

Future-Ready for Middletown

A Strategic Plan for the Russell Library 2021-2025





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LIBRARY

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FUTURE-READY FOR MIDDLETOWN: A STRATEGIC PLAN FOR THE RUSSELL LIBRARY 2021-2025

Design by Brandie Doyle
2020

1. Public Libraries -- Strategic Plans
2. Revolutionary Librarianship
3. Middletown (Conn.)

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In the months since we began this round of strategic planning, our community, our country, and the world have experienced monumental disruption: a global pandemic, bitterly divided politics, and a national reckoning around racial justice. It is fascinating to look back to 2017, the year our previous strategic plan expired, and see how much the landscape has changed. I am writing this introduction at home, socially distanced from friends and colleagues. Our Board meetings take place virtually, with children, pets, and household appliances making appearances as we conduct the important business of the Russell Library from our kitchen tables. If you asked me a year ago whether I could have conceived or planned for this situation, you would have gotten a blank stare in response.

Times like these beg the question: “Why plan?” Current challenges hit us broadside, so can we predict the next sea change? We are living in what futurists call “VUCA” times: Volatile, Uncertain, Complex, and Ambiguous. Why plan when unforeseeable events may alter circumstances at a moment’s notice?

The first answer is, simply, that **we must plan for change**. To paraphrase the ancient Greek philosopher Heraclitus, “Change is the only constant.” We must ready ourselves to anticipate and respond to the rapidly evolving needs of our community in order to truly serve it. Russell Library demonstrated change-readiness by swiftly providing innovative and compassionate services in response to COVID-19: Curbside pickup, partnering with the Senior Center to conduct telephone wellness checks during shelter-in-place orders, and pivoting to all-virtual programming until public health conditions improve.

The purpose of a public library has always been to **strengthen the community** and **transform lives** using currently available technologies and resources -- be they books, multimedia, or virtual meeting platforms -- so that all people can fully participate in our democratic society. The reality, however, is that resources like budgets, staffing and facilities are finite. So, the second answer to “Why plan?” is because we are obligated to target our resources at the “must-haves.” We will therefore be directing the library’s efforts towards accomplishing our four major organizational goals: **(1) Strengthen Community**, **(2) Create a Safe and Welcoming Destination**, **(3) Foster a Thriving Economic Ecosystem**, and **(4) Promote Lifelong Love of Learning**.

This new strategic plan is laser-focused on turning outward: listening to, responding to, and collaborating meaningfully with our stakeholders so we can forever be “future-ready.” During the course of our planning process, we connected with hundreds of Middletown residents from all walks of life through focus groups, interviews, surveys and targeted meetings to gather input about our community vision and values, and how Russell Library can help make those aspirations a reality. We want you to know that this strategic planning document is not an end in and of itself, but rather a **road map for building a bright future** for our library and our community.

In 2025 we will celebrate our 150th year serving the Middletown community. We are now more committed than ever to make Russell Library the best it can be and, in so doing, empowering all of Middletown to “**grow, connect, strive, and thrive**.”

Eamonn Wisneski,
President, Russell Library Board of Trustees

farmers market outreach



Keep Connected phone calls



hand-written postcards to seniors



delivered while sheltering-in-place

library cards on the green



Rex on the borrowing desk



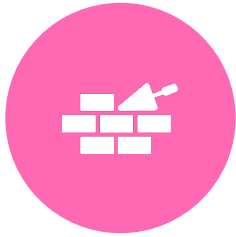


Mission: *We empower people to grow, connect, strive and thrive.*

Vision: *Everyone feels welcomed and included.*

Foundational Strategy: *Practice equity and inclusion, and listen to youth voices*

Strategic Goal 1: Strengthen Community



Objective 1.1: *Create space for intentional connections between people of different lived experiences.*

Objective 1.2: *Strengthen relationships between people in underserved communities and the Library.*

Objective 1.3: *Increase collaborative efforts with existing and emerging community groups.*

Strategic Goal 2: Create a Safe and Welcoming Destination



Objective 2.1: *Increase interaction with community groups within the library's physical and virtual spaces.*

Objective 2.2: *Increase community members' sense of welcome and satisfaction with staff interactions.*

Objective 2.3: *Increase financial support available for capital improvements to the library that create safe and welcoming spaces.*

Strategic Goal 3: Foster a Thriving Economic Ecosystem



Objective 3.1: *Increase users' confidence related to opportunities and resources that promote economic well being.*

Objective 3.2: *Increase partnerships and collaborations with community programs that support economic well being.*

Objective 3.3: *Increase stakeholder awareness in the economic value of libraries.*

