



# Museum Profile **TRI-CITIES HISTORICAL MUSEUM**

OTTAWA COUNTY, MICHIGAN

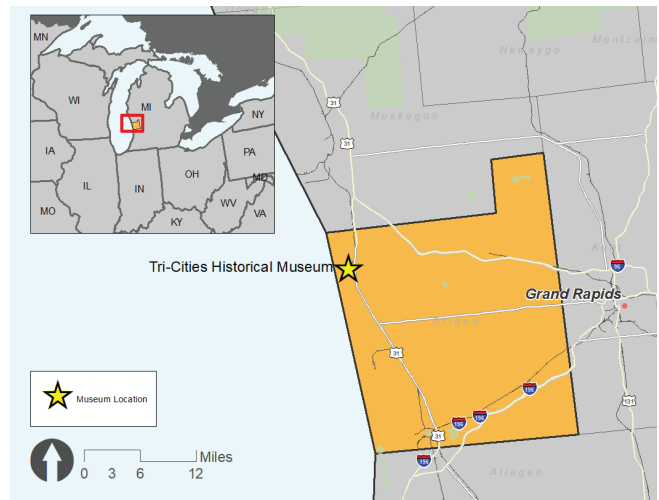
# Museum Profile: Tri-Cities Historical Museum



## OTTAWA COUNTY, MICHIGAN

Tri-Cities Historical Museum (TCHM) focuses on the history of the Northwest Ottawa County, Michigan, communities of Ferrysburg, Grand Haven, and Spring Lake. Its mission is to “create connections to local history,” with the vision of supporting a community that values its past. Four main values shape the museum’s approach: “inclusiveness, adaptability, stewardship, and wonder.”

Founded in 1959 and run initially by volunteers, TCHM now has a professional staff. In 2004, TCHM moved to a large, centrally located building on Grand Haven’s main street and, in 2018, opened a Community Archives and Research Center (CARC) to the public at a separate location. In 2019, TCHM reported annual revenue of roughly \$804,586 that supported about 24 full- and part-time staff and received 53,500 visitors. Admission is free, and a local tax levy primarily supports the museum. Through a wide variety of programs and partnerships, TCHM offers educational and learning opportunities, both inside and outside of the museum, that link to local history, artifacts, and community needs and priorities.



## OTTAWA COUNTY

TCHM is located in Grand Haven, Michigan, in Ottawa County. Grand Haven is a small city on the shores of Lake Michigan, known for its beaches, boardwalk, and lighthouses, and it is a popular summer tourist destination. The Tri-City area also encompasses nearby Ferrysburg and Spring Lake. Ferrysburg, Grand Haven, and

Spring Lake have populations of 2,892, 10,412, and 2,323 respectively. The median household income in Ottawa County is \$61,367 a year, and the poverty rate is 6 percent, well below the national poverty rate of 11 percent. The county population is 84.6 percent White, 1.3 percent Black, and 9.3 percent Hispanic.

	Population	% Change in Population (2000–2016)	% White	% Black	% Hispanic	% Asian	% Other	Median Household Income	% Families in Poverty
United States	318,558,162	13.2	62.0	12.3	17.3	5.2	3.3	\$55,322	11.0
Ottawa County	276,583	16.1	84.6	1.3	9.3	2.7	2.1	\$61,367	6.0

Compared to other suburban counties across the country, Ottawa County residents enjoy elevated levels of community health, and K–12 students in the county perform well across a range of publicly available measures of success. Ottawa County fell in the top quartile of both the

Community Health and School Effectiveness Indexes.<sup>1</sup> Manufacturing, Education Services, Health Care & Social Assistance, and Retail Trade represent the largest employment sectors; Manufacturing is a major sector, employing 35 percent of the working population.

	Total Labor Force	% Manufacturing	% Education Services	% Health Care & Social Assistance	% Retail Trade
United States*	131,362,978	9.3	9.2	14.5	10.9
Ottawa County	121,449	35.0	9.0	8.0	8.0

Data Sources: 2012–16 American Community Survey five-year estimates; U.S. Census Longitudinal Employer-Household Dynamics (LEHD), 2017.

\*Continental figures for total labor force include the 48 lower states and Washington, DC.

<sup>1</sup> Data elements included in the Community Health and School Effectiveness Indexes, along with measures for Ottawa County, can be found in the Technical Appendix.

