WESTPORT MUSEUM for history & culture
Making history whole.

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

WESTPORT MUSEUM LAUNCHES $750,000 CAMPAIGN

150-Year-Old Institution Calls on the Community to Secure Its Future

Asks for donations at: westporthistory.org/SaveWM

or Text: History250

October 12, 2026 WESTPORT, Conn. — Westport Museum for History & Culture today launched an urgent campaign to raise $750,000 by January 2027. The Museum currently has sufficient operating funds only through the end of 2026. The community's response will determine whether the nearly 150-year-old institution across from Town Hall can remain a vibrant public museum in the 230-year-old Bradley Wheeler House for generations to come.

The announcement follows two years of increasingly serious measures to conserve resources. The Museum has **reduced public operating hours, reduced staffing, and implemented other significant cost-saving measures** in an effort to preserve its exhibitions, programs, collections, and archives while maintaining financial stability. Those measures are no longer enough.

The privately funded nonprofit receives **no operating support from the Town of Westport and is not funded by Westport taxpayers**—a fact Museum leaders believe many residents do not realize.

"I think one of our greatest challenges has been that people understandably assume we are a town-funded institution," said Executive Director **Ramin Ganeshram**, who has led the Museum since 2018.

"Every exhibition we mount, every artifact and document we preserve, every student we train and every program we offer has to be supported by money we raise ourselves," Ganeshram said.

Without significant public donations now, the Museum's Board of Directors says it must begin pursuing a dramatically different future.

A Museum Transformed

The current financial crisis comes after eight years of significant institutional transformation.

Ganeshram was hired in 2018 following a board-led strategic planning process that determined the then-Westport Historical Society needed to professionalize and substantially change its operating model to survive. At the time, the institution had less than a year of viable operation remaining under its existing structure.

Under her leadership, the organization moved from a largely static house-museum model to a professionally operated humanities institution producing rotating exhibitions grounded in original scholarship, primary sources and the Museum's own collections and archives.

The transformation included creating new exhibition galleries; upgrading technology and digital infrastructure; renovating the Museum grounds; professionalizing collections and archival management; and undertaking major preservation work on the distinctive seven-sided 1846 Bradley Wheeler Cobblestone Barn, a unique historic resource believed to be the only structure of its kind in Connecticut.

The Museum also undertook professional management and preservation of its significant archives, which contain documents dating to the 1670s, ensuring that centuries of Westport history remain available to researchers, scholars, students, journalists, homeowners and members of the public.

Its exhibitions and programs have used Westport's history as a lens through which to explore the larger American experience, bringing forward the stories of women, Black and Indigenous residents, immigrants, LGBTQ+ people, workers, veterans, artists, business owners, children and others whose lives collectively shaped the community.

“The innovative approach Ramin has brought to presenting and interpreting subject matter has added remarkable new dimensions of breadth, depth, and relevance to museum exhibitions locally, regionally, and nationally. Her work has enabled generations of visitors—both longtime museumgoers and new audiences—to encounter familiar subjects through fresh, compelling, and often unexpected perspectives,” said Harold Bailey, Chairperson of TEAM Westport, the town’s diversity committee.

“Perhaps most importantly, this approach has helped break down the barriers that can separate people from history, culture, and experiences outside their own. By making exhibitions more accessible, engaging, and personally resonant, the Westport Museum has helped audiences connect deeply with people, cultures, and events they might otherwise have viewed as distant, unfamiliar, or simply “not for them.”

That work has received recognition beyond Westport, including national and regional awards for exhibitions, scholarship and museum leadership.

“This museum has reached impressive heights of quality, professionalism and scholarly rigor under Ramin's leadership,” said Bill Lutkins, Chair of the Museum's Board of Directors. “When she arrived in 2018, the Museum was already facing a dire financial future and had less than a

year to viably survive under its existing model. The Board asked her to transform the institution, and she and the staff did exactly that."

A Difficult Funding Environment After Surviving COVID

When museums across the country closed in 2020, Westport Museum rapidly shifted its work online. The Museum redeployed staff to researching, writing, and producing digital historical content. The strategy allowed the Museum to continue serving the public and raising funds while keeping most staff employed full time during the height of the crisis.

Between 2020 and 2022, the Museum raised nearly **$3 million**, an extraordinary achievement for an institution of its size.

"The nearly $3 million raised more than four years ago was not an endowment—it was funding designated to accomplish specific work and sustain the Museum over several years," said Lutkins. "Those funds were responsibly stewarded and exceptionally well used, supporting major preservation and capital projects while allowing the Museum to transform its exhibitions, programs and operations. That investment did what it was meant to do. Now it is critical that we rebuild that financial support so we can expand upon this work and continue sharing Westport's remarkable legacy."

Even after significant cost reductions, operating Westport Museum costs approximately $400,000 annually. About $150,000 each year is required simply to maintain and operate the historic property—including utilities, insurance, grounds care and routine repairs. The remainder is split between professional care of the Museum's collections and archives, exhibition, the Museum's small professional staff, public and educational programs and other operating expenses.

The Museum currently has enough operating funds to continue only through the end of 2026. The $750,000 campaign is **intended not simply to carry the institution through another year, but to give it the financial footing to remain open while building a more sustainable future**.

In the years following COVID, museums and humanities organizations have faced an increasingly difficult funding environment.

Federal support for the humanities was severely disrupted by 2025, placing additional pressure on state humanities organizations and increasing competition for private grants, foundation support, and corporate sponsorships. At the same time, cultural institutions compete for philanthropic dollars in a world filled with urgent human needs, from food insecurity and housing to health care and disaster relief.