Strategic Goal 4: Promote a Lifelong Love of Learning



Objective 4.1: *Increase user engagement with lifelong learning opportunities.*

Objective 4.2: *Engage early learners and their caregivers.*

Objective 4.3: *Strengthen hands-on and active learning opportunities for users of all ages that promote skill-building and sharing.*

Objective 4.4: *Strengthen partnerships with community organizations to identify and fill gaps in community learning.*

THE PLANNING PROCESS



Consultant Selection

A successful public library reflects the needs and vision of the community it serves. With this in mind, the Strategic Planning Committee of the Library Board of Trustees searched for a consultant with a strong knowledge of library planning, experience in library administration, and an eye toward future-readiness and innovation. After interviewing Maxine Bleiweis in the summer of 2019, the Committee was confident in selecting her firm, Maxine Bleiweis & Associates, to lead us through our planning process. Having retired from a decades-long and very successful career as a library director in Connecticut libraries of all types and sizes, Ms. Bleiweis transitioned to consulting; in just the past few years she has completed numerous strategic plans for public libraries throughout our state. Ms. Bleiweis is an internationally-renowned speaker and published writer on the topics of library innovation, customer service, recruitment and hiring. As a library director, she was in charge of several large library renovations and expansions, and she has a keen knowledge of their needs, potential and challenges.



Gathering Data and Information

In order to ensure that the Middletown community was at the center of the new strategic plan for the Russell Library, we sought input from a wide range of community members. In combination with a careful look at trends and forward-thinking approaches to library services, their feedback directly informed the resulting mission statement and strategic goals.



Board brainstorming session

In crafting the Russell Library's new strategic plan, we recorded the opinions of more than 600 Middletown residents. Residents participated in focus groups, took surveys, were interviewed, and attended Advisory Council meetings. Below is a brief description of the data collection process:

- Our consultants held eight focus groups between November 7 and December 12, 2019. These groups convened business owners, people in media and marketing, North End residents, the faith community, educators, the nonprofit/philanthropy sector, middle schoolers, and parents of young children. A total of 46 individuals participated. Our

consultants also conducted nine telephone interviews with “key community stakeholders” between December 13, 2019 and January 6, 2020.

- Our consultants collected responses to a survey, in online and paper form, from February 11 to March 8, 2020. 518 individuals completed the survey. After re-starting the strategic planning process in late July 2020, our consultants made a new online survey available from July 30 to August 13, 2020. 587 individuals completed this survey.
- We convened a Community Advisory Council, consisting of seventeen members of the Middletown community. This group met four times to learn about 21st-century libraries and strategic planning, hear the results of the community assessment, craft a community vision, and select the library’s service priorities.
- A Work Group composed of four Board Trustees, the library director, and three staff members, met four times to review the community needs assessment and library data, conduct a SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats) analysis, write goals and objectives based on selected service priorities, and discuss barriers to the success of the plan. Between meetings, we tasked Work Group members with homework assignments focused on understanding barriers, interpreting the cultural landscape, and developing empathy.
- Our consultants solicited input from Library staff via individual interviews and full-staff meetings, including one meeting focused exclusively on the development of action steps.
- Our consultants also reviewed materials including demographic and census data, City of Middletown board and commission minutes and reports, and news stories. Documents reviewed included DataHaven’s *Community Wellbeing Survey 2018*; The City of Middletown’s Plan of Conservation and Development 2020 (draft); NCCJ’s (National Convention for Community and Justice) Anti-Racism Initiative Report to the Middletown Human Relations Commission; and Middletown Public Schools’ strategic planning documents *Middletown 2021: Keys to Innovation and Equity*, and *Early Minds 2022: Pathways to Readiness and Equity*.

A Note on COVID-19 and Racial Justice



When the Russell Library embarked on the strategic planning process in November 2019, there was no way of knowing the societal upheaval that would be wrought by COVID-19. We held the first Community Advisory Council meeting on March 6, 2020, just one week before the pandemic forced a shutdown; it would not meet again -- and this time virtually -- until August 25, 2020. COVID-19 has changed the way the delivery of library services can be envisioned, as well as the role of the public library in the community.



Middletown had already begun to grapple publicly with issues of racial justice even before worldwide protests, triggered by the murder of George Floyd, began in the spring of 2020. As demonstrated by the community assessment, completed in late 2019, there was a sense from communities of color, and particularly among Black residents, of exclusion from power and influence in Middletown’s institutions. The Russell Library has for years hosted Racial Justice Book Discussion groups, and all staff have attended anti-racism training through the National Conference for Community and Justice (NCCJ), with more planned for the future and on an ongoing basis. The staff Equity and Inclusion Team meets monthly to discuss concrete ways to make the library a welcoming and fair environment for all visitors and staff.

