Letter from the Board Chair

As I look back over 2017 and 2018 at WHS, I realize what watershed years they have been. While we continued to present our wonderful exhibits, programs, school and children’s activities, walking, house, and garden tours, we also engaged in monumental activities that allowed us to enact major transformations.

In 2017 we continued to present our cornerstone exhibits – headlined by the wonderful Danbury Raid 240th Anniversary celebration and the ground-breaking look at the history of architecture of the future: Westport 06880+50. Meanwhile, our principal curator and staff spent several months in 2017 preparing the evocative current exhibit: Remembered: The History of African-Americans in Westport, launched in May 2018 and running through June 2019. Definitely, time and effort well-spent! Be sure to see it if you have not done so.

In 2017, the 06880+50 exhibit was also used as the theme of our first Annual Tomorrow’s History Gala, which we reprised this October. Both the 2017, and 2018 parties were well-attended. Those who participated in the Gala, as well as the Hidden Garden and Holiday House tours, appreciate that history can be enjoyable. And, continuing a directive we set for ourselves in 2017 all the houses on the 2018 House Tour are historic structures, faithful to our mission. For the first time, Wheeler House—the headquarters of WHS—is a featured stop on the Holiday House Tour as well.

More than anything, 2017 was a year of hard work and change. Following our two-year participation in the StEPs-CT program, we spent the better part of 2017 completing our 2018-2021 Strategic Plan. The Plan was formally approved by the Board in December. The guiding force behind the Plan is a firm commitment to achieving recognized museum standard in all our various endeavors. In 2018, under the leadership of our new Executive Director, we are delighted to tell you that the directives outlined in this plan are more than 75% complete—many years ahead of schedule. You can see a chart highlighting the major elements of the plan on page 11 of this report.

Many of the most obvious efforts are already apparent, including the re-imagining of the space at Wheeler House, a complete overhaul of our computer systems, the layout of a ‘third space’ outdoor patio, and a reinvigorated development effort.

Meanwhile, if all that were not enough, in 2017 we executed the most meaningful change of all – we hired a new Executive Director. After a very professional three-month effort, we narrowed the field down to a few excellent candidates, from whom the committee unanimously chose our current ED: Ramin Ganeshram. Ramin came on board after the end of the year, but her influence was felt long before that, as she is the curator of the stellar Remembered exhibit which has garnered WHS a prestigious nomination for a National Medal from the Institute of Museum and Library Services. Ramin is also the driving force behind the full series of presentations, films, book events and curator-tours of this, one of the best exhibits ever presented at Westport Historical Society. Her efforts have been
recognized as the recipient of a New England Museum Association 2018 Award of Excellence presented to her this November. The ED search and decision process was exhaustive and exhausting, but the result was definitely worth all the hard work.

Based upon results to date, 2019 is looking to be another stellar year for WHS, so stay tuned and join us on our continuing journey.

Robert W. Mitchell
Board Chair
Westport Historical Society underwent transformational change in the last two fiscal years. In his chairperson’s letter, Bob Mitchell, outlined the hallmarks of 2017, a year marked the organization’s completion of its strategic plan, enabled by the StEPs program funded by Connecticut Humanities. With a new plan in and the retirement of Executive Director Susan Gold, who served the organization for a decade, WHS was embarking on an era of change.

When I took the helm in 2018, I was given the strategic plan as both my guide and my “To Do” list. Foremost on that list was making WHS relevant to a wider community both in Westport and in neighboring areas and to move the Society toward 21st century museum standards.

Those of you who have come to visit in the past year will have noted these changes. Per the strategic plan the period rooms have been decommissioned in order to use the spaces more effectively for a wider variety of rotating exhibits and programs. The main gallery is also being used to build more interactive exhibits that encompass the whole space in order to engage visitors.

In order to further serve our museum guests, we have moved the gift shop toward the front of the building where downtown shoppers might more effectively stop in. The former gift shop—the largest space on the first floor besides the main gallery—is now being used as a programs room for everything from lectures to small exhibits to parties. We’ve adapted the outdoor spaces to provide free public wifi, seating, outdoor games, and art kits so all may enjoy WHS’ lovely grounds. To date, visitors have given our new plan rave reviews.

Speaking of rave reviews, our 2018/19 exhibit Remembered: The History of African Americans in Westport continues to receive accolades from the public and from award-granting organizations. To date we have garnered a nomination from Congressman Jim Himes for a medal from the national Institute for Museum and Library Services, a nomination for a national award from the American Association for State and Local History, and an excellence award for from the Connecticut League of History Organizations. I’ve been lucky enough to receive an Excellence Award from the New England Museum Association for my work curating Remembered.
Westport Public Schools partnered with WHS to bring the 8th grade classes from both Bedford and Coleytown Middle Schools as well as 10th Grade history classes and AP History classes from Staples High School to the exhibit. We continue to work with the school district on curriculum-supportive programming that brings history to life for students.

In 2018, we also opened several other compelling exhibits including Rights All? Centered on the 200th anniversary of adoption of the Connecticut State Constitution as well as an exhibit on ecumenical holiday celebrations in Westport—including a Victorian Christmas scene; and an exhibit about oystering in Westport which was accompanied by a fundraiser featuring fresh Copps Island Oysters. The year began with a retrospective of famed Westport illustrator Ed Vebell’s work.

New programming of all kinds made the year exciting including Spooktober, a month long series of events in October to celebrate the Halloween season and Holly Days which was packed with family fun holiday events from various cultures throughout December. Santa Claus was at WHS to greet children after the Town’s Christmas Tree Lighting and Family Fun days—including one with horse drawn carriage rides were enjoyed by all.

