

A Place for Friends Capital Campaign: A Snapshot (Now That It's Underway and There's No Turning Back)

Jennifer Lee Gray, Education & Museum Manager, Arch Street Meeting House Preservation Trust, Jgray@historicismh.org

In 2024, Arch Street Meeting House Preservation Trust – the non-profit entity that preserves, interprets, and operates Arch Street Meeting House in Philadelphia, PA – launched a Capital Campaign to achieve five strategic improvement projects. These designs, ranging from installing a fire-suppression system to updating the visitor experience, will be completed by summer of 2026 for the Semiquincentennial celebrations. Requiring lots of planning and fundraising, these improvements have also provided some unexpected bumps along our journey to bring the meetinghouse into the twenty-first century.



Bringing a 220-year-old building into the twenty-first century is no easy task. But I shouldn't begin that way; you might think that the meetinghouse I'm referring to has been sitting untouched for decades, waiting for historic preservationists and modern technology to collaborate on something that will allow such a historic structure to be updated and yet remain...well, historic. And in many ways, that's exactly what the last couple of years have been focused on: the blending of preservation and modernity, history and today. But Arch Street Meeting House was not a derelict, empty building when this story begins. In fact, it has been in constant use since 1805, necessitating various improvements and renovations over the centuries. One of the first changes was in 1815 when the Friends added a small window to the south-facing wall of the West Room to let in more light. It cost a total of \$10.75. Today, in order to make the updates that are needed throughout the building, Arch Street Meeting House Preservation Trust is in the midst of a Capital Campaign to raise a grand total of \$4.7 million (let's just say things are more expensive than they were in 1815).

Not counting the major roof repair in the 1990s, our last large-scale building renovations were in the late 1960s. Spearheaded by the Monthly Meeting of Friends of Philadelphia which wanted a smaller dedicated space to hold Meeting for Worship, Friends removed many additions that had been lumped onto the back of the building in the preceding decades, adding a shelter for plumbed toilets, for example. In their stead, we got an elevator, a big basement with large restrooms, the aforementioned Monthly Meeting Room, and a building that is 28,000 square feet in size which currently serves the community as a worship space, museum, rental space, food pantry, and neighborhood hub. Today, the building is used on a daily basis for everything from school tours to weddings, dance recitals to business conferences, community events to private programming. This leads to the question, where on Earth to begin?

The current Capital Campaign, *A Place for Friends*, has five main points:

- Upgrade our 100-year-old heating system with eco-friendly forced air that delivers efficient heating and cooling. This will unlock year-round access to community events and ensure the preservation of the museum's archives.
- Install fire-suppression sprinklers throughout the meetinghouse to preserve and protect this National Historic Landmark.
- Build an endowment that guarantees the long-term preservation of the meetinghouse, ensuring that future generations of students, visitors, and Quakers can continue to experience and learn from its legacy.
- Bring Quaker history to life with new exhibits that captivate visitors and offer a deeper, more compelling exploration of Quaker ideals and the faith's complex past.

- Add advanced, energy-efficient West Room lighting and technology that enhances the space's simplicity while providing dynamic options for programming and events.

If you were to ask Sean Connolly, Executive Director of Arch Street Meeting House Preservation Trust, what he feels is the most important component of this project, he would probably say the sprinkler system. Fire has destroyed countless historic structures around the globe, and many do not survive the ordeal or bounce back in the same way. It is comforting to see those that have persevered and reopened after such devastation, such as the Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris. One such structure is our neighbor in Philadelphia, Carpenters' Hall. While undergoing their own renovations and updates, they were set back for months by a fire on Christmas Eve in 2023 that was initially believed to be electrical in nature but was eventually classified as arson. You could say our own Campaign at ASMH all started with some creative electric wiring; after installing higher-efficiency bulbs in our post-lights on the grounds, we started noticing some – let's just say, quirks. Coupled with the memories of Carpenters' Hall lingering in the not-too-distant background, addressing the electrical issues became a higher priority and installing a sprinkler system an even higher one.

From my standpoint, the exhibition updates are an incredible endeavor that will transform the building into an educational museum space worthy of the crowds expected for the Semiquincentennial celebrations (the 250th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence, and a bigger party in Philadelphia than when the Pope came to town). It will also align us within current best practices. History museums of the modern-day are taking cues from children's museums and heavily incorporating visuals, multi-modal experiences, and interactive components. The plexiglass barriers that bar visitors from rooms and objects are a thing of the past, and creating spaces that fit the needs of all learners is at the forefront. Currently, aside from a small space where visitors can contribute answers on Post-Its to the question *How Will You Change The World?* – posited again on enormous chalkboards outside our gates on the sidewalk in the summertime – the museum displays at Arch Street Meeting House fall flat in the realm of visitor engagement. Our public programming, however, runs the gamut, encompassing interactive activities for the whole family, first-person interpretation, and neighborhood walking tours that are hugely popular.

