

Connecticut Historical Society: An Overview

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Social Media



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MISSION

Connecting you and the story of Connecticut

OVERVIEW

The Connecticut Historical Society (CHS) is a private, not-for-profit museum, library, research and educational center. Founded in 1825, the CHS is one of the oldest state-level historical societies in the nation. The mission is to inspire and foster a life-long interest in history. To accomplish that purpose, CHS collects and preserves material (books, documents, images, and artifacts) related to Connecticut's social, cultural, and family history and makes those materials available for public education and use **onsite** at its building on Elizabeth Street in Hartford, **off-site** at other locations, and **online**. CHS's on- and off-site public services reached 43,870 people in 2012, almost half of whom were K-college students, teachers, and chaperones.

VISION

A society that values historical perspective and understanding as essential tools in connecting with others, shaping communities, and making informed decisions.

LOCATION

One Elizabeth Street, Hartford, CT 06105

The Connecticut Historical Society is located on 7.4 acres in the historic West End of Hartford, the state's capital city, just 2 hours from New York City and 1.5 hours from Boston. One of the oldest cities in the country, Hartford lies on the banks of the Connecticut River and is steeped in history and rich in cultural institutions.

CHS is housed in what was once the home of inventor and businessman Curtis H. Veeder (1862-1943), who designed and patented a cyclometer (used to record distance traveled on a bicycle), which gave rise to his own company, the Veeder Manufacturing Company. In 1928, Veeder's Company merged with the Root Company of Bristol, CT to become Veeder-Root Inc., which is still in operation today and continues to produce counting devices. Veeder's 1928 Colonial Revival home with European influences was a luxurious residence, complete with its own car-wash, an elevator, built-in vacuum system, and separate servants' quarters, all of which can be explored during a monthly behind-the-scenes tour. Three major additions in the 1950s and 1970s provided space for exhibits, collections storage, an auditorium, and a library/research center.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

In 1825, the Connecticut General Assembly was presented with and approved a petition signed by Connecticut citizens including Thomas Robbins, John Trumbull, Thomas Day, and William W. Ellsworth stating the importance of creating a society for preserving historical materials. The Connecticut Historical Society was created to collect materials related to the history of the United States, and specifically Connecticut.

In 1843, with an ever-increasing collection of books, pamphlets, and objects, the CHS moved from its original 2nd-floor location over a store on Main Street to a room in the newly built Wadsworth Athenaeum. By 1844, the collection had grown to include 6,000 pamphlets, 250 bound volumes of newspapers, manuscripts, coins, portraits, and furniture. Some early objects included a chest owned by William Brewster, a tavern sign from General Israel Putnam's inn, and the bloodstained vest worn by Colonel William Ledyard at the Battle of Groton Heights.

Through the years, the collection continued to grow, necessitating larger facilities. To accommodate the growth, the CHS purchased the house of inventor Curtis Veeder at Elizabeth Street in the West End of Hartford. Alterations to the building in the 1950s and 1970s included the addition of book stacks, collections storage, auditorium, exhibition galleries, and library reading room.

COLLECTION

With **over 3.5 million items**, the CHS collection is nationally-renowned, especially in the areas of clothing and textiles, furniture, unique hand-written manuscripts and diaries, prints,

photographs, tavern signs, early children's books, and tools. As stewards of this collection, CHS aims to: 1) preserve and enhance the collection to maintain its relevance and overall quality, 2) employ judicious accessioning and deaccessioning as needed, and 3) organize and catalog the collection to increase its value and accessibility to our audiences. The latter is to be accomplished through a variety of channels including online catalogs, finding aids, and on-site databases, as well as use in school tours, educational programs for children and adults, exhibitions, off-site programs, and community and university partnerships.

EXHIBITS

Permanent exhibitions:

Making Connecticut

An overview of 400+ years of Connecticut history, filled with more than 500 historic objects, images, and documents from Native Quinnetukut to today. Themes of daily life, clothing, transportation, sports and leisure, work, and social change run throughout the exhibit. Hands-on activities for kids (and adults) include working a World War II assembly line, hand stenciling designs for a 19th-century chair, sewing a Native American moccasin, replacing bobbins in a textile mill, and cooking a meal and setting the table in both a colonial and a 1980s kitchen.

Inn & Tavern Signs

Between 1750 and 1850, there were more than 50,000 inn and tavern signs produced by American painters, creating a distinct visual language and offering a glimpse into tavern life, travel, and patriotic ideals in early America. Only a fraction of these signs survive. The Connecticut Historical Society's collection numbering more than 60 signs is by far the largest and most spectacular in the country.

Off-site permanent exhibition:

History is All Around Us, Mortensen Gallery at Connecticut's Old State House

The Connecticut Historical Society created this interactive, multimedia exhibit about the history of Hartford and the history "all around us". Explore history in the places we live, the things that we use every day, and the actions we take. Build and re-build Hartford over time on the large-scale floor map, find out about the era of urban renewal and its effects on the city, delight in everyday objects from long ago (and not so long ago!), come

face-to-face with a 1912 steam-powered fire engine, encounter creative and innovative people who have made a difference, and consider your own place in history.

