

How do I start a Museum or History Center?

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Introduction

So you have this idea! You've found a significant person, place, story, or collection of amazing objects that you think other people would benefit from learning about. This leaflet outlines the journey from an idea to the creation of a museum or community cultural center.

What is a Museum?

The definition of a museum is changing. Traditionally, a museum is an organization and a building that houses exhibits of fine art, significant historical artifacts, or scientific specimens. More recently, museums and community cultural centers have been driven by a story, a historical event, or an issue with spaces, objects, and media that may only be included to advance storytelling or activism. They are community gathering spaces that invoke dialogue. Some museums have full-time professional staff, others are completely volunteer led and every hybrid in between. Some museums are place-based and others are completely virtual.

What is a History Center/Historic Site?

Historic sites ground events, stories, people, and experiences in places. Sites can be a street, a natural environment, or a property. Centers are sometimes houses, former schools, social clubs, and other significant structures. These are places where history happened and places where visitors can learn, reflect and take action on the implications of that historical event, story, person, or era.

First Steps:

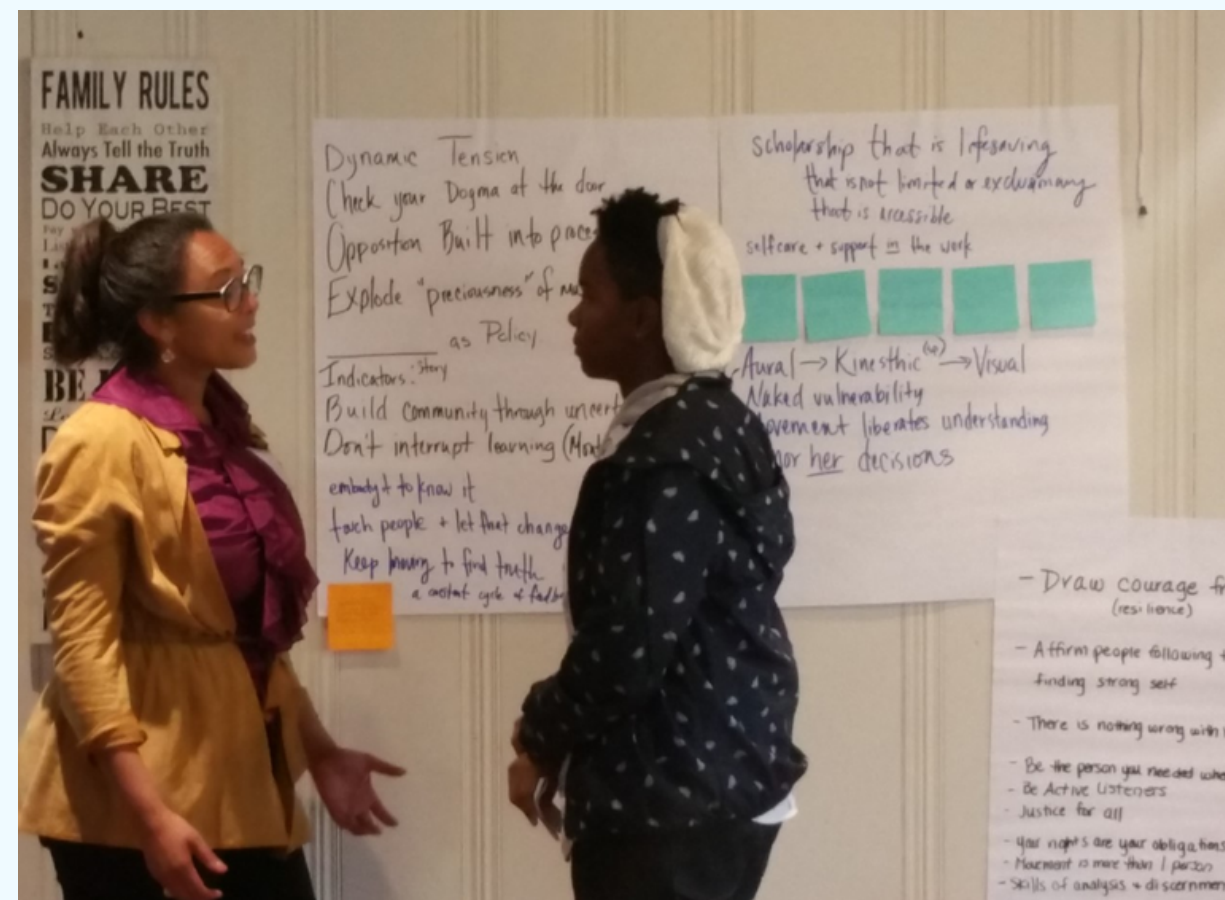
So the first step of your journey is to clearly understand why you want to start a museum or history center and what you want to focus on. Here are several questions to guide that process:

