

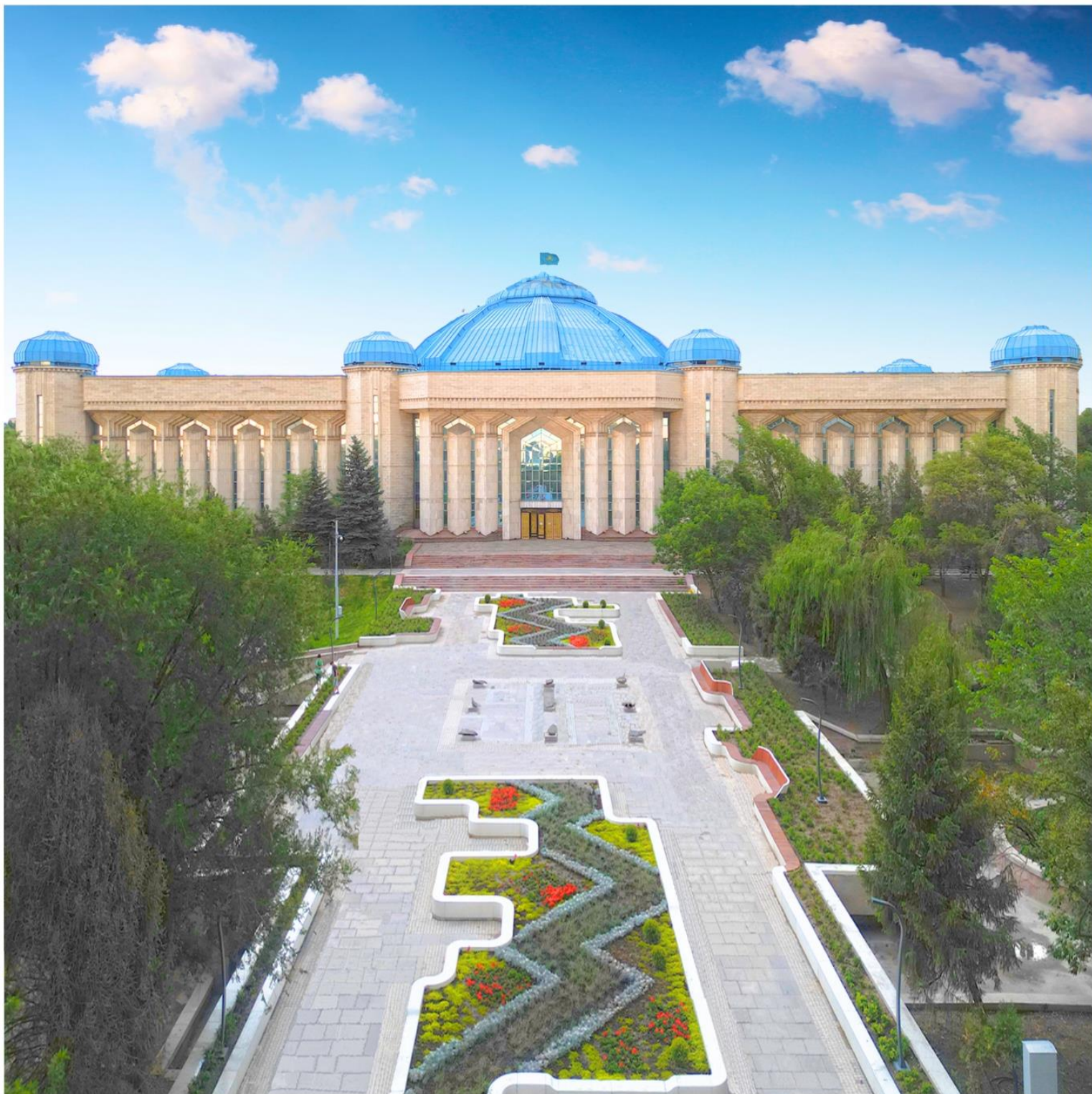
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EXTREME OPENNESS: STRAWBERRY BANKE MUSEUM AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

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Abstract. Many museum professionals and non-profit Boards in the United States are reimagining the role of their institutions within society. This article explores how Strawberry Banke Museum in Portsmouth, New Hampshire, stands out for its “extreme openness,” an ability to engage meaningfully with people from a variety of economic and educational backgrounds. From creating small, distinctive communities on its historic grounds, to offering inclusive events and low-barrier entry points, Strawberry Banke breaks down traditional boundaries between museums and the public. The article covers important topics related to Governance and Funding, a variety of programs that promote community engagement in the Museum, the role of events in fulfilling the Museum’s mission that is dedicated to preservation and education. Additionally, the author offers insights on how the Museum offers a range of options to decrease the barriers members of the public might feel when visiting the Museum. Throughout the article, the author offers insights on a current trend in museology within the United States – being as open and accessible as possible to a diverse public.

