

# Strategic Plan

## Introduction and Background

As we move in to 2019, the American Canal Society begins its 47<sup>th</sup> year of operation. The ACS faces many new challenges, unseen 1972 when Tom Hahn and others decided to organize a nationwide group devoted to the preservation of canals. Some of the challenges stem from a shift in how the younger generation views joining and supporting membership organizations. They tend to view these groups far differently than did their parents and grandparents. The ACS faces a challenge from its successes. When the ACS was first introduced, it may have been the only canal organization representing the forgotten canals. One of the early goals was to foster new local and state groups, and as it accomplished these goals, the local groups then would take on the role of local representation. If it came down to choosing one group over the other, in terms of manpower and financial support, the ACS would naturally lose.

In the first issue of the American Canal Society newsletter, dated March 1972, President Tom Hahn outlined what Bill Shank, Bill Trout, and himself saw as the need for a North American canals organization, dedicated to the protection of historic canals and the sharing of information between those groups that were currently working on canal preservation. These men were at first involved in the Canal Information Service, a organization devoted to the sharing of information between canal groups and interested individuals. But the three felt that more could be done and started the American Canal Society on January 1, 1972. The stated the goals were fairly straight forward; 1) to bring together as many canal societies and organizations as they could; 2) to issue a quarterly newsletter; 3) to advocate for endangered canal sites, to support all the local, regional and statewide canal groups and help to create new groups where they were needed; 4) not to interfere with any local groups unless asked; 5) and offer and share information to canal enthusiasts everywhere.

These purposes were later formalized into Article II of the ACS Constitution;

1:01- Provide for, encourage and participate in historic research of the historic transportation canals of America.

1:02- Promote the protection and restoration of segments of America's historic transportation canals where possible.

1:03- Promote, encourage and participate in the sensible and historic conversion of portions of these historic waterways into public recreational areas and waterways where practical and feasible.

1:04- To act as a clearing house for information and technical data for any project initiated by local and regional historic canal societies and / or canal corridor organizations, in the above three

areas, to assist and provide publicity for any such group upon request and to work in cooperative ways with these organizations upon request.

Note-The above articles should be modified to say “North American” instead of America in order to clarify that Canadian and Mexican Canals are part of the scope of this Society.

The operational model of the Society has always relied heavily upon members doing projects and activities locally in the name of the ACS. Be it study, writing, advocacy, or networking, there are few instances where the entire organization gathered at one place and took action. Rather, the member(s) accomplished something and then reported back to the ACS. Those members who lived near one another may have collaborated on a project, but as a whole, the group is too diverse to try to carry out large involved projects.

For the past 47 years, the ACS has been remarkably successful in carrying out these goals. And yet in the recent years, the ACS has seen a decline in membership, and a loss of the core focus. As it is the intent of the organization to remain as a viable society in the canal preservation world, the following strategic plan has been developed.

## Current Conditions

### Finances

As of October, 2018, the ACS had 130 paid members, down from 184 in 2017. There were 113 life members. There were 51 non-paid members, an increase from 27 in 2017.

The cash on hand as of October 1, 2018 was \$13,533.64, with \$10,446.42 of this in a CD account, which leaves the cash on hand as \$3,087.22. The financial report from September 2017 to October 2018 shows yearly expenses of \$9,024.28 and income of \$5193.50, with a deficit of \$3830.78. The deficit was taken from the cash account, reducing that from \$7037.73 in 2017. (The expenses include five printings of AC)

A majority of the expenses is in the production, printing, and mailing the American Canals bulletin. The yearly cost is \$7,863.00. It costs the ACS \$5.40 per issue per member to produce and mail the American Canals bulletin, for a total of \$21.60 a year (based on 294 memberships). This is below the yearly \$25.00 dues although this might vary depending on how memberships are counted in terms of individual vs family membership.

In 2018, the Society also paid out \$1409.95 to David Barber to reimburse him for website expenses.