- What do you want to share with your public audiences, what do you want them to learn, know, or act on as a result of their interaction with your organization/museum?
- What are your assets: collections of objects, historic buildings, a powerful story, location in relation to significant historical events?
- Who do you hope will visit your place or engage in your programs? There can be many answers to this question but each group of people you name might have different reasons for visiting.
- What kind of human assets can you marshal in support of your idea? What kinds of skills, expertise, or networks can these folks bring to the table?
- What do you imagine your scope and scale to be? Is your focus local, national, international? Do your assets parallel your scope? Do you want to be a single room museum within another building or is it your hope to be a large free-standing operation?
- Who are the other organizations and associations serving and partnering with projects like yours - your colleagues and sibling sites? Who are your cultural neighbors - other museums, cultural institutions, or historic sites that could partner but also might compete with you for visitors and resources?

Pauli Murray Center for History and Social Justice Case Study

Fifteen years ago, I understood Pauli Murray's story to be primarily relevant to the older folks in her West End Neighborhood. They gave me the book she wrote about her grandparents and their home and how their principles and hard work shaped Dr. Murray into an activist. It was not until we invited an artist from outside Durham to work on a project with us that we began to understand the national significance of Murray's legal, activist, creative, and theological work. Rev. Dr. Pauli Murray's story is our primary asset and we have built an entire organization and site (her grandparent's modest 1898 home) around that idea.

Research, community building, and networking with historians, national preservation organizations, and Fitzgerald/Murray family members followed. Ten years ago, we established the Pauli Murray Center for History and Social Justice and began a planning process based on the questions listed above. With the help of several community partners we were able to save the historic structure from becoming a parking lot. We partnered with our local preservation organization who became our first fiscal sponsor which enabled us to begin accepting tax-deductible donations for our project.



1. Pauli Murray Center for History and Social Justice with lawn exhibit. Photo by Brad Bunyea, courtesy of the Pauli Murray Center

Scholars and a program officer from the National Trust for Historic Preservation helped us understand just how significant Dr. Murray's contributions to 20th century human rights activism have been. We began to dream of becoming a national organization. We started a mailing list through which to share our progress and planned events to foster support from people in our city and across the country. After some strategic planning we decided to become a 501 © 3 non-profit organization, with the goal of becoming self-sustaining through soliciting grants and donations.



2. Community members at 2019 visioning session for the future of the Pauli Murray Center site. Photo courtesy of the Pauli Murray Center

We made a few very key decisions early on that continue to shape our work.

- Our first key choice was not to privilege the renovation of our building over our educational and community programming. Both were equally important. Our programming energized our community support which provided the resources and networks to achieve our building renovation goals. And the potential of our building and site fueled interest in our programming.
- Our second key choice was to give this project the time it needed, to move at the

pace of trust. While an early strategic plan outlined goals and action steps, we did not overlay an unrealistic timeline on our actions. We also wanted to be good stewards of the donations we received so we didn't want to spend beyond our resources. As we were able to raise more funds, we were able to do more programming and more work on our building.

After 10 years, we are on the cusp of opening our historic house and still a few years away from a fully functional history center but we are on a good path and expect to be visitor ready very soon.

How do I pay for all of this?