## SITE VISIT PARTICIPANTS AND DATA COLLECTION

In February 2020, the study team conducted interviews with six current staff, three board members, and representatives from seven partner organizations. Site visit interviews focused on understanding TCHM programming and partnerships that support formal and informal education as well as TCHM's institutional approaches to assessment, staff support, and sustainability.

In addition, TCHM staff provided the following data to create the network map included in this profile:

- TCHM 2016 Form 990
- Program evaluations for several TCHM programs
- Interview notes and related materials collected by the case study team

This site profile includes the following:

- A summary of select TCHM programming, partnerships, and institutional practices that support education and learning in Ottawa County
- A descriptive network map that illustrates the scope and variety of connections TCHM maintains with local partners throughout the county and beyond

## TCHM PROGRAMS LINK K–12 LEARNING TO THE WORLD BEYOND SCHOOL WALLS

TCHM has a robust partnership with the Ottawa Area Independent School District (OAISD), which includes the 10 school districts in Ottawa County as well as with the Grand Haven School District, which is part of OAISD. These partnerships engage children with history and the local community and encourage creative problem-solving and design thinking. For example, TCHM brings local history programs to schools. During second grade, when local history is part of the curriculum, staff visit each classroom six times using TCHM-developed Museum to You: Travel Kits. Linked to local history and permanent TCHM exhibits, the kits contain a PowerPoint about a historical topic, lessons, worksheets, images, and artifacts and are also available for educators from other grades to borrow. TCHM has built especially strong partnerships with local elementary schools; one of its current strategic

plan goals is to cultivate more partnerships with middle and high schools and their students.

Local educators, superintendents, and business leaders created OAISD's futurePREP'd program in 2010 to address the need for students to develop soft skills such as critical thinking, problem-solving, collaboration, and technology literacy to succeed in college and careers. TCHM actively participates in three futurePREP'd programs:<sup>2</sup>

- The **Academy**, which takes place during the school year, brings teams of six to 10 high school students into a business and a nonprofit for six weeks each. Teams visit their site twice per week. The host site charges the team with addressing a driving question or challenge; for example, TCHM asked one team to develop suggestions about what

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.oaisd.org/programs-services/career-technical-education/futureprepd/>



kind of technology or resources to add to its Education Room.

- **IChallengeU** is a two-week summer program for students in the ninth through 12th grades. The program places small teams of students and teachers with a business or nonprofit where they focus on solving a problem. At the end of both IChallengeU and the Academy, students present their solutions and suggestions. TCHM asked a team to generate ideas about how to make the museum more interactive.
- In **FUZE**, TCHM partners with one teacher and his or her class for a daylong program. The group of middle or high school students tours the museum and engages in opportunities to practice soft skills.

One futurePREP'd partner said of TCHM:

*"As a partner, they possess things I look for—open and willing to work with all types of teachers and students, not just high-flyers, but embracing everyone. And they really hear out the ideas from teachers and students. They do a nice job with that openness and flexibility. And sometimes ideas don't work from kids but that's ok . . . they give constructive feedback and find a way to make kids feel good about the work they put in."*

Homegrown, a local outgrowth of futurePREP'd, was developed by futurePREP'd-trained teachers in the Grand Haven Area Public Schools (GHAPS). One or more classes work with an organization that charges them with a problem to solve. For example, in winter 2020, teachers and students from two first grade classes partnered with TCHM to explore the guiding question, "How might we communicate how families and schools have changed from the pioneer era until now?" After a museum tour, children chose the

time period they wanted to study and formed groups. Museum staff provided documents and images for students to examine. A participating teacher reported that what children learned stayed with them afterward, and they were able to apply it to other areas of inquiry:

*"They got excited about history in general. They learned a lot about their era but [about] the other eras as well. They did a lot of collaborating with each other. I can still ask them, 'Hey what did you learn about this?' We can say, 'How do you think TV has changed families?' and kids are able to start talking about that."*

As one museum staff member noted, "It's totally different than the model of sitting at your desk and being quiet—this is a new educational model for kids to collaborate and move around."