Materials and methods of the research. The article is a personal reflection of Linnea Grim, President & CEO, Strawberry Banke Museum, regarding the Museum’s commitment to community engagement. Ms. Grim’s reflections are based on her two years of experience serving as President & CEO of Strawberry Banke Museum. Additional materials to provide context to her reflections come from print and on-line publications related to the history of Strawberry Banke Museum.

Keywords: United States museology, historic site, museum, accessibility, community, education, preservation, non-profit, Strawberry Banke Museum

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АШЫҚТЫҚ: СТРОБЕРИ-БЭНК МУЗЕЙІ ЖӘНЕ ҚОҒАММЕН ӨЗАРА ӘРЕКЕТ

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Аңдатпа. Америка Құрама Штаттарындағы көптеген музей мамандары мен коммерциялық емес ұйымдардың директорлар кеңесі өз мекемелерінің қоғамдағы рөлін қайта қарастыруда. Бұл мақала Нью-Гэмпширдегі Портсмут қаласындағы Стробери-Бэнк музейі өзінің «өте ашықтығымен», экономикалық және білім деңгейі әртүрлі адамдармен мазмұнды араласу қабілетімен қалай ерекшеленетінін қарастырады. Тарихи меншігінде шағын, шынайы қауымдастықтар құрудан бастап Стробери-Бэнк музейлер мен жұртшылық арасындағы инклюзивті іс-шараларды өткізуден кедергісіз қолжетімділікті қамтамасыз етуге дейінгі дәстүрлі шекараларды бұзады.

Мақалада басқару мен қаржыландыруға қатысты маңызды тақырыптар, қоғамдастықтың араласуына ықпал ететін әртүрлі бағдарламалар мен музейдің сақтау және білім беру миссиясын жүзеге асырудағы оқиғалардың рөлі қарастырылады. Сонымен қатар, автор музейге барған кезде жұртшылықтың сезінетін кедергілерін азайтуға арналған музейдің бірқатар нұсқаларын ұсынады. Бұл мақалада автор Америка Құрама Штаттарындағы музейтануындағы әр түрлі жұртшылық үшін барынша ашықтық пен қолжетімділіктің қазіргі тенденциясын қарастырады.

Зерттеу материалдары мен әдістері. Бұл мақалада Стробери-Бэнк музейінің президенті және бас директоры Линнея Гримнің музейдің қоғаммен араласу жөніндегі міндеттемесі туралы жеке ойы берілген. Грим ханымның ой-пікірлері оның Стробери-Бэнк музейінің президенті және бас директоры қызметіндегі екі жыл уақыты кезіндегі тәжірибеге негізделген. Оның ойларын растайтын қосымша материал Стробери-Бэнк музейінің тарихы туралы баспа және интернет басылымдарынан алынған.

Тірек сөздер: АҚШ музейтануы, тарихи орын, музей, қолжетімділік, қауымдастық, білім беру, сақтау, коммерциялық емес ұйым, Стробери-Бэнк музейі.

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КРАЙНЯЯ ОТКРЫТОСТЬ: МУЗЕЙ СТРОБЕРИ-БЭНК И ВЗАИМОДЕЙСТВИЕ С ОБЩЕСТВОМ

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Аннотация. Многие музейные специалисты и советы директоров некоммерческих организаций в США переосмысливают роль своих учреждений в обществе. В этой статье рассматривается, как музей Стробери-Бэнк в Портсмуте, штат Нью-Гэмпшир, выделяется своей «исключительной открытостью» – способностью содержательно взаимодействовать с людьми из самых разных экономических и образовательных слоев. От создания небольших, самобытных сообществ на своей исторической территории до организации инклюзивных мероприятий и обеспечения доступа с низкими барьерами – Стробери-Бэнк разрушает традиционные границы между музеями и публикой. В статье рассматриваются важные темы, связанные с управлением и финансированием, различными программами, способствующими вовлечению сообщества в деятельность музея, а также ролью мероприятий в реализации миссии музея, направленной на сохранение и просвещение. Кроме того, автор предлагает различные варианты, которые музей предлагает для устранения барьеров, с которыми могут столкнуться посетители при посещении музея. В статье автор рассматривает современную тенденцию в музеологии в США – максимальную открытость и доступность для разнообразной публики.

