

# HISTORIC LEWES ANNUAL REPORT

THE LEWES HISTORICAL SOCIETY PROMOTES AND ADVOCATES FOR THE PRESERVATION, INTERPRETATION, AND CULTURAL ENRICHMENT OF THE LEWES REGION, THROUGH MUSEUM EXHIBITS, EDUCATIONAL PROGRAMS, HISTORICAL RESEARCH, AND PUBLICATIONS.

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*The Lewes Historical Society is an exempt organization as described in Section 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code; and The Lewes Historical Society EIN is 51-6017951*

# 2025 Annual Report of the Lewes Historical Society

Dear Friends of Historic Lewes ~

Welcome to this summary of the programs and events that filled the days of **2025**. As you will read from the various departments, it was a whirlwind time. The year was full of new offerings, including *ShantyFest* and our *Cannon Ball Gala*, as well as the continuation of long-standing favorites, such as the *Sea Glass Festival* and the *Holiday House Tour*. We've increased our educational programs and immersive interpretive events, while beginning the transformation of the Lewes History Museum.

With thirteen historic buildings spread across campus and across town, it is thanks to our skilled staff and dedicated volunteers that we have been able to welcome visitors throughout the year. It has been an honor to lead this organization for the past two years and we are grateful to you, our supporters, who help fund the engaging activities at Historic Lewes.

—Denise Clemons, Chair, Lewes Historical Society



## **The Vision of the Lewes Historical Society:**

To preserve and share the diverse history and heritage of the greater Lewes region.

## **The Mission of the Lewes Historical Society:**

Promotes and advocates for the preservation, interpretation, and cultural enrichment of the Lewes region, through museum exhibits, educational programs, historical research, and publications.

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## Interpretation & Cultural Enrichment

2025 marked the beginning of major commemorations of the Revolutionary War and the penultimate year to the founding of American nationhood. After years of planning and effort to orient programming around how Lewes and the larger State of Delaware experienced and responded to those pivotal years, it was deeply fulfilling to embark on this Semiquincentennial together.

Of course, none of these accomplishments would have been possible without the devoted efforts of over 100 volunteers, four summertime interns, and strong interdepartmental collaboration—particularly with the Curatorial and Facilities & Grounds Departments. The Interpretation Department team also underwent noteworthy changes in 2025. During the closure of the Lewes History Museum, Alan Jensen took over daily management of the Cannonball House Maritime Museum, U.S. Life-Saving Service Boat House, and Ryves Holt House Museum & Mercantile sites; meanwhile, Dawson Gehrke initially transferred to the Historic Shipcarpenter Street Campus before his subsequent promotion to oversee the Education Department as associate director. Greg Burton, after years of service to Historic Lewes, also elected to step down as the supervisor for the Lewistown Coffee-House in the late summer. A veteran historical interpretation intern and recent graduate of the University of Delaware, Breanna Duncan was then hired on in a full-time capacity to oversee operations on the Campus (including its Coffee-House) as its historic area manager.

In addition to our regular operation of up to eight manned historic structures from April through December, popular *First Friday Community Nights*, and contributions to events like the *Cannon Ball*, *Sea Glass Festival*, *Boos & Brews*, and the *Holiday House Tour & Market*, we also offered an impressive array of unique options specifically tailored for our guests to engage directly with our mission.

- April saw the return of our oldest-standing living history event, *Hearty in the Cause*, focused on the spring of 1776.
- In May, our first-ever *Shanty Fest* premiered to great success, attracting a hitherto-untouched audience with marvelous performances and learning opportunities.

- June saw the launch of a premium beach walking tour in partnership with Cape Henlopen State Park, *Shipwrecks & Rescues*, which was performed until August.
- Come August, we added a new living history event to our roster with the introduction of *Under Enemy Guns*, which explored Lewes in the months surrounding the infamous War of 1812 bombardment.
- Then, in October, we transported guests back to the fall of 1775 with our *Harvest Fair*, featuring new vendors and entertainers.
- Finally, November witnessed the triumphant return of our *Fires of the Revolution Bonfire Night* after its 2024 hiatus.