GHAPS futurePREP'd teachers and TCHM staff developed an additional program, Museum Explorers. TCHM invited teachers to develop lessons in math, science, and history linked to museum exhibits. In a pilot program, three first grade teachers from the same school used the museum as their classroom for three consecutive days, teaching all their subjects through the lens of history and encouraging students to conduct individual research on a topic. At the end of the program, students presented their findings to their family and friends and acted as museum docents and tour guides.

By participating in multiple iterations of futurePREP'd, TCHM provides students with the opportunity to learn about and generate solutions for a real problem or question in an institution important to their community. It also offers them the opportunity to learn more about working in a museum context and about TCHM's specific focus of local history.

## PARTNERSHIPS WITH LIBRARIES EXTEND LEARNING AND REACH

Partnerships with the Loutit (Grand Haven) and Spring Lake libraries enable TCHM to amplify its exhibits and take both museum topics and learning about history into the community.

TCHM has its roots in the local community and views partnering with local organizations as part of its mission. Both TCHM and many of its partners identified advantages of collaborating rather than individually owning events or programs. A librarian said:

*"Collaboration is good for both of us. [We have the] same audience, a lot of crossover. We're all swimming in the same pool. It expands programming [for both] . . . the great thing about collaboration—we can share the load, but all enjoy the patron use and the benefit of it . . . I don't think either of us are in position where we need to own it—we serve the same donors and taxpayers."*

TCHM enjoys reciprocal partnerships with two Tri-Cities libraries: Loutit and Spring Lake. Loutit is located in Grand Haven, about .25 miles from TCHM; Spring Lake is located 2.5 miles from TCHM in the village of Spring Lake. TCHM and the libraries cross-market each other's events and make meeting space available for each other's programs. The libraries plan and host events based around current museum exhibits. Museum staff also research local history topics and provide resources for librarians, which then inform library programming. By engaging multiple audiences, both institutions can broaden their reach. A librarian related that, "If we have a topic, they will put a program together for us . . . all of the programs we double our attendance because we get museum patrons that come."

The three institutions collaborate on a summer reading program, which involves events and entertainment that relate to local history. Loutit Library and the museum have also created Grand Haven walking tours in partnership with the historical society, which are popular among both residents and tourists. For instance, the tours focus on local cemeteries, downtown taverns, or particular neighborhoods. Working together helps support the capacity of these tours: One librarian said, "To be able to rely on [TCHM] who are able to help with research, scriptwriting, and volunteers to run the program and tour is priceless."

The three institutions also support each other's research needs since each institution has unique holdings and a common emphasis on research. The libraries have digital resources, local newspaper archives, and access to national databases that are useful for historians. They pool their collective resources to answer public research requests. The museum's strong partnerships with these two local libraries enable all three organizations to enhance their programming, strengthen their presence in the community, and reach more community members.

## TCHM'S PROGRAMS AND PARTNERSHIPS PROMOTE LEARNING, COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS, AND WELLBEING

TCHM takes the museum into the community and brings the community and visitors into the museum in a range of creative ways. Externally facing programs and partnerships support informal education, health, and wellbeing for children and adults, both inside and outside of the museum. Some also provide opportunities for residents to share their own expertise or to pursue individual research projects. All are designed with the community in mind: The services and interactions that TCHM facilitates through its partnerships are crucial threads in the broader social fabric of Grand Haven.

TCHM creates programming to provide groups that often face barriers to participation and engagement with opportunities to connect with both local history and other community members. For example, TCHM has partnered with Pioneer Resources, a local nonprofit, to bring developmentally disabled adults to the museum for programming and activities with historical themes. These visits center around local history but are also designed to help participants feel more comfortable and connected to the community in which they live. TCHM also takes programming to local senior centers and assisted living facilities, bringing interactive history presentations and artifacts.

TCHM offers opportunities for community members to explore and share local and personal histories. The Community Curator program allows local residents to showcase their own collections, whether they be music memorabilia or candlesticks, in a museum case for a month. The program aims to help residents connect with the museum and ensure feelings of ownership—as one curator said, “When you give community members the opportunity to engage and be part of the exhibits process, that’s huge.”