Over the years we've done our best to update signage as we fix glaring historical omissions and add more in-depth content. But adding nuanced interactive components and removing displays that have been in place for decades is a massive undertaking that was also cost-prohibitive. Add in the unexpected surprises of a 220-year-old building that pull money away from exhibit updates, and the likelihood of finding money for even a touch screen was slim. Two examples of such surprises include: our boiler being condemned in

February 2023 the day before a full wedding and reception for 150 people, and a plumbing leak in February 2024 that resulted in asbestos abatement and a month-long headache. February 2025 was no less stressful, but at least the disruptions were planned this time! The construction work began the Fall prior out on the grounds, and inside the building once winter hit. On any given day there were electricians, plumbers, painters, carpenters, and the occasional design company on site, all working in tandem and around the museum operations we could not postpone. Thankfully, we opted to spread the renovations out as best as we could, so the West Room & Lobby came first; the Reception Room & East Room will come next year. The West Room updates are subtle. The new lighting system is a dream and designed to be low-profile, and the updated signage and increased use of technology we are only just seeing the impacts of now that we've reopened for the season. The changes in the Lobby, on the other hand, are immediately noticeable.

Working with a consultant, we began by conducting visitor surveys to assess how people move through the Lobby – the space contains four sets of huge double doors, a staircase, and access to our vault – and what historical content they want to see most. Around the same time, we also performed an extensive cleaning of the vault and a proper inventory of the collection. Three very long days later, we now have the beginnings of a respectable collection database, complete with a numbering system and a knowledge of what we actually have, including five copies of the Philadelphia *Rules of Discipline and Advices* from 1894. After deciding on a new visitor flow and corresponding layout, we began discussing the signage as we worked with a design firm on the color scheme and furniture. A woodworker made our new Lobby furniture from some of our dismantled benches, and the gift shop started to expand with new merchandise. The informational signs went through seemingly endless revisions, ensuring every color, word choice, and piece of punctuation were perfect – the last thing anyone wants is to have to re-do something because a typo was missed in haste. And, finally, over a year after we started planning, it was time to paint. And let me tell you, I may have been content with just the fresh coat of paint; the difference is astounding.

We reopened with our new-and-improved Lobby and West Room on March 13, 2025, but the work actually had to be completed a week earlier. Arch Street Meeting House hosts the Continuing Sessions of the Philadelphia Yearly Meeting, held the Saturday prior to our museum reopening each year. We only just made the deadline – we were cleaning up plaster dust around the tech equipment being set up. And don't tell anyone, but there's still more work to do. The Lobby floors still have to be cleaned and waxed, some artifacts on the wall need to be swapped out, the exhibit case is the wrong color, the video in the West Room is still being tweaked, the wallpaper on the vault door is misaligned, and some new gift shop items got lost in the mail. But I digress.

As of this writing, the Capital Campaign renovations are about 50 per cent completed. The Reception Room and East Room are larger undertakings for exhibit updates, but the bulk of the behind-the-scenes infrastructure work for the sprinklers and HVAC is already done. We've had some surprises along the way, as everyone does with this kind of work: unearthing bones that turned out to be animal, lingering questions about our emergency lights, industrial rugs that didn't last a week before visible damage, and more asbestos, of course.

In some ways, having a building that wasn't updated in the 1960s may actually be easier to preserve (we wouldn't have the electrical oddities to deal with, for starters). But more importantly, historic preservation has changed a lot over the last 65 years. Back then, removal was the name of the game. If it did not fit the aesthetic one was looking for, it was out, regardless of its historical significance. Arch Street Meeting House lost a lot of things due to this mindset, and a big component of this Capital Campaign is to ensure it doesn't happen again. For example, we are paying homage to the lights we removed from the West Room – massive globe lights that were installed in, you guessed it, the 1960s – with a custom light fixture in the Lobby that has a globe light surrounded by a frame that mimics the roofline of the building. Plus, the visitor surveys we conducted indicate that the public wanted to know about the architecture of the building, so we are making a conscious effort to talk about it and show it off.

One great thing that came out of the 1960s renovations was 'The Green Book'. Officially entitled *An Architectural Study of Arch Street Meeting House*, this massive tome is the outcome of extensive surveying and research of the property conducted during the last renovations. It is our key to the vast architectural history of the building. Even before the Capital Campaign began, we referenced it constantly. Organised by room and with lots of pictures, the book gives us a window into the past, allowing us to pinpoint what is original – like the windows between the Lobby and the Reception Room that have always been fully internal – and what's not. There are even a dozen architectural drawings in the back of the book that depict side elevations of the various benches that make up the seating throughout the building. Some of these drawings, alongside architectural plans, made their way onto the custom wallpaper that now spans a whole wall in the Lobby. A copy of the Green Book is also on display, together with tools used by the master builder back in 1804 when the meetinghouse was being built.

