



History Happenings

MONTHLY NEWSLETTER

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2020 at The History Center...

2020 - What an extraordinary year! Historic national voter turnout for a presidential election (highest voter turnout in 120 years!), a census year that will inform the next decade of funding and provide a historic resource for future historians, national protests against racial injustice, and a global pandemic that continues to re-shape our community and global society.

It was also an exceptional year for The History Center in Tompkins County. Staff can tell you that it wasn't until January of 2020 that we finally moved the last box out of our storage spaces in the Gateway Building and into their new homes at the [Tompkins Center for History & Culture](#) and to our off-site storage spaces across the city. Our organization began as a living room [historical society in 1863](#), and over 150 years later we found ourselves finally moved into a new state of the art museum and [Research Library](#) open to the public in the heart of the county. Only a few short months after being truly open to the public and fully staffed, we, and most other public spaces in the county, shut our doors to the public for five long months of lockdown while staff worked from home.

2020 also marked a number of anniversaries for [staff](#) at The History Center; Director Ben Sandberg reached his one year anniversary in August, HistoryForge Project Coordinator Eve Snyder completed her first year in October, and Zoë Van Nostrand, Marketing & Visitor Experience Coordinator, rounded the 12 month mark in November. Donna Eschenbrenner (Director of Archives & Research Services) had her twentieth anniversary this year, Cindy Kjellander-Cantu (Design & Support Specialist) her fifth, and Dave Dier (Office Manager & Bookkeeper) finished his second year at The History Center.

This year was bound to be full of unexpected challenges. In a new space, with new staff, and expanded public hours, but the challenges we rose to and the programs and curation we produced were nothing short of extraordinary, and we wanted to share some of these milestones with you. Truly without your continued support and engagement this year would not have been possible.

Youth Programs

Thanks to generous funding from the [New York Council on the Arts](#) and the [National Endowment for the Humanities](#) we were able to provide six in-person [youth programs](#) this year, four virtual programs, and a brand new series of learning [videos](#) and printed activities. Our collaborations and programs this year expanded our community connections, and introduced youth of all ages to the rich history of Tompkins County and the human cultural heritage that has existed on this land for centuries.

We explored historic Grove Cemetery in Trumansburg with the [Ulysses Historical Society](#), crafted traditional Seneca Corn Husk Dolls with Penny Minner (*Seneca*), learned how to draw comics from [ITHAQA](#) creator Michael Watson, collected maple sap with [Sapsquatch](#) in Enfield, listened to Haudenosaunee traditional storytelling with Perry Ground (*Onondaga*), and printed archival [Ithaca Kitty](#) postcards with Laura Rowley of [Illuminated Press](#).



We connected with families across the county (and country!) with virtual programs, expanding into a completely new program style and approach for our organization. You can still watch and enjoy the following programs from home:

- [Music of Central New York with Dave Ruch](#)
- [Gingham Dog & the Calico Cat - Film Screening](#)
- [Ithaca Drag Story Hour - Gingham Dog & the Calico Cat](#)

The [History at Home](#) learning activity booklets developed during lock-down this spring are still available for educators and parents to download for free, as is our brand new five-part "[Learning to Fly with Tommy](#)" video series which was filmed and edited by Shira Evergreen from [Uplifted Ithaca](#), and was a collaborative brainchild of Tompkins County Heritage Ambassador Roger Segelken. We are thrilled to continue expanding our approach to learning and engagement with local history through these new materials.

We also hosted in-person museum field trips last winter, and virtual field trips for classrooms this fall, in addition to re-vamping our [Eight Square Schoolhouse](#) learning experience for virtual and distance learning.

We'd also like to give a wholehearted congratulations to our phenomenal Youth Ambassadors who worked throughout the spring semester lockdown to curate and create the [Stories from Inside](#) website documenting the early months of the pandemic in Tompkins County. This website provides a unique look at our community experience during this time, and offers an inside look at what items a modern archival collection at THC can include.

Archival Growth and Expansion

After the monumental task of transferring and organizing our archival collections in the new [Cornell Local History Research Library](#) and [Thaler/Howell Archives](#), this year unexpectedly provided a rare opportunity to engage in rapid-response archival work. Early on in the pandemic archivist Donna Eschenbrenner began reaching out to the community, asking them to share with us their images, videos, and written reflections of the Covid-19 pandemic, and its local impact. This is an on-going collection, and with generous funding support we've been able to digitize selections from this collection and have made it available on the [New York Heritage Digital Collections](#) database.

The [Covid-19 Pandemic Photograph](#) collection is the seventh collection we've been able to submit to New York Heritage Digital

The History Center in Tompkins County
Requests Help in Documenting Covid-19 Impacts in Tompkins County

We are living through one of the most demanding and disturbing times in modern history. The whole world is grappling with the unsettling realities of the Coronavirus outbreak. Tompkins County is no exception, and our community has completely restructured in the past 2 1/2 weeks with the goal of protecting our most vulnerable, and slowing down the spread of the virus locally so our local health workers can continue to provide the best care to all patients. Many historians have been comparing the COVID-19 outbreak to the global influenza pandemic of 1918. In this instance however we have an opportunity to better document this pivotal time in our community than we've ever had before.

