

Organizational Profile: Mystic Seaport

Abigail H. Tilden

Queens College Graduate School of Library and Information Science

Mystic Seaport

Mystic Seaport, Inc. describes itself as "The Museum of America and the Sea." It is located in Mystic, Connecticut, at the mouth of the Thames River, and is consists of several parts: a recreated sea-side village, restored ships and other marine vessels, and a Collections Research Center. (<http://www.mysticseaport.org/>). The museum was recently reaccredited by the American Association of Museums, after undergoing "an exhaustive self-assessment and two intensive days of study." (Annual Statement 10). Its goal is to preserve and present America's seafaring history: through a collection of artifacts, documents, and source material; by re-enacting period life and sailing, to allow visitors to experience maritime history first-hand, and by maintaining and restoring various ships. In addition to the museum's work preserving maritime history, they also run a joint program with Williams College which allows students to spend a semester in a maritime education program, publish books on their ships and collection, and maintain a collection of folk art on site. (<http://www.mysticseaport.org/>).

General Records Management

In many aspects, Mystic Seaport is a typical organization: as a Connecticut corporation, it is subject to state-specific statutes and regulations, as well as all applicable federal laws and regulations. Museum administration, accounting, human resources, legal, and marketing/public relations departments all have specific laws and regulations governing their actions and making specific requirements of their recordkeeping. Mystic Seaport's RIM department, in that respect, will operate much more traditionally. Its administration will generate documentation of business and operational decisions on both the day-to-day and long-term levels. Accounting will have records relating to the budget, payroll, income, taxes, and donations, as described further below. Human resources will have documentation on applicants

and staff, employee records, and related issues such as health insurance. The legal department will have paperwork relating to compliance issues, as well as any legal challenges or lawsuits that arise involving Mystic Seaport. Marketing/public relations will have records of marketing transactions in various media and markets, and information on their success. Each of these department's records are typical records, and can be treated accordingly.

Other Factors Affecting RIM

Donations

Mystic Seaport also has non-traditional aspects which provide a challenge in record keeping. As a museum, Mystic Seaport's depends on donations, grants, gifts, and bequests (Annual Report 15), which creates additional requirements. Donors can expect receipts of their donations to use towards their taxes, and the museum must keep records of donations not only for that purpose, but also to satisfy federal and state regulations. In order to satisfy any regulations which would affect the use of those donations, records must also be kept in that area. This affects not only the accounting department, but also the legal department, in order to ensure that all applicable regulations are being satisfied.

Accreditation

As an accredited museum, Mystic Seaport is also obligated to satisfy the requirements of the accrediting organization (in this case, the American Association of Museums) (Annual Report 10). Areas in which the museum is required to satisfy requirements include Public Trust & Accountability (including Accountability, Transparency, & Accessibility and Ethics), Mission, Planning, & Assessing Achievement, Leadership & Organizational Structure (including Founding Documents, Parent Organizations, and Organizational Structure), Collections Stewardship, (including Scope of Collections, Development and Planning,

Collections Management, Exhibition and Storage Spaces, and Preservation and Conservation Practices), Education & Interpretation, Financial Stability, and Facilities and Risk Management. (<http://www.aam-us.org/museumresources/accred/2005-Self-Study-Table-of-Contents.cfm>).

This means items and documents which, while normally not under the aegis of an RIM department, in this case should be treated as records, in order to satisfy accreditation requirements.

Of these, Collections Stewardship deviates most from traditional Records Management. The requirements for Leadership & Organizational Structure are also wide-ranging, but organizational documents often traditionally fall under RIM management. Collections Stewardship, however, highlights documents, not records. It is only due to the unique requirements created by the accreditation requirements of the American Association of Museums that these documents, in this setting, are to be treated as records, in order to satisfy those requirements. These documents will likely not be subject to a destruction schedule, given that the goal of a collection on this scale is to preserve and expand. This particular area will find the RIM department depending more heavily on archival standards and techniques.

Reenactment

The divide between records and archival material is often blurred at Mystic Seaport. Accreditation requirements, as stated above, present one complication. Another is the museum's active use of many of its documents. Maintaining a recreated village and ships, and reenacting period culture, require access to the source documents, using them as manuals and guides for staff and future planning. Ships maintained by Mystic Seaport, such as the *Charles W. Morgan* and the *Amistad*, are run as authentically as possible. Because of this, documents become actively consulted records that fall under the jurisdiction of records management. The score of a

eighteenth century sea shanty, which might be considered simply a historical document under other circumstances, is an actively consulted file for Mystic Seaport's re-enactors, who perform such songs for museum visitors in the course of their work.

Conclusion

Mystic Seaport's RIM department must have a flexible definition of "record" in order to accommodate the circumstances and requirements of Mystic Seaport: accreditation and Mystic Seaport's unique operating needs have expanded the reach of the RIM department beyond traditional expectations.

References

American Association of Museums. (1999). Accreditation Self-Study Questionnaire Table of Contents. Retrieved February 26, 2007, from <http://www.aam-us.org/museumresources/accred/2005-Self-Study-Table-of-Contents.cfm> .

Mystic Seaport. (2007). Mystic Seaport: The Museum of America and the Sea. Retrieved February 26, 2007, from <http://www.mysticseaport.org> .

Mystic Seaport (2006). Mystic Seaport 2005-2006 Annual Report. Mystic, CT: Mystic Seaport.