Visitors were also curious about our collection, so we've opened up the vault so people can look inside. We are also actively creating exhibits that will showcase the objects in our collection in mindful ways. Maybe we can find a home for the massive cast iron base to an old lamppost that was found while the contractors were digging a trench to lay new pipes and wires?

Our collection, as it stands, is pretty all-encompassing, but not exactly what you would expect to find at a meetinghouse. Nearly all of our papers, for example, were sent on-deposit to Haverford College in 2008 for proper storage in their climate-controlled Quaker research library. Alleviating the responsibilities that come with 200 years of paper was both a preservation and space-saving decision, as our vault is roughly 16' × 10' in size and was additionally crammed with books, clothing, assorted building materials, artwork, and a plethora of whatnot. The three-day inventory we conducted at the start of the Campaign helped us get organised, and the items on site are now not only comprehensively numbered but broken into categories (like *Paper*) and subcategories (like *Letters & Diaries*). And, like any good institution, we have an *Other* category which helps us maintain some semblance of organisation for the things that seem truly random. One of the subcategories in *Other* is *Burials*, as the property that Arch Street Meeting House sits upon was the main Quaker cemetery in Philadelphia for nearly 200 years. So, while the burial records themselves are now at Haverford, we have other related items (like headstones) that still need categorization and houseroom.

Questions about the burial records are probably the most frequent that staff are asked when stationed at the front desk. On almost a weekly basis, a visitor through the door or a phone call to the museum inquiries about an ancestor who they believe is buried on our property; can we help? Well, conservative estimates indicate 13,000 burials and possibly as close to 20,000. Even if I did have the burial records on site, it would be like finding a needle in a haystack. Still, redirecting them to the Quaker Collection at Haverford College, and in some cases the Friends Historical Library at Swarthmore College, became so frequent that we not only posted the information on our website, but we put the same material on business cards to be able to give to the walk-in visitors who have this question. Partially because of this frequency of interest, one of the ancillary plans related to the Capital Campaign is a small on-site research library. This space on the second floor will give us the opportunity to allow such visitors to sift through the digital records that exist while on site at the meetinghouse before venturing to the next stop on their genealogical journey.

We have a lot of bonnets in our collection – a subcategory under *Textiles* is *Headwear* – but there are many things we don't have. ASMH is not a collecting institution, at least not yet, and while handfuls of things are acquisitioned on a semi-regular basis, we do not seek out items to add. In planning for these new exhibits, we discovered significant gaps in the object collection, and we wanted to see if other Quaker sites had the same problem. To answer this question, we invited everyone to ASMH on a Monday afternoon in September of 2024 for a bit of brainstorming. About two dozen museum personnel from Quaker-linked institutions around the Philadelphia area came to Arch Street

Meeting House for some show & tell and a conversation about our collections. Thus, a secondary goal of the Capital Campaign was born: a proper database for the Quaker collections at large. The internal ASMH collection spreadsheet is certainly better than nothing (which is literally what we had before), but having an online archive that is designed for this purpose would be optimal. It would be great to showcase some of our collection on our website or allow a smaller Quaker institution to view and search for objects that might enhance their own exhibits. It would be even better to have a way for the small institutions to piggy-back off of the ASMH database, allowing them to go digital even if they don't have the staff or resources to fund such an endeavor. Mind you, we don't really have the staff or resources either but being in the midst of a Capital Campaign makes you feel like you can do it anyway.

In case you were wondering, the Arch Street Meeting House Preservation Trust does not have a large staff to supervise all of these endeavors. As of April 2025, ASMHT employs three full-time office staff, two full-time maintenance staff, and two part time staff. We are all continuing to perform our normal duties in addition to the work that the Capital Campaign has provided, and that includes more than research and monitoring contractors. Just last week you would have found the five full-time staff and our consultant on site, painting the West Room altogether as a team. Talk about "other duties as assigned".

The year 2026 plans to be a busy one in Philadelphia, as the city and its surrounding suburbs are hosting the FIFA World Cup, the MLB All-Star Game, NCAA March Madness, the PGA Championship, and the Semiquincentennial celebrations. And as the city scrambles to repave streets, install bike lanes, and tackle trash build-up, we at Arch Street Meeting House are working hard to ensure all of these Capital Campaign renovations are completed so we can show off our hard work. Let's hope we make the deadline.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