The History Center in Tompkins County and the Cornell University Archives are collaborating in creating ongoing archival collections related to the impacts of COVID-19. Cornell is focusing on the impacts nationally, while we at The History Center are focusing on the issues locally. To this end we need your help!

Please let us know how you are coping with these tremendous challenges. Write about your experiences with this virus and the impacts you are seeing in the local community. Capture pictures of ways community spaces have changed, and how you are practicing social distancing in your own lives.

If you are a local business that has been impacted consider sending us any materials you designed or developed to share this news with your patrons.

Teachers, this can also be an activity for students to pursue in their own way.

In this time of great urgency we are seeing many people step up to provide aid and comfort to those in need, such as our elderly and ailing neighbors. We are all in this together and sharing our stories can lighten our emotional load. Our stories are the first draft of the history our descendants will read when we're gone.

To all of our community we send our best wishes to stay safe and well.

Please send all materials to Donna Eschenbrenner at archives@thehistorycenter.net with information about the date, time, and location of images and author attribution of any written pieces. Visit www.thehistorycenter.net to learn more, and follow us at [@tompkinshistory](https://twitter.com/tompkinshistory) on your preferred social media platform for posts about local history.

Collections, and the second we completed this year following the publication of the [Tompkins County Schoolhouse Photos](#) earlier this year.

In June of 2020, following nation wide and local protests against the killing of unarmed black men and women by police and law enforcement officials, we created the [Black Lives Matter Archival Collection](#). This collection documents local efforts and actions as part of the larger national movement. This is an ongoing collection, and we welcome additional submissions to archives@thehistorycenter.net.

We consider ourselves stewards of local history, constantly working to preserve and make accessible better understandings of our shared past. Finding ourselves in the midst of an uncommonly exceptional year we felt compelled to reach out to the community to

actively pursue people's donations during these unprecedented times. We have been extraordinarily fortunate in the generous responses from many donors who have shared materials that will become the foundation of the history of 2020 in Tompkins County. The collections include written reflections, images, poetry, podcasts, objects and myriad other forms of experience documenting life in Tompkins County this year. If you find yourself reflecting on something collected, written, or created during 2020 that you would like included in a collection, please contact Donna Eschenbrenner at archives@thehistorycenter.net.

We look forward to a future time when we can re-open the Research Library to the public, and bring more of you in to explore these wonderful collections in person!

HistoryForge Reaches New Milestones in 2020



With continued funding the [National Historical Publications and Records Commission \(NHPRC\)](#) of the National Archives (NARA) and a dedicated group of amazing volunteers, [HistoryForge](#) reached new heights in 2020. When New York's lockdown began in May, HistoryForge's Bob Kibbee and Eve Snyder quickly transitioned the bi-monthly in-person [transcription](#)

[sessions](#) to bi-monthly Zoom sessions. This transition allowed HistoryForge to increase its volunteer base, opening the door to more local participants, and to volunteers who live in parts of the state and country.

Over the past year, HistoryForge volunteers completed transcribing the 1920 and 1930 US Census records for the City of Ithaca, and since August have transcribed over 5,500 records from the 1940 census. HistoryForge now contains 4 complete census datasets (1900-1930) and over 71,000 records. In addition, HistoryForge unveiled its new more user-friendly website in the spring and continues to update its data entry pages for easier and more accurate transcription and searches. The project also began the long awaited addition of digitizing photographs of houses and other local buildings from [The History Center archives](#) to add to the building records in HistoryForge. This aspect of the project is made possible through generous funding from the [South Central Regional Library Council](#).

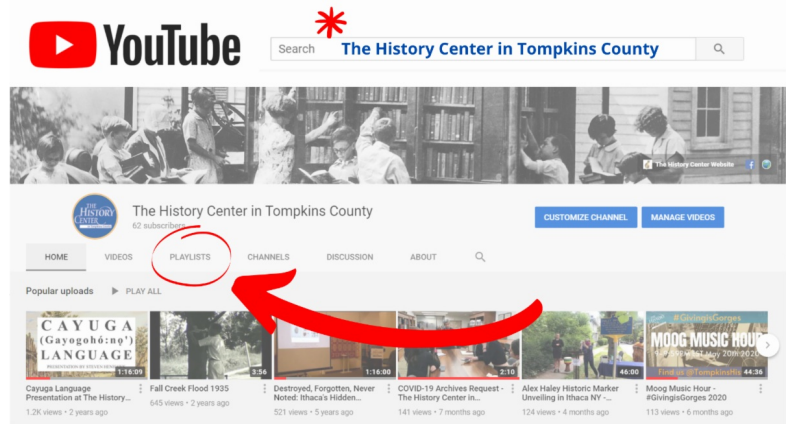
HistoryForge will soon be partnering with the [Seymour Library](#) in Auburn, the [Chemung Valley Historical Society](#) in Elmira, and the [Oberlin Heritage Center](#) in Oberlin Ohio. Over the next year, these communities will begin to create their own versions of HistoryForge based on our model. Volunteers from each community will begin by transcribing the 1910 census from their city, create a historical map layer, and add digitized archival materials for their communities. It has been a goal of HistoryForge since it first began to expand to and include other communities, and we are eager for these partnerships to grow the awareness and access of this groundbreaking approach to accessing and visualizing local history. Bob and Eve would like to thank everyone who made all this possible, especially the hard work and intrepid puzzle-solving of HistoryForge volunteers!