Материалы и методы исследования. Статья представляет собой личное размышление Линнеи Грим, президента и генерального директора музея Стробери-Бэнк, о приверженности музея взаимодействию с местным сообществом. Размышления г-жи Грим основаны на ее двухлетнем опыте работы президентом и генеральным директором музея Стробери-Бэнк. Дополнительные материалы, поясняющие ее размышления, взяты из печатных и онлайн-изданий, посвященных истории музея Стробери-Бэнк.

Ключевые слова: музеология США, историческое место, музей, доступность, сообщество, образование, сохранение, некоммерческая организация, музей Стробери-Бэнк.

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Introduction. For decades, many museum professionals and non-profit Boards in the United States are reimagining the role of their institutions within society. [Weil, 1999: 229] In the context of this national conversation, staff and Board members at Strawberry Banke Museum in Portsmouth, New Hampshire, believe it stands out for its “extreme openness,” an ability to engage meaningfully

with people from a variety of economic and educational backgrounds. From creating small, distinctive communities on its historic grounds, to offering inclusive events and low-barrier entry points, Strawberry Banke breaks down traditional boundaries between museums and the public.

Strawberry Banke is a nearly 10-acre living history museum that interprets over 350 years of local history, from Indigenous history to the present. Through its historical houses on their original sites, heirloom gardens, traditional crafts, and costumed roleplayers, visitors are invited to explore the stories of the families who lived and worked in the authentic waterfront neighborhood of Puddle Dock [Strawberry Banke Museum website, 2025: <http://www.strawberrybanke.org/history>; date accessed: 16.07.2025].

Results and discussion. As the first Smithsonian Affiliate in New Hampshire, Strawberry Banke is part of a prestigious network of more than 200 Affiliates across the U.S., Puerto Rico, and Panama. The Museum welcomes visitors, members, schoolchildren, and volunteers for daily programs, exhibits, special events, and seasonal ice skating.

Strawberry Banke Museum tells the story of the neighborhood called Puddle Dock. This region has a deep history of seasonal gatherings by Indigenous peoples. Archeologists at Strawberry Banke have uncovered pieces of pottery, stone tools, and tent holes that demonstrate the presence of the Abenaki. For over 12,000 years they visited the Seacoast seasonally for hunting, fishing, and food preparation [Martin & Jennison, 2025: 88-90].

In 1623, English colonists established a settlement along what is now the “New Hampshire” coast, built houses along the Piscataqua River, a more sheltered cove that is now Portsmouth Harbor. They named the settlement “Strawberry Banke”, for the abundant wild strawberries growing along the banks of the river. The neighborhood grew through cycles of maritime prosperity to become a multicultural “neighborhood of newcomers” [Robinson, 2007: 41].

In 1958, a group of concerned citizens banded together to preserve the nearly 10-acre area known as Puddle Dock, located at the South End of Portsmouth. Strawberry Banke, Inc., was formed and took its name from the earliest settlement. By 1965, the site was opened to the public as an outdoor living history museum, with only a handful of the historic houses open to the public. The early founders of Strawberry Banke went door-to-door gathering support from the community to continue preservation efforts [Robinson, 2007: 1-15].

Today Strawberry Banke is distinctive among outdoor history museums, sharing change over time in the same waterfront neighborhood. The Museum interprets a long span of history, from the history of Indigenous peoples (artifacts dating back to 10,000-12,000 years ago), to the present day. It has evolved from a grassroots nonprofit to a pillar in the community welcoming over 100,000 annual visitors for year-round programming.

Governance and Funding

The Museum’s governance and funding structures form the basis for the Museum’s current model of “extreme openness.” According to a 2024 report from the American Alliance of Museums, 77% of museums in the United States are private non-profits [American Alliance of Museums, 2024: 39]. Within the United States tax code, these private non-profits are classified by the code “501(c)3” and described as “public benefit charities.”

Private non-profits, such as Strawberry Banke Museum, have a governing board of directors. Strawberry Banke’s Board of Trustees consists of approximately 20 individuals who set the direction of the Museum and hire the President and Chief Executive Officer (CEO) (Fig. 1). The Board of Trustees does not need to have any affiliation with local, state, or national government.



(Figure 1). Linnea Grim, President & CEO, Thomas W. Haas Endowed Chair
(Photo courtesy of David J. Murray, ClearEyePhoto, 2023; photograph by Linnea M. Grim)

The Board of Trustees creates the Museum's mission or, in other words, the reason the organization exists. Strawberry Banke's mission is to, "To promote understanding of the lives of individuals and the value of community through encounters with the history and ongoing preservation of a New England waterfront neighborhood. Toward that goal, Strawberry Banke Museum: 1) Preserves for today's visitors and for future generations, historic buildings, cultural landscapes, objects, and other materials pertinent to its mission. 2) Conducts research aimed at placing local developments within the broader context of city, state, and national history. 3) Disseminates the results of that research to the public through exhibitions, publications, demonstrations, tours, symposia, workshops, and other educational activities and programs" [Strawberry Banke Museum website, 2025: <http://www.strawberrybanke.org/mission-and-vision>; date accessed: 16.07.2025].