We wrapped up the year with our 1st annual First Light a celebration for New Year’s Eve featuring a bonfire, live music, carriage rides and more for young and old to enjoy.

After finishing 2018 off with a bang, we are looking forward to a 2019 filled with even bigger milestones—and community engagement. There are big plans in the works for WHS, and we look forward to bringing you best-in-class exhibits, programs, and educational experiences in the coming year.

Ramin Ganeshram
Executive Director
2017-18 Financials

WHS’ fiscal year is concurrent with the calendar year. As is consistent with WHS’ operations year over year, operating expenses including salaries, represented the lion’s share of the organization’s expenditures.

In 2017 and previously, grant funding was limited but those grants pursued and received largely went toward the education programs. Annual sponsorships came from a variety of organizations including year over year support from several. The Tomorrow’s History Gala of 2017 was a new endeavor to separate the organization’s major fundraising initiative into an event separate from the annual Hidden Garden Tour as in previous years was a fiscal success that was continued into 2018 and garnered new sponsorships. At the end of fiscal year 2017 it was determined that, as part of the strategic plan, a more aggressive grant and general fundraising plan needed to be pursued.

At the end of 2017, assets including the Society’s headquarters at Wheler House and the value of cash holdings and investments totaled $1,778,436.

In 2018, WHS received a major gift of $215,000 from the Daniel E. Offutt III Private Foundation Trust and ended the year with a profit. Assets including Wheeler House and the value of cash holdings and investments totaled $1,817,775.43. Full details may be found of WHS’ 990 financial filings with the State of Connecticut’s Department of Revenue Services.
2017 Gross Revenues by Category

2017 Gross Expenses by Category
2018 Gross Expenses by Category

2018 Gross Revenues by Category
Strategic Plan

With the world changing at an ever-rapid pace, WHS’ Board recognizes that our organization must adapt to these changes or the alternative is to become a marginalized, irrelevant, minor player in the cultural and educational life of our vibrant town. Change cannot come about without direction. And direction requires formal planning, and the concerted implementation, execution, and monitoring of those plans involving the full participation of those who lead this organization in all its endeavors: education, exhibits, programs, collections, archives, oral histories, administration, historic structure maintenance, marketing, and fundraising.

Therefore, Westport Historical Society applied and was accepted into the StEPs-CT program class of 2015-2017. This program was developed by the American Association for State and Local History, and was conducted by CT League of History Organizations and CT Humanities. During 26 months, six standards sections were covered: Governance, Audience, Management, Stewardship of Collections, Stewardship of Historic Structures and Landscapes, and Interpretation - exhibits and programs. Participation in the StEPs-CT program provided the opportunity for necessary training to Board and Staff. It also provided the direction we sought to help refocus and systematically evaluate WHS’ performance across the six program areas.

The direction and work of WHS have been guided principally by members of the Board at the time, primarily a series of dedicated individuals serving in the role of President. For most of its history, WHS has not had a guiding planning document. A search of the institutional files in 2015 revealed “Westport Historical Society Strategic Long-Term Planning Committee Report & Recommendations” completed in October 2005. That exercise was well-meaning, demonstrating thought and effort on the part of the committee. However, there is no evidence of any attempt to truly engage the Board beyond sign-off at a special Board meeting. Nor is there any evidence, that once the short-term goals were met, the document was ever implemented or reviewed by the Board. The bylaws, until recently, had not been reviewed and updated since 2005. The Mission Statement had not been reviewed for many years, and there had never been a Vision Statement.

Search of the institutional files also revealed that standard governing documents and policies had not been reviewed for well over a decade, or had not ever been written including: board member job descriptions, board manual, code of ethics, conflict of interest policy, and committee descriptions and responsibilities. This underscored concerns that basic elements of board responsibilities and functions had been neglected, and raised concerns about what else may have been allowed to slip.

As a participant in the StEPs-CT program, WHS recognized addressing these neglected governance issues as a high priority. The necessary starting point was to thoroughly examine the bylaws. A task force was convened during the summer of 2015 and proposed revisions were made and approved by formal Board vote. The task force noted this was a preliminary update and more thorough revisions need to be addressed. It became evident
during the initial review that the Board had not been following procedures set forth in the bylaws, and that some committees, such as the Executive Committee, had ceased to function. Per Board approval, the Executive Committee was reinstated in March 2016 as an important governing committee and serves as a forum for discussion of issues of importance to WHS.

This strategic planning effort has filled a much-needed gap in our governance and management processes. It is apparent that the planning process itself has helped to continually raise the consciousness and teamwork of the Board. It has also created a sense of shared responsibility to ensure a vibrant future for Westport Historical Society.
Strategic Plan Overview

Mission
Inspire discovery of Westport history

Vision
Valued as the premier space for gathering and learning about Westport

Core Values
- Learning: Provide engaging and meaningful opportunities for lifelong discovery
- Community: Build pride and shared responsibility for Westport heritage
- Stewardship: Advocate for preservation of historic structures, landscapes, and collections
- Excellence: Deliver quality, relevance, accountability, and collaboration in everything we do

Goals and Strategies

Community Engagement
1. Market Segments
2. Community and School Programs
3. Identity and Branding
4. Collaboration

Collections Stewardship
1. Care and Management
2. Access and Engagement
3. Proactive Growth

Building and Grounds Stewardship
1. Master Plan
2. Annual Maintenance
3. Future Maintenance

Funding and Sustainability
1. Expand Revenue
2. Ensure Stability
3. Manage Financial Resources

Organizational Excellence
1. Technologically Forward
2. Board
3. Advisory Council
4. Paid Staff and Contractors
5. Volunteers/Unpaid Staff
6. Internships