approved.

At the same time as the text panels were being developed, HSMC's Historic Building Curator, Peter Rivers, consulted with Miller to select the site. They selected a place near the Chapel and a short distance from the location of the Priests' House, leaving the possibility for its construction at a later date. They planned a significantly larger pavilion than had been constructed by the tavern, to accommodate a greater number of text panels and visitors. With the support of a grant from Access Maryland, a state program to help organizations meet

ADA requirements, the museum hired a contractor to pour the cement foundation for the exhibition.

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*Pavilion at Tavern (Van Sweringen Site). Courtesy of Historic St. Mary's City.*

custom cut lumber at very reasonable costs. The greatest complication with working with Amish people is that one cannot contact them by phone, because they do not have phones. Rivers made several trips to negotiate the milling of the lumber. His time was well spent, because





Peter Rivers and the Chapel Pavilion. Courtesy of Historic St. Mary's City.

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**Reference:**

Miller, H.M. (2007). When the digging is over. In Jameson, Jr., J.H. and Baugher, S., Ed. *Past meets present: Archaeologists partnering with museum curators, teachers, and community groups.* (pp. 35-52). New York: Springer.

the Amish millers delivered the custom timbers for a fraction of their cost at a retail store.

Rivers hired two students from St. Mary's College of Maryland, the museum's partner in an undergraduate Museum Studies program, to assist him. The students came with essential skills, having completed Rivers' class "Post and Beam in an Age Gone Modern," where they learned hands-on timber framing techniques. The three men chiseled pegs, hewed beams, cut mortis and tenon joints, and hoisted the heavy timbers to make sills, frames, and supporting beams. The pavilion rose over the summer of 2010. Visitors enjoyed stopping by the site to observe the work and talk about timber framing with both Rivers and the students. By early fall of 2010, Rivers and the students mounted a leafy bough from the pavilion's gable, a traditional English symbol that the work was completed.

**Multiple Uses for the Exhibition**

The building exhibitions at HSMC are spread over approximately 40 acres, and

summers in southern Maryland can be very hot and humid. Visitors walking the site need way-stations to rest and refresh. Therefore, staff designed the pavilion with built-in benches and an adjacent water fountain. Now visitors can take a break and have a cool drink while they learn about the chapel and can examine, up close, building techniques of the 17<sup>th</sup> century.

**Mission Accomplished and Lessons Learned**

The pavilion project was completed for half its projected cost (labor cost savings) and was officially opened to the public in March 2011. While successful, the project obviously required that staff members dedicate their time to a project outside of their usual duties, thereby delaying other work and causing some frustration. However, the specter of a prominent exhibition remaining un-interpreted and an awareness of project donors' eagerness to see it completed, made the choice to persevere fairly simple. With proper annual treatments of a relatively inexpensive mix of linseed oil and mineral spirits, the pavilion should serve visitors for many years. Affordable maintenance of this, and all its structures, is an increasingly important concern for the museum.

One of the most valuable lessons learned from the project was the greater but unrealized opportunity to engage the visitors' interest. Peter Rivers often stopped to talk to visitors about his work and techniques, and they were fascinated. It would have been better to foresee the value of promoting the project as a unique opportunity to see 17<sup>th</sup> century skills in action. Now, as Rivers restores



Chapel Pavilion Interior. Courtesy of Historic St. Mary's City.

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one of the museum's older exhibitions, a freeman's house, Winter documents his progress by creating videos and uploading them to YouTube. Once the exhibition site is safe enough for and more presentable to visitors, they will be welcomed and encouraged to witness Rivers reconstructing a wattle and daub chimney—and possibly apply some daub themselves.

The solutions to the challenges of the

economic downturn developed by HSMC might not be applicable at every museum. The nature of HSMC requires specialized skills that are not readily available, such as traditional carpentry. However, strategies such as reducing the size of exhibits, employing staff skills while understanding the impact of reallocating their time, and making an exhibition serve more than one purpose whenever possible, may be techniques that other institutions can adopt. ☀