PROGRAM

9:00 AM **BREAKFAST AND EXHIBIT HALL**

9:30 AM **WELCOME**
Priscilla Brendler, Executive Director, Greater Hudson Heritage Network

INTRODUCTION OF PARTNERS & ANNUAL CONFERENCE SPONSORS

9:45 AM **SPEAKER BLOCK 1**
8-minute speaker presentations

WHEN IT GOES VIRAL: MANAGING REPUTATION IN THE DIGITAL AGE
Abby Addams, Boscobel House and Gardens
What happens when your organization becomes the center of unexpected online attention: celebratory, controversial, or misinformed? This presentation explores the fear of losing control over institutional voice and reputation in moments of sudden visibility. Drawing on real-world experiences, including practiced communications strategies from Boscobel House and Gardens, we will discuss internal decision-making under pressure, message alignment across stakeholders, and the balance between transparency and control. At the 'follow' session, participants will be invited to share their own "near misses" and crisis moments, building a collective framework for navigating reputation risk in an era where every visitor has their own online platform, but museums don't always have a crisis manager on staff.

PLANTING PASSION WITH PURPOSE: INTEGRATING MUSEUM VOLUNTEERS INTO ACCESSIBLE MUSEUM EDUCATION PROGRAMS
Ellen Peiser, The Intrepid Museum
Passion can grow people in communities from museum visitors to museum volunteers or professionals. The Intrepid Museum has developed a successful model for integrating volunteers into its educational Access programming as thematic experts, enhancing the experience for both participants and volunteers alike. This session will explore the value of volunteer involvement in Access programming and offer a framework for other institutions to replicate this model. Testimonials from volunteers and feedback from the museum's Neurodiversity Advisory Council will highlight the impact of this approach on participants and their families.

NO PAIN, NO GAIN: COLLECTIONS REHOUSING AND DEACCESSIONING
Caitlin Monaco, Historic Hudson Valley
In 2024, leadership at Historic Hudson Valley tasked the Curatorial department with relocating object, archival, and library collections from off-site storage to our headquarters by spring 2026. As collection inventories and photography progressed in preparation for rehousing, a further complication arose: many items were broken beyond repair, outside HHV's interpretive focus, or highly duplicative. Despite the logistical difficulties and potentially controversial nature of removing items from collections, leadership and the Archives & Collections Manager recognized the opportune timing and decided to undertake a deaccession project concurrent with rehousing to address these items appropriately. The scope and scale of these tasks were daunting for the

one-person Curatorial department, especially given the demands they placed on already limited internal resources, competing responsibilities, and the increasing scarcity of federal grant funding. HHV's commitment to collection stewardship remained at the forefront of the projects and helped us navigate these obstacles as we leveraged and developed staff interests and capabilities, existing infrastructure, and collaborations between departments and the Board of Trustees. Now, in 2026, the projects' deliverables—7,000+ objects inventoried and photographed, approximately 4,000 items safely rehoused, and 3.5% of the collection deaccessioned—have given HHV better physical and intellectual control over our holdings, safe and efficient access to the collections, and new opportunities for public programming. Using our experience as a case study, HHV aims to provide colleagues with strategies and insights they can use to develop their own in-house, high-impact solutions for collections care.

THE REALITY OF HYPHENATED ROLES

Autumn Thaggard, Seneca Falls Historical Society

This presentation focuses on the positives and negatives of hyphenated positions within the museum field. Many working individuals have probably felt overworked and undercompensated by doing jobs outside of their job description. Another form of this occurs with dual-discipline jobs or roles. This presentation discusses the realities of hyphenated job titles that highlight issues and changes across multiple fields, particularly affecting small museums. As more and more working individuals experience this common reality, new terms such as "scope creep" and "quiet hiring" also exemplify the experience of these jobs.

WHEN CRIMINALS CAME CALLING: THE CHANGES AND CHALLENGES BURGLARY BRINGS

Janet Terhune, Harness Racing Museum & Hall of Fame

On the morning of December 18, 2012, the staff of the Harness Racing Museum & Hall of Fame arrived at work to the news that no museum wants to hear: "We had a break-in." The burglary was the headline, but the changes and challenges that would follow, including police investigations, theories and suspicions, insurance documentation, security upgrades, community outreach and more, are the rest of the story.

10:25 AM **FOLLOW THE SPEAKER**

Want to learn more about the topics and projects you just heard about? Pick a speaker (or two, or three!) to follow for in-depth conversations. Each speaker will host a space.

EXHIBIT HALL AND COFFEE BREAK

OFFICE HOURS (ADVANCE SIGN-UP REQUIRED)

10-minute appointment slots

11:00 AM **HUDSON RIVER MUSEUM GALLERIES OPEN FOR SELF-GUIDED EXPLORATION**

12:00 PM **AWARDS FOR EXCELLENCE PRESENTATION**

12:45 PM **LUNCHEON**

Luncheon generously sponsored by the Maurice D. Hinchey Hudson River Valley National Heritage Area/Hudson River Valley Greenway

1:25 PM **AWARDS FOR EXCELLENCE AWARDEE POSTER SESSION**

EXHIBIT HALL

OFFICE HOURS (ADVANCE SIGN-UP REQUIRED)
10-minute appointment slots

1:45 PM PANEL BLOCK 2: PANEL DISCUSSION
FACING OUR FEARS: NAVIGATING AI, HISTORY, AND CULTURAL HERITAGE
Panelists: Bill Merchant, D&H Canal Historical Society; Taylor Bruck, Ulster County Historian; Jonathan Palmer, Greene County Historian; Deborah Howes, Howes Studio

Artificial Intelligence is rapidly changing how people find, interpret, learn from, and share information—and cultural organizations cannot afford to treat this as someone else's problem. From AI-powered search and chatbots to K–12 learning tools and digital interpretation, these technologies are already shaping how audiences encounter history and cultural heritage.