This approach is also evident at the museum’s CARC, located a few miles away from the museum building. CARC both stewards TCHM’s

collection of artifacts and makes it available by inviting the public to CARC to engage in facilitated research. There is an emphasis on bringing the community into the archives and making history tangible and approachable. As one curator put it:

*“We want to make sure the information and artifacts we have are always available to study to the public. Ninety-nine percent of our artifacts are donated and people trust us to make sure that these artifacts are taken care of . . . [we’re] here to make sure that [artifacts] are being properly studied and that they are . . . always available to the public.”*

At CARC, museum staff conduct primary source tours that engage school classes or groups of adults in doing object-based research, place-based learning, and critical thinking related to history. Participants go “behind the scenes,” touring TCHM’s trove of historical objects and learning about designing collections, historical preservation, and the material culture that artifacts represent. Programs like Caring for Your Collection teach participants how to care for and preserve collections and family heirlooms. CARC plans to create a research center that will offer online access to a genealogy database as well as to a comprehensive digital archive of its collection, with the goal of eventually having the entire collection online. TCHM also maintains outreach exhibits geared to local communities and their interests at seven locations, primarily government buildings and libraries. Recent exhibits included one on firefighting at Grand Haven City Hall and an exhibit about the Spring Lake Country Club at the Spring Lake Library. These further engage community members with local history.

The small-town feel of Grand Haven promotes community involvement and connectedness. TCHM is an active participant in local networks from the Chamber of Commerce to the Rotary

Club and Kiwanis to a local nonprofit association. This allows exchange between TCHM and other community organizations. TCHM is also participates in Grand Haven's business district activities, like Halloween trick-or-treating or Frozen in Time, a local competition in which businesses created themed window displays and TCHM hosted the awards ceremony. As one interviewee observed:

*"[TCHM] participates really well with downtown businesses—it would be easy to say, 'That's not for us,' but they do a great job with being accessible. They step in when it would be easy to walk out."*

TCHM also hosts concerts, lectures, art shows, and other events in a large upstairs space; these events often display local talent and provide a space for the community to gather and socialize. Organizations and individuals can rent the gallery for their own events, bringing TCHM further into local networks. One board member observed that since the museum's restructuring, "the perception of [TCHM] has changed a great deal—there's something going on almost every weekday; there's lectures, some of them draw huge crowds." The community increasingly sees the museum as a place that animates social connections, creatively teaches residents about local history, and gets involved in the life of the surrounding community, rather than merely a building with exhibits.

## **TCHM PROMOTES STAFF DEVELOPMENT THROUGH CONTINUING EDUCATION AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT**

TCHM has undertaken a strategic planning process to reshape and support the trajectory of the museum moving forward, including more intentionally centering the needs of the community and investing in professional development to support staff development. A recently hired museum director and the board initiated this process in 2018. Guided by the principles of the new strategic plan, the board redesigned museum job descriptions to include a strong emphasis on community engagement, partnership, and collaboration. The board also created two new positions—managers of development and membership and of events and operations—as well as several assistant curator positions. Due to turnover and new positions, many of the staff at the time of our 2020 visit were relatively new.

TCHM leadership aims to send a clear message that it values staff and supports their further professional development and learning. As part of that approach, TCHM emphasizes professional development: Each curator must complete 40 Continuing Education (CE) hours of their choice. Curators must also participate in at

least one community organization. Staff valued the investment in their own learning and the encouragement to collaborate. One said:

*"Institutions need to understand that their best asset is their employees. If you have a great collection and building but don't invest in employees, then you're not going to have the quality product or programming. [Museum leadership have] done a great job of that."*

TCHM's new direction also places emphasis on defining and responding to community needs through programming, exhibits, and historical preservation. The approaches described here, including continuing education and collaboration with other TCHM staff and local community institutions, position staff to play a more robust role in reaching their community. This includes maintaining strong relationships with community partners, offering diverse programs that bring the museum into the community and the community into the museum, and taking multiple approaches to exploring and learning about local history.