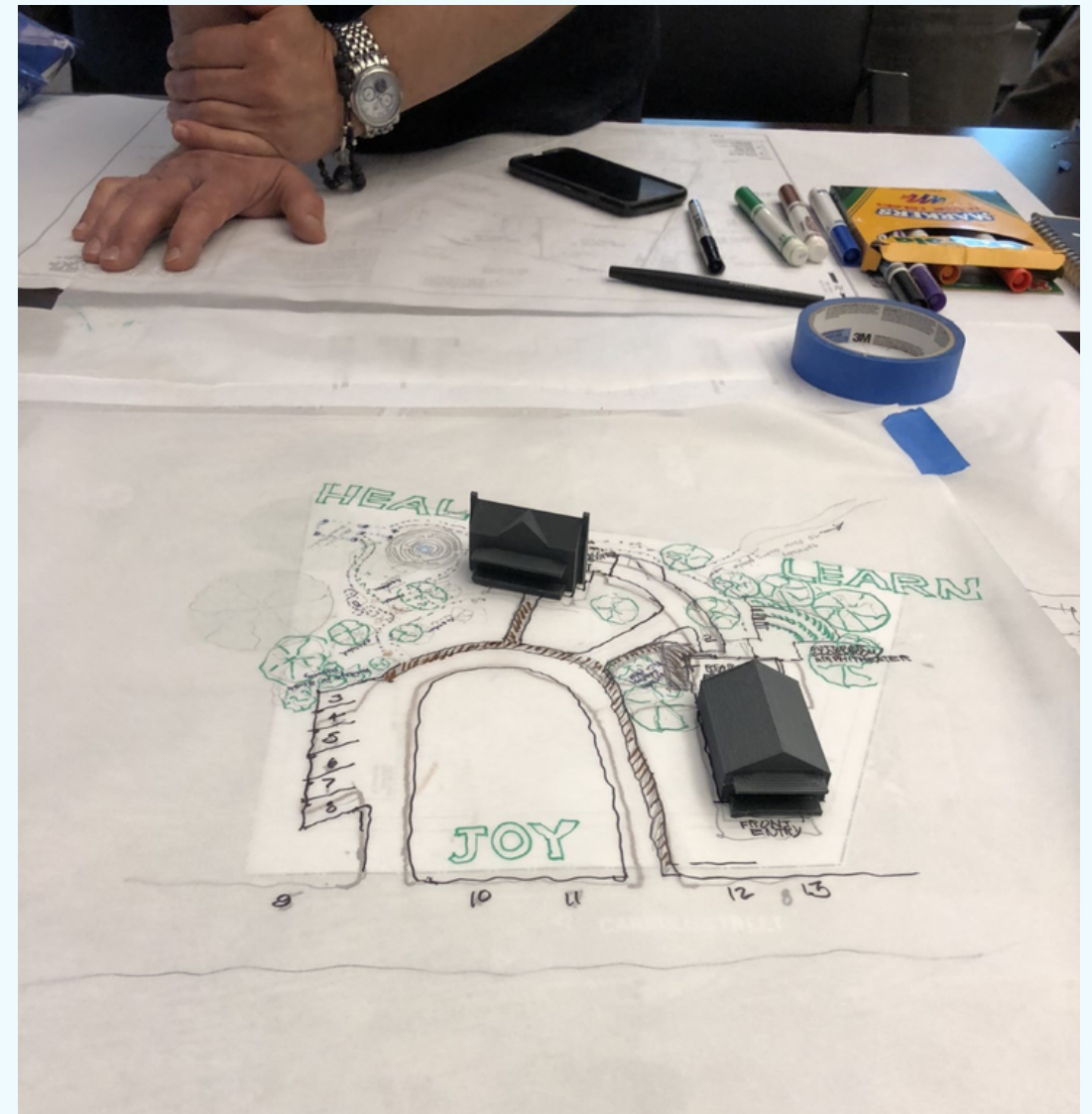
Starting a museum or cultural organization will likely require financial investments. The same will be required to sustain the museum or cultural organization. Whether there is an online-only presence, use of a room or space within an existing building, or a freestanding building dedicated to your museum or organization, financial resources are still needed.

When we consider the online-only museum, start-up costs may include the professional services of a website designer, graphic artist, photographer or videographer for media on the website, or a writer to create the initial content. There will also be costs associated with buying and maintaining a domain name and a server on which to host your website. If you are beginning an online-only museum, with the intention of using your online presence to expand visibility and increase support for a future brick-and-mortar space, the investment in professional services cannot be undervalued.