This session brings together a wide variety of perspectives on the opportunities, responsibilities, and challenges AI presents for museums, historical societies, and other cultural institutions. How can organizations ensure that their collections and primary sources remain visible and accurately represented in an increasingly AI-mediated information landscape? What responsibility do we have to help our staff, volunteers, students, and communities develop the AI literacy needed to recognize misinformation, understand how AI systems shape historical narratives, and engage critically with these technologies?

Presenters will explore practical ways cultural organizations can use AI to expand access to collections and create new pathways for learning, while also considering the difficult questions surrounding accountability, historical truth, government and institutional influence on interpretation, and the environmental costs of AI infrastructure. Rather than simply asking what we should fear about AI, this conversation asks how cultural organizations can understand these technologies well enough to make thoughtful choices and to think critically about the role museums and history organizations can play in shaping the digital future rather than simply reacting to it.

2:30 PM FOLLOW THE SPEAKER
Want to learn more? Pick a speaker to follow for in-depth conversations.
Each speaker will host a space.

EXHIBIT HALL AND COFFEE BREAK

OFFICE HOURS (ADVANCE SIGN UP REQUIRED)
10-minute appointment slots

HUDSON RIVER MUSEUM GALLERIES OPEN FOR SELF-GUIDED EXPLORATION

3:05 PM SPEAKER BLOCK 3
8-minute speaker presentations

FEAR, FAILURE, AND 50% OFF: REFRAMING VALUE IN MUSEUM MEMBERSHIP

Kimberly Phyfe, Three Village Historical Society

What happens when a small historical society takes a risk that feels completely counterintuitive: cutting its membership price in half? In early 2026, the Three Village Historical Society & Museum launched a "March Madness" 50% off membership campaign, an approach that challenged long-held assumptions about value, sustainability, and perception. The result: 106 new members in 13 days, breaking every previous membership record and reshaping the organization's understanding of growth. But this session is not about a successful promotion - it is about the fears that nearly prevented it from happening. What does it mean to "devalue" membership? What if no one responds? What if it works and expectations rise beyond capacity (which they did)? What happens when new strategies challenge institutional tradition or peer norms? This presentation offers a candid reflection on the internal and external pressures surrounding bold decision-making in museum practice. It will explore how perceived risk, fear of failure, and fear of visibility can limit innovation and how reframing those fears can unlock new opportunities for engagement and sustainability.

WHOSE STORY IS MISSING? RECONTEXTUALIZING THE COLLECTION FOR TODAY

Laura Vookles, Hudson River Museum

What happens when a museum takes a hard look at its collection and asks the questions that have long needed to be addressed? Presented with the opportunity to double its collection gallery space, the Hudson River Museum confronted a challenge facing many museums today: how do we remain relevant when our collections reflect the values, priorities, and limitations of another era? How do we acknowledge gaps in representation, meet changing audience expectations, and create experiences that feel both authentic and urgent? This session explores the fears and opportunities inherent in rethinking a permanent collection in an honest discussion about what it means to challenge assumptions, embrace institutional vulnerability, and rethink long-term displays for today's diverse audiences, especially when acquisition budgets are modest.

OVERLAPPING EMPIRES: RISK, RESPONSE, AND REFLECTION

Margaret Holmes, Van Cortlandt House Museum

In 2026, Van Cortlandt House Museum took a significant institutional risk with "Overlapping Empires" by Bronx artist Samantha Box, the first contemporary art exhibition in the museum's 129-year history. Created specifically in response to VCHM and its layered history, the whole-site installation treated the house and its collection as integral parts of the work, combining historic objects, photography, sound, and installation to explore empire, enslavement, migration, memory, and freedom, themes that have increasingly shaped the museum's interpretation over the past two years. This presentation will share how the exhibition was received by visitors, stakeholders, and our Board, whose long stewardship of VCHM shaped an important part of the conversation, as well as what worked, what did not, and what we would approach differently. Also considered will be what the project revealed about the capacity of historic preservation to support layered interpretation, how contemporary art may continue to serve as one interpretive tool at VCHM, and ultimately, whether or not the risk was worth it.

DAVID MEETS GOLIATH AT THE MUSEUM

Paul Stewart, Underground Railroad Education Center

Forging ahead with great enthusiasm and energy, Underground Railroad Education Center was making great strides in securing funding for its 14,000 square foot $15,000,000 Interpretive Center. Having achieved 75% of our total project cost, which included $3.6Ml from EPA and $250,000 from NEH, we were ready to apply for

additional funding that was reasonably assured and that would put us at our financial goal. Then DOGE arrived, sending UREC into a tailspin as we wrestled with how to respond - practical impacts, to litigate or not, to forge ahead or downsize or quit? What did we do and what have we learned along the way?

3:50 PM **FOLLOW THE SPEAKER**

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EXHIBIT HALL AND COFFEE BREAK

OFFICE HOURS (ADVANCE SIGN UP REQUIRED)

10-minute appointment slots

HUDSON RIVER MUSEUM GALLERIES OPEN FOR SELF-GUIDED EXPLORATION

4:30 PM **CLOSING**

50/50 RAFFLE ANNOUNCEMENTS

THANK YOU & SEND-OFF

Priscilla Brendler, Executive Director, Greater Hudson Heritage Network