Connecticut's Old State House is located at 800 Main Street, Hartford.

Recent onsite temporary exhibitions include:

- *Cooking by the Book: Amelia Simmons to Martha Stewart*, created by students from Central Connecticut State University and Hartford Art School, University of Hartford (2013)
- *Cats & Dogs in Art and Life* (2012/13)
- *Tiny Art: Connecticut Poster Stamps*(2012/13)
- *A Tradition of Craft: Current Works by the Society of American Period Furniture Makers* (2012)
- *New Life for Connecticut Trees: Furniture by City Bench* (2011/12)
- *Lost Landscapes: Great Trees from Connecticut's Past* (2011/12)
- *September 11, 2001: Connecticut Responds and Reflects* (annual installations, 2006-2011)
- *Dining with a Society of Collectors*, created by students from Central Connecticut State University (2011)
- *Echoes from Across the Ocean: From the Caribbean to Connecticut – Works by Stanwyck Cromwell* (2011)
- *Chance, Choice & Change: Coming to Connecticut* (2004-2011)
- *Connecticut Needlework: Women, Art and Family 1740-1840* (2010/11)
- *Pictures for Victorian America: Prints by Hartford's Kellogg Brothers* (2010)
- *Amistad: A True Story of Freedom* (1998-2010)
- *She Shoots . . . She Scores! The History of Women's Basketball in Connecticut* (2009/10)
- *Small Things Considered* (2007/8)
- *Connecticut Valley Furniture Made by Eliphalet Chapin and His Contemporaries 1750-1800* (2005/6)
- *Are We Clean Yet?* (2004/5)
- *Heroes, Heartthrobs and Horrors: Celebrating Connecticut's Invention of the Comic Book* (2003/4)
- *Finding a Place, Maintaining Ties: Greater Hartford's West Indians* (2002/3)

RESEARCH CENTER

The CHS Research Center is one of the largest and most comprehensive research libraries in the state and offers access to all of the millions of objects, manuscripts, photographs, prints, books, maps, and historical documents. The friendly, approachable staff serves professional, academic, and amateur historians, genealogists/family historians, teachers, and students at all levels onsite, off-site, and by remote inquiry.

The Research Center is the central point of access for:

- 3.5 million manuscripts, including diaries, letters, ledger books, family and business papers
- 242,000 photographs, prints, and drawings
- 125,000 books, serials, and pamphlets
- 38,000 artifacts and paintings, including household objects, furniture, clothing, and toys
- 10,000 architectural drawings
- 3,700 broadsides/posters
- 1,300 maps

AUDIENCES

The Connecticut Historical Society's primary audiences are **heritage tourists** seeking authentic encounters with stories and people of the past; **families** seeking educational activities to enjoy together; **students and teachers**; and **researchers of all ages**. About 93% of CHS's audience comes from within the State of Connecticut. We serve these audiences:

- **Onsite** at our location at One Elizabeth Street in Hartford, through exhibitions; school programs; teacher workshops; family programs; adult lectures, programs, and workshops; the Research Center; rentals and special events; and the store
- **Off-site** throughout the state, through school and community group outreach programs; presentations for adult groups; festivals; conferences; travelling or permanent exhibitions; and off-site special events
- **Remotely**, through chs.org, online research tools and resources, blogs and social media, online projects and exhibits, and partnerships in collaborative websites and web-based projects

In 2012, the CHS served 36,220 people, plus an additional 7,650 through our *History is All Around Us* exhibit at Connecticut's Old State House. Some of the largest audiences were:

- 21,200 students or youths in groups, teachers, and chaperones
- 5,400 adults served off-site through outreach programs, presentations, and activities
- 3,700 who used the Research Center or had remote research inquiries answered
- 2,000 who visited the museum galleries on their own
- 1,100 adults taking part in guided tours or onsite programs or workshops
- 1,020 families taking part in onsite and off-site programs
- 500 who attended rental events

FUNDRAISING

The Connecticut Historical Society is not a state agency and receives no general operating support from the State of Connecticut. As a private, not-for-profit organization, the CHS raises funds through memberships, donations, admissions, program fees, and store sales and from grants, matching gifts, sponsorships, bequests, and endowments. To support the CHS, please contact the Membership & Development Office at (860) 236-5621, ext. 227.

VOLUNTEERS

As a not-for-profit institution, the CHS needs the support and advocacy of volunteers to help with many aspects of our work. Currently, the CHS has over 100 volunteers and interns, and we actively seek others who share our passion for history. If interested, please contact the Education Department at (860) 236-5621, ext. 233.

LEADERSHIP

Jody Blankenship, Executive Director

Richard J. Tuchman, CFRE, Chief Development Officer

Kevin Hughes, Director of Administration