This ambitious slate was made possible by our local volunteers, more than 50 guest interpreters, and partnership with twenty like-minded organizations in our region. All told, our mission-oriented offerings attracted at least 13,000 visitors in 2025.

Great strides were also made in two revenue centers under the department's jurisdiction. After a year in use as a joint venture between Historic Lewes and a local artist collective, we resumed museum store operations at the Ryves Holt House Museum & Mercantile in late August. After entirely restocking that space, the final quarter yielded sales of \$3,358.91, which bodes very well for a full return in 2026. Meanwhile, the Lewistown Coffee-House's interior benefitted immensely from the targeted focus of new Historic Area Manager Breanna Duncan, Assistant Curator Lucie Allen, and Facilities & Grounds volunteer Anthony Fortunato. With its ongoing facelift and reinforced focus, the Coffee-House grossed \$11,984.02 in 2025.

With another year of progressive growth behind us, the Interpretation Department is looking ahead to a formidable slate of programming in 2026, built on the foundations that have made us recognized leaders in our vocation within Delaware: close collaboration with our fellow departments, a stalwart corps of volunteers, robust partnerships with like-minded organizations and individuals, a reliable calendar of offerings, and a drive to be the foremost destination for America 250 commemoration in the First State.

In many ways, 2026 represents a culminating year for public programming at Historic Lewes.

Since 2021, Historic Lewes has been focused on presenting the Lewes and larger Delaware experience of the American Revolution for the country's 250th birthday, and it can be fairly said that we are pulling out all the stops. The popular annual living history events we have been building through the years, *Hearty in the Cause* and *Harvest Fair*—the former revisiting the spring of Independence and the latter advancing each year in time with the commemoration— will finally meet one another in 1776. The events will be bigger than ever, featuring more activities, demonstrators, performers, and reenactors. Meanwhile, the success of our initial *Under Enemy Guns* event, telling the story of Lewes in the War of 1812, will expand the story past the Revolutionary Generation, this time over the course of a full weekend in August. For the first time, we will also be in close collaboration with the City of Lewes too as we touch on the spirit of early America for an Old Lewes Independence Day.

Beyond these tentpoles, our team is looking forward to continuing the development of the Lewes Maritime Museum (including a new introductory film!), advancing curation on the Shipcarpenter Street Campus, and growing revenue at both the Ryves Holt House Mercantile and Lewistown Coffee-House. The success of our *Shipwrecks & Rescues Beach Tour* in 2025 calls for expansion in this new year of operations, as does the popularity of our Halloween programming—to be fulfilled by a one-day, All Hallows' Eve event of fright, fun, and folklore on October 31st in the lead-up to the City's extremely-popular Trick-or-Treat night.

With all this and more, we have a wonderful, ambitious year ahead... and a tantalizing future to innovate and explore beyond.

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## **Museum Curation**

### **—The Historic Lewes Maritime Museum**

Over the course of 2025, Historic Lewes' curatorial team and museum committee have been diligently working toward the transformation of the Lewes History Museum into the Historic Lewes Maritime Museum. Utilizing a generous grant pledged by the Ma-Ran Foundation, this new museum experience is scheduled to debut its first exhibition, *Revolutionary Lewistown at Sea*, in April 2026, with the complete museum opening scheduled for December 2026.

In an effort to reinforce Lewes' maritime identity and relationship with the sea, the Historic Lewes Maritime Museum will be a space to share Lewes' nearly 400-year history both ashore and at sea. The exhibitions slated for our December opening will highlight Lewes' intimate relationship with the broader Atlantic world, exploring the community's shore-based maritime infrastructure and trades, as well as the town's diverse seafaring labor force. This museum will further enhance each visitor's experience through annually rotating exhibitions and our new Maritime Research Library and theater space.