A physical space for an in-person museum or cultural organization carries greater expenses. There are the obvious operational costs related to basic utilities for the physical space. Additional expenses may include property insurance, general liability insurance if you are inviting the public onto the premises, or a fine arts policy to cover potential damage to objects and artifacts in the collection. A recognized national insurance provider should be able to get you started, but as your operations or collection expands, consider working with a specialized insurer like National Trust Insurance Services, LLC.

There are additional and on-going costs to maintain a physical space. As a space which invites the public in, there are likely local requirements for life safety equipment and regular inspections of that equipment. There may be spaces which need to maintain specific temperature and humidity settings to protect objects, artifacts, or archival materials and will require modifications to existing HVAC systems. It may be worth investing in service and maintenance agreements for equipment which is costly to repair or replace.

Once the basics are covered, you can think about exhibits and the “fun” parts of a museum. The beauty of our current world is exhibit panels can be as expensive or as modest as you desire. There are exhibit design firms which can help your organization ideate, create digital mock-ups,



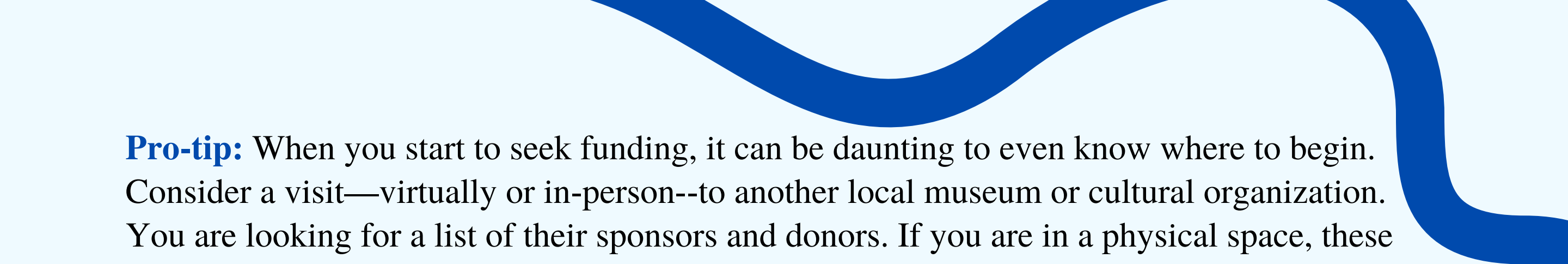
3. Site design markup from the 2019 visioning session for the future of the Pauli Murray Center site. Photo courtesy of the Pauli Murray Center

and even help find fabricators for your exhibits. There are also large-scale poster-sized print options available through Staples and frames at your local hobby store which may be a more practical option as you are beginning. You may want to investigate print-to-canvas or other surfaces for exhibit panels

Where will the fund come from?

Does starting a museum sound expensive? It can be. Operating a museum will be just as expensive, if not more so, if there are compensated staff positions, computers and software, building and maintenance costs, etc. This list of potential expenses is endless. This is usually the point where many become overwhelmed, and rely on hope and faith that the mission and impetus for beginning the museum or cultural organization will be sustained by others. Hope and faith are important, but there are other mechanisms to support your efforts to start a museum.

The source of funds for starting museums and cultural organizations is broad. Funds may come from individuals, local businesses, multinational corporations, or state and federal agencies. Search high and low, and remember no amount is too small to accept or too large to request. Grassroots initiatives in your local community is a great place to start. This could look like presentations at your local library or participating in community festivals to expand visibility. Partnerships with your local library or similar organizations may also help. Local or statewide preservation groups may also be a source of helpful grants. Your city council or county commissioners may have funds available.




Pro-tip: When you start to seek funding, it can be daunting to even know where to begin. Consider a visit—virtually or in-person--to another local museum or cultural organization. You are looking for a list of their sponsors and donors. If you are in a physical space, these names are usually prominently displayed as you enter the building or exhibit space. Make a note of those names and businesses and start your research. One of those donors or sponsors may take an interest in your museum or organization as well.

How can I effectively manage my financial resources?

Donations and grants rolling in can be very exciting. But look closely at each check or grant. Are the funds for a restricted or unrestricted purpose? It matters, and it all must be tracked and accounted for. In the beginning, this tracking may be uncomplicated. It could be accomplished by someone experienced with spreadsheets. There is, however, a tipping point when you will want a bookkeeper or CPA to provide technical expertise for financial management.