All the revenue for the Society is generated from membership dues. The Society does offer past issues of American Canals and the Best of American Canals, but these are by mail order only, and in 2018, no sales were recorded.

While the Society is not in any immediate danger of running out of cash, this will happen in the next five years if changes are not made.

## **Membership**

The loss of membership is NOT an American Canal Society problem alone. As members age and retire, they are not being replaced by a younger generation. This is being seen in every organization, from fire departments to the Boy Scouts to the Little League and many advocacy organizations. As noted prior, the success of the ACS in fostering local canal groups might be a factor in this decline, as people chose to join their local or statewide groups. But most studies show that much of the decline is likely due to the shift in how people now look at joining these organizations and what benefits they can expect to see.

While the ACS strives to attract new members, it should not forget about the long term membership. The decrease in retention shows that the ACS is not being viewed as worthy of continued support.

In the early days of the Society, the officers heavily promoted the idea of lifetime membership as a method to generate cash. However, unless the lifetime fee is a sizable one, this category of membership only serves to harm the organization long term. The ACS now has about half it's membership in this lifetime category, which does not bring in dues, but continues to require all services. This category should be eliminated or the lifetime dues should be greatly increased.

## **American Canals**

It can likely be stated that American Canals is the one real, put your hands upon, benefit of becoming a member of the ACS. Aside from one year, the Society has printed an issue every three months for the past 46 years. Looking back through the issues, this bulletin has done a remarkable job in chronicling the history of all canals, given rise to new organizations, shared travelogues, spoke to preservation issues and shared information. The articles are well researched and written, including maps and other materials that will continue to serve the canal historian for years to come.

## **Committees**

Most of the ACS committees have not met or reported meeting in years. Listed are the; ACS Sales Committee, Canal Archeology Committee, Canal Boat Committee, Canal Engineering and Operations Committee, Canal Parks Committee, Canal Liaison Committee, and the Historic American Canals Survey Committee. There are also the Nominating and Membership Committees. When the ACS was founded, it is likely there was a need for information on preservation and operations. However, as local groups brought canals back to life and rebuilt locks, aqueducts, dams, towpaths and such, they likely know more about operations than the

ACS can provide, and it is likely that the lack of activity in these committees shows the lack of need for them as local and statewide groups assumed the role for preservation and advocacy.

## **Annual Meeting / Meetings**

As a very diverse board, the ACS has always had issues with face to face meetings. For years, the annual meeting is typically scheduled to be held in conjunction with a state group tour. As the ACS is secondary to the weekend tour and attendance will vary greatly on the cost and attractiveness of the tour, the location, the time of year and so forth. This turns the meeting into more of a yearly recap and makes for little future planning.

## **Website and Social Media**

The organization has had a website since 2004 and it has been updated throughout the years. The appearance of the website is fairly utilitarian and basic, although the content is very good. The format uses a single home page and highlighted links to take you to various topics. There has never been a use of tabs or separate pages. There is no use of a blog to generate return hits and traffic.

Until the fall of 2018, the Society has never used any social media to share news or increase it's outreach. The Facebook has been slow to pick up new likes, and it appears that many in the membership see little value to using this outlet.

## **Going Forward**

It is a difficult thing to do, but the board of directors should ask itself a couple questions;

- 1) Is there a value in continuing the ACS?
- 2) Do the original goals remain valid?
- 3) What can the Society offer the canal community in 2019 and into the future?
- 4) Are there changes that need to be made to reflect the current conditions?
- 5) What internal structure needs to change and be updated? Do the By-laws need to be updated in order to support this?
- 6) How can revenues be increased and or expenditures decreased?

What follows are suggested goal and actions. All the goals are designed to be projects that one or two people can work on and shepherd along with a minimum of time and effort.

### **Goal #1 - Attracting New Members and Retain Membership**

The most important goal for any membership group is to attract new members and retain members. All the other goals must always have this goal in mind. The best way to attract new members is by word of mouth as the canal community is a fairly small group. To aid in this, the membership materials should be updated and refreshed, and copies made available to everyone, especially board members, so they might freely pass them out when the occasion is right.

