

**Big Springs Historical Society and Museum
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January 12, 2009

Senator Dale Volker
59th District
427 State Capitol Building
Albany, New York 12247

Honorable Sir:

I am writing on behalf of Caledonia's Big Springs Historical Society and Museum where I have served as a board member and (volunteer) program coordinator for over ten years. I have witnessed first-hand the impact that New York Council on the Arts funding can have on community organizations like ours. It is difficult to know where to begin, so integral to our livelihood and success has been this support.

The Big Springs Historical Society has an annual operating budget of less than \$24,000. Our budget has DOUBLED over the last 10 years largely due to the level of activity made possible through decentralized arts funding at the local level. Our success can also be directly attributed to the guidance and support of our stellar arts council, the Genesee Valley Council on the Arts (GVCA). I welcome *any* community to offer up a more professional, knowledgeable, and nurturing group of people. The BSHS has been the recipient of several small grants (average award size of less than \$2500), administered by GVCA to create and develop projects that honor, preserve and illuminate local history. In 1999, Decentralization/Community Arts Grant funding propelled us into perhaps the most remarkable project ever undertaken in our museum's 70-year history. A \$2100 grant empowered us to seek, record, and present the histories of 34 African-American families whose ancestors settled Caledonia during the post-Civil War era. Funding of *A Heritage Shared; African American Families of Caledonia and Mumford*, supported the reproduction and exhibition of over 400 family photographs never before seen by the public. This exhibit brought over 1,000 visitors to our museum in one year! It honored the under-represented lives of people who made our community and county what it is today. The project launched a program for local school children about the Great Migration, and brought them back to our museum after a very long hiatus. The project also ignited volunteerism by descendants of featured African-American families who, each year, generously share first-hand accounts of their family's struggles and accomplishments. And, because the original grant of \$2100 proved, early on, to

be too small for the burgeoning project, it allowed us to leverage additional funding from the New York Council for the Humanities who awarded us an additional \$2500. Our business neighbor, the Bank of Castile also recognized the project's importance and contributed funds. If only all of our investments could demonstrate this kind of return!

In 2005 with a \$5,000 Community Arts Grant, we developed a documentary project and exhibit entitled *Behind the Fencerows, Family Farms of Caledonia and Mumford*. This project featured narratives, and "day-in-the-life" photographs of Caledonia and Mumford farmers, the people who drive the number one industry in Livingston County – agriculture. The exhibit also included historic photographs, an 8-minute film entitled *One Field, One Season*, and aerial photographs of 10 local farms. The exhibit was featured on a local television news segment and was re-installed during the Livingston County Fair in 2006.

These are just two examples of what we have accomplished with re-granted NYSCA funding. We also have been awarded re-granted NYSCA funds from the Upstate History Alliance for strategic and interpretive planning, and from the Lower Hudson Conference for collection conservation projects. Last year, after 10 years of thoughtful, concerted effort, we were awarded first-time funding directly through NYSCA's museum program. As a result, we were able to hire a professional textile consultant for 45 days over the course of a year to work with three volunteers. Four people for the price of one is an incredible return on an investment! ***This work would not have been possible without this funding.*** In fact, even with our amazing volunteer team, in all likelihood, very little of this work could have been accomplished without NYSCA support. BSHS has been awarded funding by NYSCA for 2009, but we await a decision on \$7 million in proposed cuts. We wait for \$4,000.

I am including two of our newsletters, hoping that they will provide you with an increased sense of this extraordinary organization.

In 10 years we have:-

- increased member support exponentially (35 members have grown to almost 400)
- received a marked increase in village and town support (even as they themselves face fiscal challenges)
- hosted over 150 programs appealing to diverse audiences
- successfully fundraised to keep our doors open and the heat on
- maintained, and improved, our circa 1900, 10,000 sq. ft. historic former school building
- cared for our archives and collections
- sought out and received grants while matching this support with our own dollars and in-kind efforts

- sent volunteers to numerous professional development opportunities, many of which were funded by NYSCA

Our curator is paid for four hours a week, our docent for three hours a week, and we are hoping for a small amount of additional operating support within the next three years. We bring visitors to our community (and our county) who spend dollars at local antique and gift stores, restaurants, and gas stations. We honor our mission to preserve and share local history, and we anchor our downtown district, contributing to the character of Main Street.

NYSCA funding represents less than 1% of New York State's budget. NYSCA has already endured significant cuts in the past. We know that the arts are an economic generator and that places like our museum provide an excellent return on investment. Cuts to the NYSCA budget will affect us very negatively, possibly irreparably, as our momentum is compromised and volunteers, who have already worked above and beyond what is reasonable, burn out.

As you strive to bring resolution to New York's fiscal plight, I ask you *please to* remember us, honor the work we do, and fight for the funding that is so important to the cultural health of your district. We thank you.

Sincerely,

Jean Guthrie, Coordinator of Grants, Exhibits and Programs, Big Springs
Historical Society and Museum