Because the Museum is a private entity, the staff members who report to the President and CEO have significant freedom in how they achieve the mission and other priorities that the Board has defined. The government does not provide regular ongoing funding to help the Museum fulfill its mission, so one of the top responsibilities of the CEO is to ensure enough money to support the Museum's activities that the Board and staff have identified as essential functions.

In Strawberry Banke's current annual \$4.1M (USD) budget, two-thirds of the funds will come from earned revenue such as ticket sales, museum shop sales, event tickets, and rental income. The remaining one-third is a combination of donations from individuals and businesses as well as investment income from an endowment that the Board has created.

Due to the governance and funding structures, the Museum must be responsive to its community. If Strawberry Banke operated in a vacuum, without consideration of the people it served, it would not be able to have the funding support to continue. This community-based approach to operating has led the Museum to embrace the concept of extreme openness.

Welcoming Small, Distinctive Communities

At the heart of Strawberry Banke Museum's extreme openness is an intentional commitment to nurturing smaller distinctive communities within its historic campus. Traditionally, the public has thought of museums as quiet and static venues. To thrive, Museum staff have needed to upset this traditional narrative by creating spaces for contemporary people to gather within the context of a

historic site. The result is a living neighborhood where modern lives coexist with centuries of history.

Among its most distinctive offerings is the Heritage House Program (HHP) that allows individuals and small businesses the opportunity to rent spaces in the historic houses. In many houses, museum exhibits exist on ground floors and apartments or commercial spaces on the second floors. A graduate student is currently writing a thesis about HHP and the new communities it creates.

Beyond the rental properties, Strawberry Banke has embraced its role as a community anchor through programs like the community garden. Local residents tend plots during the relatively short growing season in New Hampshire. They have autonomy to choose what they plant. Retirees, families, and young professionals gather here not just to cultivate flowers and vegetables, but also form community bonds. Decades old, the community garden now spans generations, and the gardeners are extremely dedicated to their section of the Museum and to one another.

Casual uses of the Museum's grounds also reflect the philosophy of extreme openness. The Museum has become a favorite route for dog walkers, joggers, and neighborhood strollers who use the paths and open spaces outside regular museum hours. This informal but consistent relationship between the Museum and its neighbors fosters a love and respect for the historic site. Rather than closing its gates or fencing off its spaces, Strawberry Banke leaves them open both physically and philosophically to encourage engagement in informal but meaningful ways. That openness turns the Museum into a shared asset, not a siloed attraction.

Events as a Primary Way to Fulfill the Museum's Mission of Education and Preservation

Of the nearly 110,000 visitors to the Museum every year, approximately 20,000 of them visit Strawberry Banke for one of the Museum's four signature events. That means that approximately one-fifth of the Museum's entire visitation happens over 17 days throughout the year. At one time, staff considered these events as extraneous to the site's everyday museum program. However, the public is clamoring for seasonal events, and so the events have become a central way for Strawberry Banke to meet its mission.

SpringFest, an annual celebration, aims to educate the public about horticulture and husbandry. During the two-day event, the Museum invites families to enjoy the historic campus through hands-on activities, music, demonstrations, and seeing heritage-breed baby animals with their mothers. Many participants have described the event as welcoming, joyful, and informative. The event is especially popular with families with young children. Often during SpringFest, strollers are lined up by the dozens near the tents with baby animals.

Another profoundly moving event is the *July 4th Naturalization Ceremony*, which honors new American citizens against the powerful backdrop of centuries-old homes and gardens. Few settings could better underscore the meaning of citizenship and belonging than a site steeped in the stories of immigrants, patriots, laborers, and visionaries. As families gather to watch their loved ones take the oath of citizenship, they also connect—consciously or not—to the deeper currents of American identity. This event affirms that the Museum is not just a place for history but a space for living democratic ideals.

Three months later, *Ghosts on the Banke* explores the site's past through Halloween-themed programming (Fig. 2). Scores of Jack-o-Lanterns light the pathways, and guests have the chance to trick-or-treat, dance, and hear ghost stories. While they come for the fun event, they are also exposed to the site's architecture and significant multi-century history. In coming years, the staff is working on including more authentic stories from the site's past in to this event to create even stronger connection between the event and the Museum's education-based mission.