When we designed our strategic planning process, we prioritized inclusion in focus groups and interviews. We intentionally sought historically marginalized voices, particularly BIPOC (Black, Indigenous and People of Color). We also convened a focus group specific to the North End, an area of Middletown



disproportionately inhabited by economically disadvantaged residents. However, our consultants and the strategic planning committee of the Board of Trustees did not examine how they could make the process itself “anti-racist,” nor did we make it explicit that we would identify and react to the ways in which strategic planning reinforces norms of “whiteness” (See *White Supremacy Culture* by Tema Okun). When the planning process re-started in August 2020, a member of the Work Group who is a Board Trustee raised this issue. While there was a consensus not to re-start the process, the group acknowledged the significance of that observation and committed to a more conscious awareness moving forward. Work Group members agreed that the product of their work should acknowledge Russell Library’s complicity – through action and inaction – in maintaining structures that privilege whiteness. This contributed to the development of our Foundational Strategy.



Community Assessment

As described earlier, we conducted the community assessment process between November 2019 and March 2020, primarily in the form of focus groups, interviews, surveys, and document review. The consequent report, which was delivered to the Board of Trustees on January 16, 2020, gives a detailed look at the results of the process. Much of what we learned was echoed in survey results.

Several **key themes** emerged, listed below. The fact these were concerns and gaps pre-COVID means that deeper thinking is required to reimagine Middletown given the current pandemic.

- Prioritizing the **focus on equity** that is taking place across and within systems in Middletown.
- The increasing importance of **engaging across lines of difference** in a societal landscape that fosters division. This includes a need to have ways to **create deep connections** with one another.
- The need for financially sustained, **physical spaces** in under-resourced neighborhoods that provide opportunities **for youth engagement**.
- A growth in **accountability** between community leaders and community members, including commitments to move partnerships and energy beyond planning and into implementation.



Advisory Council meeting



Defining a Community Vision

After hearing a presentation on the community assessment, the Community Advisory Council was tasked with developing a broad Vision for the City of Middletown that would also guide the priorities of the Russell Library for the next five years. The vision statement is as follows:

We want Middletown to be a place where all residents feel welcomed and included as part of the larger community.

But we face systemic barriers, like racism and socioeconomic divides, that have created mistrust and polarization.

If we want to reach our aspirations, we need to see value in the contributions of every resident, especially the leadership of our youth, and invest resources and energy in their collective vision.



The Library's Role

With the community vision for Middletown defined, the strategic planning process began to focus on the question "Where is the library in this?" How can Russell Library empower Middletown to achieve its collective aspirations?



Survey responses

Two community surveys, one from February/March 2020 and one from July/August 2020 were used to capture this information. An overwhelming majority of respondents think that the library is very important to the Middletown community: 91%; when combined with those who responded "somewhat important," the total reaches 99%.

Understanding how different segments of the population use the library is key to assuring that the needs of all residents are met. Survey questions asked about the use of and satisfaction with library services and programs. As part of the analysis process, responses were broken down by demographic groups, including age and adults with children at home.

From the February/March survey, we learned that hours of operation are perceived as a significant barrier for library users with children between 0 and 18. Younger library users (13-35) and library users with children between 0-6 were also least satisfied with the programs and events offered. These groups, particularly those with young children, are traditionally some of the heaviest library users, so it is important to gain a deeper sense of what library experiences they seek. In addition, over 50% of respondents said that "programs that are more relevant to my life" would encourage them to visit the library more. This was the second highest response after parking, which is a known barrier to library use.

The survey conducted in July/August 2020, during the pandemic, showed that caregivers of children ages 0-6 were significantly more likely to miss in-person events than any other group, while respondents ages 19-25 missed having a place to gather and relax. Unsurprisingly, respondents with children 0-6 were the most unsure about physically returning to the library and were most interested in home delivery as an option.



Hopes and opportunities

As part of the interviews conducted December 2019 and January 2020, interviewees were asked what, in their mind, would be the most important achievement of the Russell Library by 2025. The following hopes were expressed by multiple interviewees:

- To be a **convening space** for hard conversations, particularly to tackle Middletown's generational divide and issues of race and equity.
- To be a **center for youth services** and programming for out-of-school time, in collaboration with the Middletown Public Schools.
- To offer services that **acknowledge the needs of the most vulnerable** members of the community, both addressing the challenges faced by, and fostering understanding of, our vulnerable populations while providing a safe space for all.
- To serve as a **connector** in its physical location to downtown Middletown and also by going into spaces in the community where people gather.

Finally, while it is hard to predict how library services will need to shift, the Work Group conducted a Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats (SWOT) analysis in August 2020 as part of its work, and identified four key opportunities:

- **Advocate for a building** that meets community needs.
- **Engage more deeply** with and conduct outreach in the community.
- **Engage youth** in library initiatives and services.
- **Embrace change and a growth mindset.**

Mission Statement

With these opportunities, survey results, and inspiration from library leaders in mind, the following new mission statement emerged:

We empower people to grow, connect, strive, and thrive.