### **—The Cannonball House**

#### **2025**

The Boyd-Neill-Rowland House, commonly known as the "Cannonball" House, received substantial attention over the course of 2025. Thanks to the generous support of the Welfare Foundation and Crystal Trust Foundation, Historic Lewes was able to complete Phase 1 of our restoration efforts. This phase focused on the encapsulation and waterproofing of the entire building to ensure its longevity while maintaining its historical integrity. The restoration work completed included the demolition and sheathing of exterior surfaces; the replacement of cedar shakes and windows; the rebuilding of soffits and fascias; the reworking and rebuilding of shutters and door trims; and the painting of the exterior.

#### **2026**

While the Cannonball House has traditionally served as a maritime museum, the planned December 2026 opening of the Historic Lewes Maritime Museum at 101 Adams Avenue allows for the Cannonball House to enter a new chapter, with a focus on the community of Lewes and the War of 1812.

In the Spring of 1813, the British Royal Navy enacted a “strict and rigorous blockade” of the bay and river Delaware. With this came a naval bombardment. Over the course of twenty-two hours the community of Lewes would endure a naval barrage, with approximately 800 shots fired ashore. The Cannonball House still bears a physical reminder of this maritime assault, with a cannonball lodged in her foundation.

The planned transformation of this site into an 1812 museum and curation of its galleries will begin in the latter half of 2026, with a focus on both the social and military narratives surrounding Lewes’ role in this storied engagement.

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## **Education**

In 2025, the Education Department experienced a period of transition, as Director Marcos Salverria departed for the next stage of his career, and our own Dawson Gehrke took on new responsibilities as Associate Director of Education. While transitions come with challenges, they also bring new energy and ideas. During a brief period of overlap, the outgoing and incoming directors worked collaboratively, drawing on the fresh ideas and inspiration of both as we look ahead to continued growth in 2026.

2025 saw much that can be built upon. Tours grew and flourished thanks to the wonderful work of our volunteer guides, while *Tavern Talks: Back to the Bombardment* marked a step forward for our museum theatre program, with Marcos expanding the performance to wider audiences at the Lewes Public Library. Two new learning experiences were also introduced for our field trip groups—“Make a Shanty Mad Libs” and “Make and Take Lighthouses”—both of which proved highly successful and will continue into the coming year. Books from Historic Lewes and related publications were made available for sale during several of these events, resulting in new homes for dozens of volumes that had been collecting dust.

Of course, our educational work would not be possible without the support of our dedicated members—you. Through your support, longstanding outreach partnerships led to new programs being added to our repertoire, including *The Colonial History of Chocolate*, presented at Independence Community’s Tea Party, and *Mischief Night: Pirates and Ghouls*, presented for our friends at the Lodge. We also partnered with Russ Huxtable, the Z-Club, and Lewes in Bloom for Halloween pumpkin carving; offered private Legends Tours for the Lewes Yacht Club as well as for Deaf Delaware (the latter with ASL interpreters), and shared spooky stories with children at the Lewes Public Library.

Valuable new partnerships were also formed, including with Art Strong, which brought a younger demographic to the School House each Tuesday for art lessons, and with *QuiltFolk* magazine, which featured Historic Lewes and local quilters in their Delaware Issue, No. 37, released in January of this year. This inclusion was made possible thanks to the tireless advocacy of Lewes’ own De Taylor. We cannot begin to thank, or name, all of our wonderful partners and volunteers enough.

Looking ahead, we are excited to begin 2026 with strong momentum, supported by a \$25,000 grant from the Middle Run Charitable Foundation. In April, the Education Department will take part in a 250th Revolutionary Celebration in partnership with the Boy Scouts. In May the department will lead *Saving the Past, Shaping the Future: Preservation Field Trips* and will also present programs at the Georgetown Library. Together, these initiatives are expected to reach at least 2,000 young people as we begin commemorating this important anniversary.