(Figure 2). Community members at Ghosts on the Banke
(Photo courtesy of Strawberry Banke Museum, 2024; photograph by Linnea M. Grim)

Candlelight Stroll, the Museum's best-known event, offers a magical encounter with the past. Visitors wander candle-lit paths to discover holiday traditions as they were celebrated over four centuries. The Museum is transformed into a time-traveling celebration of lights, food, and music. Each house and exhibit contribute a chapter to this story of winter celebrations—some rooted in religious traditions, others in secular family customs. The event embodies the Museum's dedication to preservation, education, and community joy (Fig. 3).



(Figure 3). Carolers at Candlelight Stroll
(Photo courtesy of David J. Murray, ClearEyePhoto, 2019; photograph by Linnea M. Grim)

Each of these events demonstrates how Strawberry Banke uses celebration not as distraction from its mission, but as fulfillment of it. The Museum invites guests not to watch passively but to participate and share in collective experiences. By eschewing traditional academic formalities through the events, Museum staff create a more welcoming and open space. Guests do not need to feel like they already know something about history to enjoy themselves. Because the site is open to them and their interests, they are in turn more open to learning about the Museum's houses, gardens, and collection items.

Low-Barrier Access to the Historic Campus

Strawberry Banke's extreme openness is perhaps most visible in the many ways it lowers barriers to invite broader audiences into its space. While traditional museums often face critiques for being exclusive or intimidating, Strawberry Banke actively works against those limitations, starting with programs that make casual, low-cost access possible year-round.

The Labrie Family Skate at Puddle Dock Pond exemplifies this approach. Between the end of November and the beginning of March, the historic campus is transformed into an ice-skating destination that draws visitors from across the region. Skaters glide across a rink surrounded by centuries-old homes, festive lights, and the sounds of holiday music or the latest popular tunes. For many, this may be their first introduction to the Museum (Fig. 4). Community members who claim not to have an interest in history are able to feel welcome on the Museum's grounds and enjoy recreation. Once they feel comfortable on the site, they are more likely to have their curiosity piqued and come back to visit the Museum or come to one of the signature events. Their initial visit is based in movement and joy rather than many static text panels.



(Figure 4). Ice Skating Lessons

(Photo courtesy of Strawberry Banke Museum, 2018; photograph by Linnea M. Grim)

Ice skating may seem unrelated to history, but it reconnects visitors to a tradition that was part of life for generations in northern New England. It also creates an atmosphere of approachability. Rather than gatekeeping history behind ropes and exhibits, the Museum puts it in conversation with the everyday pleasures of life—skating with friends, sipping cocoa, enjoying music under the stars. For those who return later in the year to tour the historic homes or attend an event, the ice rink may have served as their first step into a much longer journey of learning and engagement.

Equally important are the cultural bridges the Museum builds through being a host venue for a number of community events. Throughout the year, the Museum welcomes more than 10,000 guests through these partner events such as the annual the New England Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC) Fest (Fig. 5), Riverfest, and Fairy House Tours, a community event that celebrate creativity in participants ability to create “fairy houses” out of natural materials. These community partner events are yet another way the Museum demonstrates extreme openness to people in the local community.



(Figure 5). Korean Dancers at BIPOC Fest

(Photo courtesy of David J. Murray, ClearEyePhoto, 2024; photograph by Linnea M. Grim)

Extreme Openness: A Path to Connect a Historic Site to the Future

Across the country, museums are shifting from passive spaces of looking, listening, and reading, toward dynamic environments of doing and making. Strawberry Banke Museum is at the forefront of this movement. With its extreme openness to community, it has redefined what a museum can be: not a place set apart from the world, but one deeply embedded in it.

By supporting the lives of renters, joggers, and dog walkers, the Museum honors the spirit of neighborhood and the continuity of lived history. Through inclusive events that mix education with celebration, it fulfills its mission with creativity and care. And with low-barrier experiences like ice skating and community gardens, it invites all people to participate in the story of the Puddle Dock’s neighborhood past and present.

Strawberry Banke’s model combines scholarly rigor with radical inclusion. Museum staff members welcome people into the site’s history. In other words, the Museum meets visitors where they are and matches its mission of education and preservation to their contemporary interests. In doing so, the Museum ensures it remains both relevant and essential to the many communities (Fig. 6) that it serves.



(Figure 6). Cider Shed Music Performers at Candlelight Stroll
(Photo courtesy of Strawberry Banke Museum, 2018; photograph by Linnea M. Grim)

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