



Reopening the Vermont History Museum in the Time of COVID

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The Vermont History Museum in Montpelier closed to the public on March 16, 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic. A reopening date was dependent on state, national, and local guidelines. While museums in Vermont were allowed to reopen on June 1, we made the decision to delay opening until July 1. This was done to both give us time to establish needed changes and procedures at the museum, as well as to coordinate with state historic sites and other institutions on reopening plans. The following are some of the ways in which we approached reopening and decisions we made to ensure health & safety, while also retaining an interactive visitor experience. These are some of our initial decisions and plans. We are sure to find out more about what works or doesn't as we go along!

Overall Organizational Plans & Procedures

Obviously, many of the decisions made at the museum were based on required mandates from the state and city. This included a requirement for mask wearing and limited capacity. The museum decisions were also part of larger VHS reopening plans. This includes not holding in person events until September, sign-in procedures, and changes to staff offices.

Museum Plans & Procedures

New plans and procedures for reopening took into account a myriad of considerations for the health & safety of staff, patrons, and collections. The challenge was figuring out how to do that while preserving the type of visitor experience we want to share. Some of the adjustments included:

Signs & wayfinding



Extensive exterior door signage as required by state & city. This included some required because the museum is in a state-owned building. Health screening, capacity, mask requirement, and social distancing signs were all put in place. This was a mix of signs created by the state & by ourselves to align with VHS branding.

Because the exterior signage is a lot for a visitor to take in, we also created large poster signs just inside both entries reiterating requirements and asking people to wash/sanitize their hands. Additional signs were placed at the front desk and within the museum to reiterate messaging.

1. Lobby signs reiterated important visitor requirements

The main museum exhibit already follows a “one-way” pathway in general, so a minimal amount of arrows & directional signage was needed. Many signs were placed on specific interactives to help guide usage (see below).

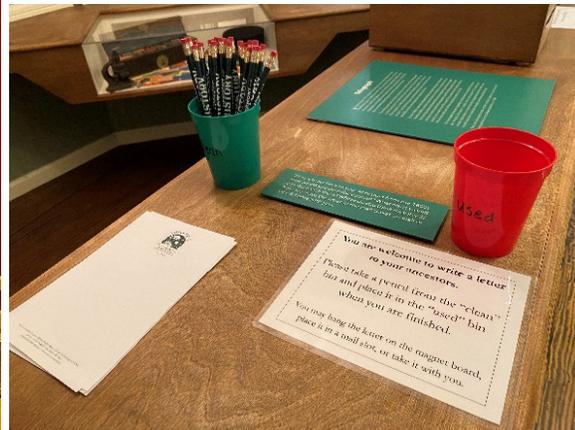


2. We created a unique and fun social distancing sign to go along with our star attraction

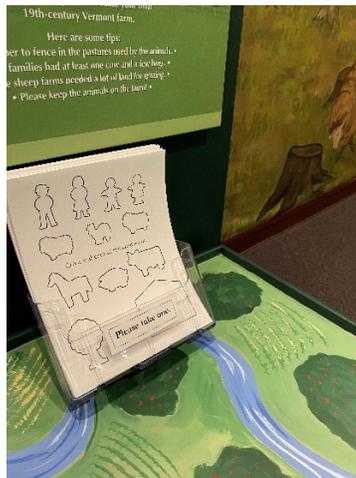
Adapting interactives

Probably one of the most challenging aspects of reopening. The museum was designed with a number of interactive/touch related opportunities. Staff first created an “inventory of touchables”, which included almost 200 items. Education staff then made decisions on a case-by-case basis based on a multitude of factors. Some items were removed- mostly if they were high-touch and could not be cleaned. A majority were modified. Modifications included:

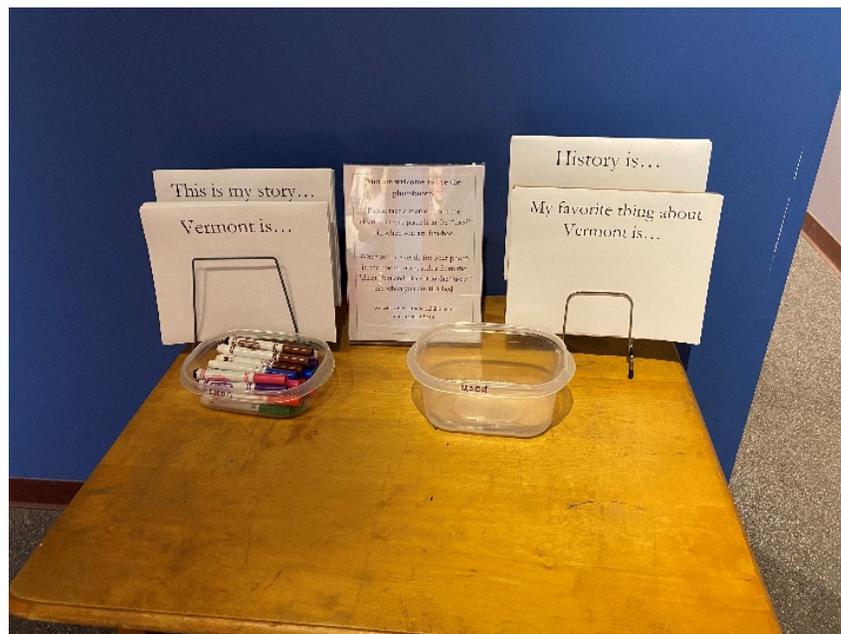
- Creating a rotational schedule with Clean/Dirty items that we had multiples of, such as wooden toys, animal pelts, slate boards, pencils, etc.



- Removing high-touch items that were not one-time use and not easy to clean, such as our pack basket, books, corn grinder, and wooden farm toy playset. Some were replaced by “take away” activities such as paper doll, paper plane, recipes.



- Providing touch apparatus such as styluses to use with touchscreens, telegraph, etc.
- Removed laminated items and replaced with single-use paper items. Such as photobooth prompts



- Re-imagined other interactives, such as our dress-clothes. These were replaced by mirrors w/"costumes" on them. Message slots in the telegraph room were replaced with an open bulletin board.



- Created active daily cleaning procedures for other touchable items, such as the photobooth.
- Creating an alternative type of interaction- such as having the audio at our conversation stations uploaded online w/QR code access rather than using phone receivers. Some activities could not be adapted or removed, such as our “Scents of the Store”, and they were closed off.



Other Adjustments/Tasks

A very thorough cleaning of the whole museum was undertaken just prior to reopening. A cleaning and rotational checklist was established for use at various times throughout the day. A moveable desktop plexi shield was placed on the front desk and a new credit card reader was installed to help w/touchless transactions.

A decision was made to wait a couple of weeks before volunteers were incorporated into the museum again. This was done to give staff time to refine procedures as needed.

The museum hours were adjusted to reduce the open days by one (to 4 days a week), but open hours were extended by one hour each day. Visitor information and requirements were all posted on our website.

Because masks are required, copies of the specific city order were printed out for staff to reference if a visitor was reluctant or antagonistic about wearing a mask. Staff also studied de-escalation techniques and ways to positively reinforce mask wearing.

Thoughts & Lessons Learned

There is no handbook for this adventure.

- *Look to others:* Everyone is trying to figure this out and many are sharing. Look to social media, professional lists, and virtual meetings/webinars for ideas and discussion. See below for a few examples.

- *Be prepared to adapt:* State guidelines changed between June 1 and July 1, and are sure to change again in the months to come. Adaptable procedures and decisions were a must.
- *Make a choice:* While it may be difficult, choose a path for reopening and walk down it.
- *Nothing is guaranteed:* By opening, we are assuming risk for our staff and visitors. While we can work to minimize that risk, the only 100% guarantee to not spread the virus is to not be open. Each organization will have to make that decision for themselves.

Online webinars referenced by VHS staff

From the New England Museum Association (NEMA)

links for recordings here: <https://nemanet.org/conference-events/workshops/>

Using COVID-19 Research to Make Data-Informed Exhibit Decisions

Interactive Spaces: Envisioning Re-opening

Museum Education Post COVID-19 Town Hall

NEMA Town Hall: From please touch, to don't touch, to how can we touch again?

Down to the Details: Museum Education Goes Virtual

From Cuseum

links for recordings here: <https://cuseum.com/webinars>

The "Contactless" Future: Reimagining the Visitor Experience in the Era of Coronavirus:

Exploring the Future of Museums in the Era of Coronavirus:

Museum Think Tank - Tapping into Fresh Ideas & Networks to Navigate the "New Normal":

Preparing to Reopen - Experimenting with New Digital Revenue Streams on the Road to Reopening