## COMMUNITY MEMBERS VALUE TCHM, WHICH FOSTERS SUSTAINABILITY

The majority (85 percent) of TCHM's budget comes from a portion of a .25 millage assessed on every homeowner in the municipalities that make up the Tri-Cities. Millages come up for renewal by the voters of each municipality every four to six years and support several different community institutions. In 2018, voters in the three municipalities with the millage on the ballot approved it, with a 75 percent approval rate. As illustrated by the quotes below from two different board members, interviewees emphasized both that local residents value TCHM and that TCHM needs to continually demonstrate its value to the community:

*"People value the museum, what it offers for historic and cultural presentation. People in this town place a lot of value on history and identity, and the museum embodies a lot of that. How does the community support the museum? . . . People say, 'Yes, we'll continue to pay for it.'"*

*"The museum must always keep increasing engagement in community because it's only by increasing their visibility in the community and demonstrating their value proposition that the millage will continue."*

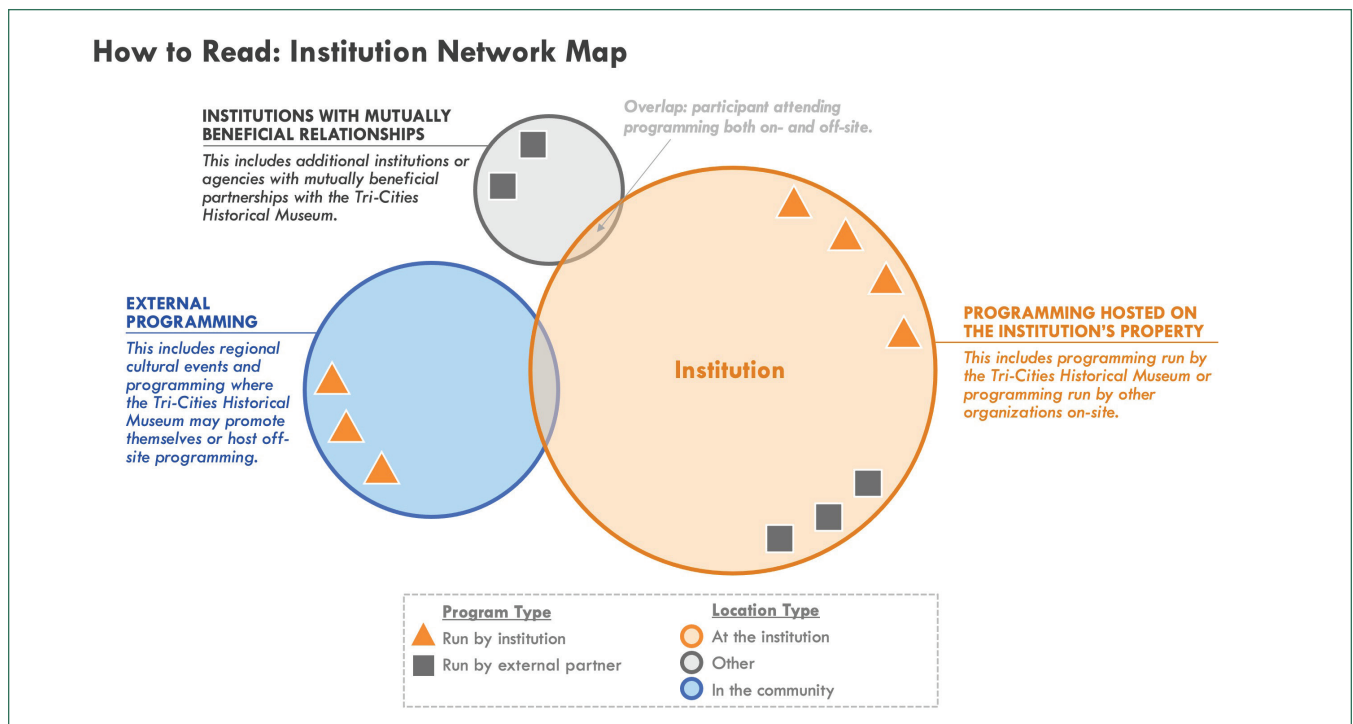
Located on one of Grand Haven's main streets, TCHM plays a central role in its community. Through a variety of partnerships and networks, the museum collaborates with others on formal and informal educational programming and events, both in the museum and in various venues across the community. TCHM reflects this in its programs and partnerships. TCHM has continued to evolve as an institution by using local history to promote learning, creative thinking, and social wellbeing within and outside the museum walls. TCHM also actively animates social and institutional connections, focusing on the needs of the community and not just the preservation of collections. Its innovative approach has made the museum, and its services, a critical part of institutional and community networks in the Tri-Cities area.