New Outreach Platforms and Engagement Opportunities

The five months of lockdown and remote work this spring stressed the importance of improving our digital presence and virtual learning opportunities.

This year we built from scratch and unveiled a [brand new website](#) on the WildApricot platform, allowing innovations like an [online bookstore](#), [downloadable learning materials](#), and [online booking of our Exhibit Hall](#).

In addition we dramatically increased the audience on our [Facebook](#), [Instagram](#), and [Twitter](#) profiles, improving our ability to share the history and rich heritage of Tompkins County even in a year of physical distancing for our community. We've also added a [LinkedIn profile](#), and [YouTube channel](#) with unique content, and curated playlists of history for each of the towns in our county. We hope these will grow and serve as professional and learning resources for the community in years to come.



We were also able to host our first-ever livestreamed event in August with the unveiling of the [Alex Haley Birthplace historical marker](#). Between Facebook and YouTube over 800 people engaged with the program, an expanded reach we could never have offered for a wholly in-person program.

While we are the first to say that we are most drawn to connecting the community through physical reminders of our past, ie. our [paper archival and object collections](#); it has been a balm this year to connect with so many disparate people and communities with the history, heritage, and memory of Tompkins County through these virtual platforms.

It is especially poignant to us to be able to reconnect residents who have moved away, or who are searching for older family connections. It is our joy to be a bridge for these individuals to explore their own intertwined histories with the county.

Grants and New Projects on the Horizon

At the start of lockdown there was an extraordinary amount of uncertainty about how The History Center could continue to be a research and learning resource in the community. In the early months of lockdown our award of New York Paycheck Protections Program, and CARES Act grants from [Humanities New York](#), [National Endowment for the Humanities](#) were a phenomenal boost of energy and needed funding as we found our feet and transitioned to the new normal of operations.



Additional project-specific grants, and flexibility from on-going grant committees at the [New York State Council of the Arts](#) and [National Historical Public Records Commission](#) allowed us to continue our [Youth Education Programs](#) and [HistoryForge](#) research. This support gave us the space to innovate our traditional approaches to programming, events, and [volunteer opportunities](#). Continuing to offer educational distractions, entertainment, and learning opportunities to our community, in addition to employing local educators and performers for our programs, felt powerful and connective in a year that often left everyone feeling distant and separated.

We are also extremely excited about the two-year grant recently received from the [Institute of Museum & Library Sciences](#) and the [Museum Association of New York](#) which has provided us with technology and platforms to create additional virtual learning engagement programs. The "[Building](#)

[Capacity, Creating Sustainability, Growing Accessibility](#)" grant has connected us with [98 other museums and historic institutions](#) across New York State who share our passion for connecting local audiences with their collections. We look forward to exploring these partnerships and creating collaborations to sustain cultural and heritage tourism in Tompkins County.

Two Awards Received in December

'James J. Byrnes Awards for Excellence'

Martha K. Preston is a Tompkins County Heritage Ambassador, tour guide, and docent at The History Center. We are endlessly grateful for the energy, support, and passion she brings to programming at The History Center. Tune in at the 2:14 minute mark for her 'James J. Byrnes Awards for Excellence' segment.



2020 Preservation Awards

Our new shared home in the Tompkins Center for History & Culture received one of the coveted 2020 Preservation Awards from Historic Ithaca. Our thanks for all our building partners, and we are looking forward to many shared years in this building!



What a year! Truly we could not have done it without the support of our community, our phenomenal volunteers, and community partners. We are as eager as anyone to move past the intensity, confusion, and distress of 2020, but we are proud of the work produced this year, and look forward to staying connected with all of you - in both the new ways developed and expanded this year - and hopefully as local health conditions allow, in the more traditional ways we all miss as well.

We hope our shared future includes picnics at the [Eight Square Schoolhouse](#), study sessions in the [Research Library](#), and exhibit openings in the [museum](#). Until then, find us in the virtual world, or [schedule](#) a private and sanitized visit to our space on the Ithaca Commons. We would love to see you.

With great appreciation from all of us

Ben, Donna, Cindy, Dave, Eve, & Zoë

The History Center in Tompkins County

Exhibit Hall, Research Library, Archives, and staff offices are located at
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Web: www.thehistorycenter.net

Phone: 607-273-8284

Follow us on social media
[@TompkinsHistory](#)



Email: Staff emails can be found [here](#)
Hours: *Thursday-Saturday 10am-5pm**

Contact Us!

**Please note our hours have changed due to COVID-19 and may be adjusted on a week to week basis depending on local health recommendations.*