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## **Sussex Tavern**

2025 was a banner year for Sussex Tavern. Maintaining a margin of about 50% to 60%, the Tavern saw gross income of \$145,000 and welcomed 18,700 visitors to its bars. Operations remained year-round, with daily hours expanding from Fridays and Saturdays to Wednesdays through Saturday. These regular days—combined with *First Fridays* and *Shanty Nights*, special events such as *Sea Glass*, the *British Invasion*, *Boos and Brews*, the *Holiday House Tour*, and four interpretive re-enactment events—saw the Sussex in operation for 191 days.

As *First Friday Tavern Nights* approaches its fourth anniversary, sales and attendance have continued to rise, averaging around 300 customers per night and \$2,800 in sales.

*Shanty Nights*, added to the calendar in November 2024, remained popular throughout 2025. Held outside on the lawn in warm weather, attendance exceeded 200 guests, while colder months still drew crowds of more than 100.

A new holiday event, *Carol Sing*, was held on the Saturday before Christmas from 3 to 6 p.m. and drew a standing-room-only crowd.

Throughout the year, our team of volunteer tavernkeepers staffed the bars faithfully and developed a strong esprit de corps, becoming some of the most public-facing ambassadors of Historic Lewes—often recognized in the community as “that person who served me a grog.”

Building on this strong base, we look ahead to 2026 with confidence.

The coming year will see some physical changes to the Tavern to help us improve customer service and efficiency. Our “Cooler Fund” exceeded its goal, which will enable us to install a reach-in chest beer cooler and a dedicated ice cooler. Along with the new equipment, we are also expanding the bar to accommodate more than one bartender at a time and adding an exit door to improve safety and ease restocking. The good news is that support for these projects has already been secured through the Cooler Fund and a generous donation, with work scheduled for Mondays through Wednesdays while we are closed.

Alongside these physical improvements, we’re also introducing something new at the bar: the “Isaac Turner Mug Club.” Isaac Turner, a Lewestowner in the late 1700s and early 1800s, was known to visit the original Sussex Tavern nearly every day. Inspired by his near-daily visits, patrons can purchase a mug for \$40, along with a \$25 membership fee, to join the club. Their mugs will be numbered and kept on a shelf in the tavern. They will receive an official Isaac Turner certificate, a 10% discount on drinks, and, of course, bragging rights.

*First Fridays, Shanty Nights, and Carol Sing* will continue in 2026, alongside an anticipated increase in private rentals to further support income. In response to rising costs, prices were adjusted modestly. The Tavern will also open on select major holidays, following successful trial openings in 2025.

With these enhancements, the Sussex Tavern is well positioned to exceed the successes of 2025.

*See you at the Sussex!*

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## **Facilities & Grounds**

In 2025, the Facilities & Grounds Committee maintained, improved, and prepared Historic Lewes' campus for ongoing operations and future initiatives. The committee supported all major Historic Lewes events through closer coordination with Events staff and hands-on assistance with setup and takedown, helping streamline event planning and execution. Concurrently, the committee directed building repairs and maintenance across the campus, completing interior and exterior work that strengthened preservation efforts and improved functionality for staff, volunteers, and visitors.

Key projects included major renovations to the Lewes History Museum in advance of its conversion to the Historic Lewes Maritime Museum, including the removal of existing exhibits, construction of a new theater, and installation of new A/V systems. The committee also completed preservation and improvement work at multiple campus buildings, including office renovations, structural repairs, window and shutter restoration, porch replacement, utility upgrades, and interior improvements. Additional accomplishments included installing new historical text panels for each building on campus, constructing a new Liberty Pole, completing Phase 1 of the Cannonball House exterior restoration, submitting ADA bathroom design plans for city review, creating a new Serenity Garden, and overseeing ongoing grounds maintenance with support from staff, contractors, and volunteers.

This coming year, Facilities will continue to support the ongoing transformation of the Maritime Museum to help ensure it opens to the public in 2026. We will also be installing new sewage pipelines on the main campus and will complete the ADA compliant public restroom once we receive HPARC approval. We will also assist with the second phase of the Burton Ingram House, transforming it back to its original 1785 era.

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