### **Goal #2 - Board**

The board is the heart of the organization and it should be filled by members who wish to take part and serve the Society. It can be difficult to keep up the activity level when board members have sat on the board for years, if not decades. However, many realize that no one else wishes to serve and they continue out of loyalty to the organization.

It might be helpful to draft a short handbook outlining the duties of the board members. In this way, hopefully the history of the board would be retained as old timers retire and are replaced. A handbook would be helpful in recruiting new members, outlining what activities need to take place in order to help the organization survive into the future. The expectations should not be so burdensome that all members feel they could never live up to what has been asked and expected.

As part of this, the board should seek methods to hold more frequent meetings. An annual meeting has little benefit if other discussions are not taking place throughout the year. There are free video and conference call services available, as well as simple email chains where ideas and issues can be discussed in a timely fashion.

The stated goal was to have board membership from as great a variety of canal groups and organizations as possible. Ideally, a representative from each canal group in each state would sit on the ACS board. In this way, that board member could engage with the local groups to share and network, and perhaps collaborate on trips or preservation efforts. Although this might be impossible to do, the nominating committee should strive to make the board as representative as possible.

### **Goal #3- Re-evaluate the Standing Committees**

As the board looks inward, it should reevaluate the many inactive committees. It appears that the various committees were formed when someone had an idea, proposed it, and carried out much or all of the work. As they moved on, or changed interest, the committee became inactive. It does the Society no good to have a list of inactive committees, and have people appointed as chairs and members feel badly that nothing is happening. It is suggested that the board take a hard and

honest look at all the inactive committees and dis-continue them unless someone wishes to become an active chair and reengaged its work.

These are the suggested committees;

**Nominating** – active

**Budget** – The ACS budget is very simple as most of it centers around the publication. However, current expenses are out of line with income. The budget committee should work with the other committees, especially Website, Newsletter, Membership/Outreach, to establish a budget that funds operations within the level of current income

**Website, Social Media** – The President will take this on.

**Newsletter** – The Editor should be heading up this committee and making suggestions as to possible changes and updates.

**Membership / Outreach** – Update the membership materials and ensure that they reflect the current mission. Compile or update the list of current canal organizations and send letters of introduction. This could be integrated with the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary.

**50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary** – This could be as simple as a couple articles from the early members taking a look back to a more formalized approach in highlighting the accomplishments of the ACS.

**Sites Inventory and Mapping** – Early issues of the bulletin suggest that this may have been completed at some point. If so, the list should be found, updated, and placed onto the interactive map on the website. This could also include the canal boat ride information.

## **Goal #4 – Redesign the Website**

A website has 10 to 20 seconds to create interest and compel someone to stay and investigate further. While our current website has much to offer the canal researcher and historian, there is nothing there to grab the attention of the average user who might be casually searching for canals.

The current website has not changed much since it was first published in 2003. It uses the very old fashion html setup of lists and links. One must read and scroll through the home page in order to find what they might be looking for. The website should be redesigned to make use of images to instantly tell the viewer what they have landed upon and page tabs to help direct the viewer to the information they desire.

It is now possible to include an interactive map page that would show any and all canal sites. This would rely on the interaction with canal researchers and could be a way to engage new interests in the goals of the Society. At one time the Society was creating or had an inventory of many canal sites. This could be updated and used as a basis for this map. If a state or regional group has already constructed such a map, then links would be offered.

A blog page should also be included. Using a blog allows the page to be updated frequently, which makes it more attractive to web-crawlers and thus easier to find on search results. Terry Woods excellent columns would be ideal content for the blog.

The annual Canal Boat Rides could be redesigned as a web only feature, helping to save money on printing and mailing, and helping to generate traffic to the website.

By using the Google Analytic feature, it will be possible to measure what topic generates interest, and what doesn't. This will give the board feedback as to future projects and direction.