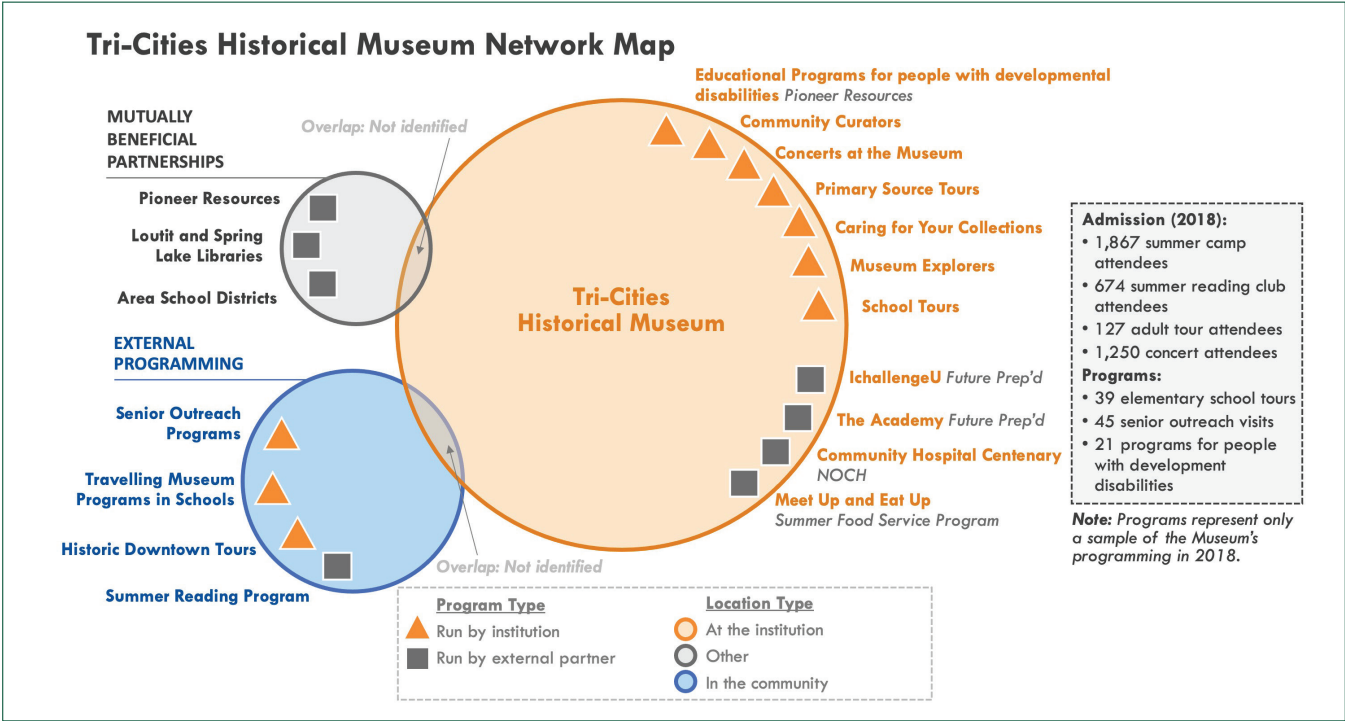
# TRI-CITIES HISTORICAL MUSEUM NETWORK MAP

Using data provided by TCHM, the study team developed a descriptive network map to highlight the different types of connections TCHM maintains with other institutions in the local community. The map illustrates the relationships between TCHM and those entities that offer programming at the museum itself and

those that support cross-marketing efforts or have reciprocal relationships with the museum, and it includes examples of off-site, TCHM-led programming. The map does not provide an exhaustive list of the museum’s programs but attempts to illustrate a subset of the relationships that the museum maintains.

*NOTE: The network map is purely descriptive. The connections represented on the map do not necessarily, and are not intended to, provide estimates of the duration, durability, intensity, or broader economic impact of the relationships between TCHM and any single entity, or the broader network itself. The goal of the network map is to represent the range and diversity of different types of institutions that connect to the museum in different ways.*





The figure above illustrates a *sample* of the connections of the many programs offered across TCHM's network. Within the orange circle is a small sample of programs conducted on the physical property of the institution—both programs produced by the institution and those produced by others. Within the blue circle is a sample of programs produced by TCHM and offered off-site in the community. The gray circle represents a sample of institutions and initiatives where the museum has mutually beneficial partnerships.