A word of caution: There are lots of rules and regulations around accepting donations. Most organizations are required to have a solicitation license from the Secretary of State before they can request or accept donations. This is an area where there can be unintentional missteps with major negative and burdensome consequences. Please consult a lawyer or certified public accountant (CPA) before you proceed



Raising Funds

You've done it! You have created the organizational entity and registered it with the Secretary of State. You have your solicitation license. You have received your tax-status from the IRS. You have established your museum either virtually or in a physical space, complete with exhibits or other materials. Now what?

You have to keep going.

How you generate revenue to sustain the organization depends on many variables. Beyond seeking donations and grants, will there be an admission charged to enter the physical space? Will you offer special programming for a fee? Will there be fundraising events? If you own the physical space, is it suitable for rental to other individuals and groups without being disruptive to your primary mission?

Potential Funding Sources:

[National Trust for Historic Preservation](#)

[North Carolina Humanities](#)

[African American Cultural Heritage Action Fund](#)

Local government allocations

Local Arts Councils

[Institute for Museum and Library Services](#)

Local historic preservation organizations

Structure and Leadership

One of the most important decisions to be made regards the structure and leadership of your museum or organization. Consult with an attorney to determine the preferred business entity. You may want to be a non-profit, but there are different types.

Many museums start informally. It may be a group of close individuals with a shared desire to spread information, or a community group, or perhaps even a family with a notable person in their lineage. The good intentions of all the individuals initially engaged is understood. It's all so collegial so there's no need to formalize anything...

This is a mistake. The continued good health of the relationships which brought the individuals together for the shared purpose should be considered. When roles are not defined, it is easy for individuals who began as friends to end as something else. Sometimes, the person who initiated the idea is presumed to be "in charge," but may not have the skills or experience to execute on the idea

Organizations larger than 1 person need structure. Decisions have to be made, and it should be determined who is empowered to make what decisions. Structure and leadership models can change as the organization changes, or needs become clarified. But there has to be some structural model in place at the outset, even if it is only identifying common roles such as chairperson, secretary and treasurer



4. Justice Think Tank participants visit the historic Pauli Murray house as part of our long-term program planning process. Photo courtesy of the Pauli Murray Center

Resources

As you begin this journey, consider existing resources around museums and cultural organizations. There are many organizations, conferences, and workshops in this space. In addition to your city, county or state historic preservation agencies, you may find the following organizations and opportunities useful.

Organizations

American Alliance of Museums (AAM)

American Historical Association (AHA)

Association of African American Museums (AAAM)

Association for the Study of African American Life and History (ASALH)

American Association for State and Local History (AASLH)

Southeastern Museums Conference (SEMC)

North Carolina Museums Council (NCMC)

North Carolina Humanities Council (NCHC)

National Council on Public History (NCPH)

National Trust for Historic Preservation (NTHP)

American Cultural Resources Association (ACRA)

North Carolina Center for Nonprofits



5. PMC Board members and community activists participated in the Activism Think Tank as part of our long-term program planning process. Photo courtesy of the Pauli Murray Center

Workshops

Jekyll Island Management Institute

To start a museum:

- Choose a name
- Establish a mission statement
- Determine audiences
- Enlist support and supporters from the local community, elected officials, academia, businesses, etc.
- With the input of supporters and competent professionals, establish a board of directors with officers and defined roles
- Draft and file Articles of Incorporation and Bylaws and file with the Secretary of State
- Apply for any state or federal exemptions
- Apply for a DUNS number
- Apply for an EIN
- Apply for a solicitation license with the Secretary of State
- Continue building partnerships with supporters
- Establish databases for donors, partners, resources
- Establish an online presence through websites or social media platform

Action Steps

- Take an inventory of your assets
- Facilities, collections, resources (including human)
- Getting the Word Out
- Building Community Support - local scholars and more

Operational considerations—perhaps premature if this is about starting a museum? Because operations is another 2 pages of notes

Skills and expertise

- Volunteers?
- Academics?
- Curators?
- Graphic design?
- Social media?

Community support and engagement

- Do you have it? Who supports/opposes the project?
- Support of city and county officials?
- Support of local community organizations?

Desired visitor experience

- Start with the end in mind
- Self guided experience or docent-led?