As part of this work, the digital materials of the Society should be placed in an accessible server so that they will not be lost in case of death, accident, fire or other means.

### **Goal #5 – Refresh the American Canals newsletter**

In the Spring 1997 issue of American Canals (No.101), David F. Ross assumed the role of editor of American Canals. In a very good article, he laid out the goals of the bulletin and his future hopes for another 25 years. He wrote that; “original articles about canals are the red meat of American Canals”. This was as true a statement that you will ever read.

Now another 22 years have gone by, the bulletin continues to do a remarkable job in chronicling the history of all canals, sharing travelogues, speaking to preservation issues and sharing information. The articles are well researched and written, including maps and other materials that will continue to serve the canal historian for years to come.

It is rare for a volunteer organization to pay an editor and the ACS should take advantage of this and ask the editor to assist in refreshing the bulletin. Other newsletters and publications should be looked over and suggestions made ways to improve American Canals. Lately, much of the content is pulled from other organizations publications, and although this fulfills a goal of sharing, it also makes it difficult to produce new versions of the Best of, if we wished to do this in the future.

There has been talk about going to an all digital version of the newsletter. This would greatly reduce the yearly budget of the Society and allow us to incorporate color, links, and other web based features. However, it is possible that this move would alienate a large percentage of the membership. The Canal Society of Indiana has begun to use this model and it will be interesting to see the response and engagement of the digital newsletter.

### **Goal # 6 – Use of Social Media**

As noted, the Society has recently begun to post on Facebook. These are typically reposts of articles found by way of Google alerts and keywords. This is free advertising for the Society and is a very effective method to reach out to millions of people. This will also reach people who are searching on-line for canal topics. The other way to engage people is to share the post on one's own Facebook page. Facebook also has the Facebook Live function, which would allow someone the chance to record and share live. This can then be archived and reposted. The one issue with this strategy is the bad press that Facebook has been receiving as of late. Many may feel uneasy in signing up or sharing.

There are other opportunities on social media. The Society could create a YouTube channel and post original content. These films can be as fancy as one wishes it to be, with titles, music, special effects, and more. As drones are becoming a fact of life, it would allow those who wish to experiment to have a platform to post upon. Vlogs (video blogs) are now very popular and could be created.

### **Goal # 8 – Co-sponsor Trips**

The Society should consider helping local groups by co-sponsoring canal trips and tours. As all the canal groups are having difficulties with organizing and promoting tours, the participation of the ACS might help to spread the word and bring new people to a trip. The ideal partnership would be to have an ACS board member work with his local group and see where we could bring the most benefit.

### **Goal # 9 - 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary**

It should be noted that in 2022, the ACS will mark its 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary. In the world of canal groups, the ACS has been around longer than many if not most. The Society should not allow this milestone to slip by without some type of fanfare, build up, and commemoration. .

### **Goal # 10 - Sales**

The Chair (the only member of the “committee”), holds a stock of ACS publications, badges, bumper stickers, pennants and a number of canal related books. At one time, it was noted that these sales brought in needed revenue and new membership. However, with the availability of ACS publications online in digital form, and other sites such as Amazon, eBay and AbeBooks offering a broader selection, on-line ordering and faster shipping, orders have ceased and are not readily revivable. The existing stock should be disposed of and the sales function wound up. Books could be donated to local societies that have the opportunity to sell them to in person attendees at membership meetings. A limited number of each ACS publication should be retained as an archive. Badges, bumper stickers and pennants could be transferred to the membership chairman to be sent as a “premium” to new members as long as stock remains.

### **Goal # 11 – Be an “North American” Canal Society**

At the time of founding, the mission of the ACS was to service all of the North American canals, especially those sites which did not have a organized group watching over it. As these groups grew in numbers, the ACS took a back seat. Now that many of these groups are seeing a decline and outright demise, there might be an opportunity for the ACS to reserve these canals and canal supporters.