Museum leaders readily acknowledge the importance of those causes. But they argue that preserving history is also a public responsibility—and that once historic resources and institutions disappear, they can be extraordinarily difficult, and sometimes impossible, to reconstruct.

Among the Museum's longtime supporters is **Dr. Vera Rhimes**, a respected educational and cultural leader who, along with her husband Ilee Rhimes, has personally been a stalwart supporter of the Westport Museum since moving to Westport four years ago.

"As an educator, I know young people deserve to learn the whole story of America in all its complexity," Dr. Rhimes said. "Institutions like the Westport Museum teach how to think—to examine evidence, ask difficult questions and understand experiences beyond their own. Today, history education is under increasing pressure, and community groups like the Westport Museum are essential. My family has always believed that supporting education and the arts is an investment in future generations. Westport would lose something irreplaceable if this Museum disappeared."

Asking Westport to Invest in Its Own History

Although the Museum has successfully attracted substantial outside funding, **local individual giving has not grown at the level necessary to sustain the institution that Westport now has**.

The Museum serves far more than traditional museum visitors.

Its archives are used by scholars, researchers, journalists and residents. Its exhibitions and programs provide teachers and students with access to primary sources and scholarship. Its staff answers inquiries about local properties, families, businesses and events. Families attend programs throughout the year. Visitors learn how the history of one Connecticut community connects to larger events in American history.

Since 2018, **hundreds of young people have received internships, volunteer opportunities and hands-on training at the Museum**, learning research, writing, archival, interpretive and professional skills. CORA Foundation (a local Westport family foundation) funded *The Real Revolution* exhibition and a multimedia contest for Westport high schoolers to "rewrite the Declaration of Independence" with a modern lens, for America's 250th Year.

"History isn't valuable because it always makes us comfortable," Ganeshram said. "It is valuable because it gives us evidence. Our responsibility is to follow that evidence wherever it leads and give people the information they need to think for themselves."

"Please support this work. At a moment when what students can learn about American history is increasingly contested, independent places where young people and adults can encounter primary sources, rigorous scholarship and multiple perspectives are more important than ever."

What's at Stake: Limited Options for 2027

If the Museum cannot raise the necessary funds, the Board is exploring options that would allow the nonprofit organization to survive while dramatically reducing its physical footprint and public operations such as:

The sale of Bradley Wheeler House, a 230-year-old building and grounds whose maintenance costs have become prohibitive without significant funding.

- Retention of the historic Cobblestone Barn at Avery Place for limited Museum use.
- Relocation of Westport collections and archives to a lower-cost off-site location.
- Transition to a smaller research-focused organization providing online access, research services and limited public programming.

What would Westport lose? It would no longer be the Museum as the public knows it today: **regularly changing exhibitions, extensive public programming, and a dedicated museum building in the center of town where residents, families, schoolchildren, and visitors can encounter Westport's history firsthand.**

“It would be a tremendous loss,” Lutkins continued. “Westport is a sophisticated community that values education, culture, ideas and intellectual inquiry. We believe residents understand the value of having a humanities museum of this caliber in their town. Now we need the community to demonstrate that it wants this institution to remain here.”

$750,000 by January 2027

The Museum is seeking $750,000 in commitments by January 2027 from individuals, families, foundations, businesses and corporate sponsors.

Gifts at every level matter. Reaching the goal will also require significant leadership gifts and pledges from donors who believe Westport should continue to have a professionally operated museum. A wire transfer information sheet is available upon request.

Funds raised will:

- Keep the Museum open and continue exhibitions and public programs into 2028 including America 250 programming and the 250th anniversary of the Danbury Raid, which began with the British landing at Compo Beach in April 1777
- Rebuild the Museum’s financial reserves to provide greater stability against future operating shortfalls
- Engage professional fundraising expertise to create and implement a sustainable long-term development plan.

“This campaign isn’t about simply getting through another year,” Lutkins said. “It is about giving an institution that has demonstrated its value the financial foundation it needs to remain in Westport and serve this community for years to come.”

The campaign is ultimately about far more than preserving a building.

It is about whether Westport's children will have a place to encounter their community's history beyond a textbook. Whether researchers and scholars will continue to have access to centuries of

primary-source material. Whether residents can walk into a gallery and discover the people who lived on these streets, generations before them. Whether visitors can understand Westport as part of the larger American story. Is our history worth preserving in the center of our town?

We thank all our donors, board members, staff and volunteers and the people over the decades who have made this institution grow into the valued tapestry of Westport's Story.

"Westport Museum is on the brink of a critical, transformative era" said Robin Tauck, a prominent Westport citizen who is President of CORA Foundation. "Whether it remains in the Bradley-Wheeler House or elsewhere, the Museum is creating a new way of convening our community from schools to seniors in fun, engaging ways that open learning, sharing, and shaping a better future. Westporters are proud of our remarkable educational resources; this 250th Year of America would be a great time to donate."

TAX DEDUCTIBLE Pledges and Donations:

To contribute to the $750,000 Campaign to Save Westport Museum, visit **westporthistory.org/SaveWM**

FUNDRAISING CONTACT:

Dina Fleischman

dfleischman@westporthistory.org

or mail contributions to Westport Museum for History & Culture, 25 Avery Place, Westport, CT 06880.

Checks, pledges, and Appreciated Stock transfers are accepted. Wire transfer info is available upon request.

ABOUT WESTPORT MUSEUM FOR HISTORY & CULTURE

Westport Museum for History & Culture is an independent 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization dedicated to embracing the truths of history so that all can see themselves in the American story. Through exhibitions, research, collections, archives, public programs and educational initiatives, the Museum uses the history of Westport and the surrounding region to illuminate the larger American experience.

CONTACT:
info@westporthistory.org
203-222-1424

High resolution photos available.