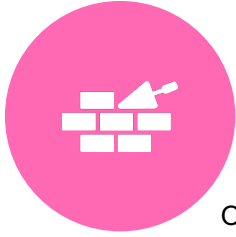
Planning for 2021-2025

After listening to the community, we developed four goals that will guide the Russell Library over the next five years. Objectives are associated with each goal in order to hold the library and its staff accountable to its commitment to serve the community. Before finalizing the Library's strategic goals for 2021-2025, however, the Advisory Council adopted a Foundational Strategy – one that would be woven through the planning, implementation, and evaluation of each goal:



Practice equity and inclusion, and listen to youth voices.

The experiences and input of community members who are underrepresented in formal leadership – which includes primarily youth and Black, Indigenous and other People of Color (BIPOC) – will inform how Russell Library delivers services.



Strategic Goal 1: Strengthen Community

The community will experience Middletown's public library as a launch pad for community engagement.

Objectives = How will we know we've achieved our goal?

- Library staff and initiatives support intentional engagements between people of different lived experiences.
- The library has a stronger presence in underserved communities.
- The library drives an increase in collaborative efforts with existing and emerging community groups.

Strategies = What might we do to accomplish that?

- Identify and develop relationships with key community leaders.
- Assess staff relationships with existing community groups, assign staff as liaisons and send them out into the community.
- Leverage and convene intergenerational opportunities based on shared interests.
- Co-host or co-sponsor community events that bring groups together on topics of shared interest.
- Work with volunteers to serve in the community.



Strategic Goal 2: Create a Safe and Welcoming Destination

The community will enter physical and virtual spaces that encourage them to learn, grow, and connect. They will be confident that all library staff see them as people of value and will feel that they are welcome to participate in all library experiences.

Objectives = How will we know we've achieved our goal?

- We see increased interaction with community groups inside the library's physical and virtual spaces.
- Community members tell us they feel more welcome and are satisfied with their interactions with staff.
- We have a concrete, well-funded plan for capital improvements to the library that will create safe and welcoming spaces for the community and staff.

Strategies = What might we do to accomplish that?

- Enliven the exterior of the library to welcome people into the building.
- Train and identify staff as able to serve people who need extra assistance.
- Examine staff and information placement (including signage and service points) in the building.
- Update website to address access and increase welcoming atmosphere.
- Create spaces for food and drink.
- Continue to engage community stakeholders, adjusting hours and programming offerings to meet their evolving needs.



Strategic Goal 3: Foster a Thriving Economic Ecosystem

The community will have opportunities and resources for skill-building, networking, co-creating, and incubating ideas that support economic wellbeing in collaborative physical and virtual spaces.

Objectives = How will we know we've achieved our goal?

- Community members are using the resources, services, and spaces the library has curated for economic well-being.
- Partnerships and collaborations with community groups and initiatives that support economic wellbeing are producing results.
- Decision makers in the community see the library as a key partner in supporting economic development and economic wellbeing in Middletown and the region.

Strategies = What might we do to accomplish that?

- Make space for pop-up entrepreneurial ventures.
- Serve as a hub for apprenticeships and internships between community and local businesses.
- Serve as a hub for collaborative relationships among nonprofits.



Strategic Goal 4: Promote a Lifelong Love of Learning

From birth through adulthood, the community will experience interactions that spark curiosity, foster critical thinking skills, and stimulate the imagination.

Objectives = How will we know we've achieved our goal?

- Early learners and their caregivers engage with our services and programs.
- Users of all ages participate in hands-on and active learning opportunities that promote skill-building and knowledge sharing.
- Community organizations and the library work together to identify and fill gaps in community learning.
- More Middletown community members use library services.

Strategies = What might we do to accomplish that?

- Identify hands-on learning opportunities for intergenerational learning.
- Connect parents and caregivers with community resources.
- Invite local organizations to participate in service planning and collection development.
- Make getting a library card and other processes "frictionless."
- Host programs and experiences outside of the library building.
- Institute collection and material development policies that encourage critical thought and reflect the diverse identity of our community.



CHALLENGES AND NEXT STEPS

We identified key challenges facing the Russell Library during the course of this planning process:



Physical Space

Well-designed library spaces are welcoming, inspiring, flexible, and safe for all who visit. The right building can serve as a magnet for community members and significantly enhance the local economy. Public libraries attract more people than any other community building on a regular basis and can serve as the “anchor store” of a community. They need to be situated close to public transportation, provide adequate parking, and have adjacent outside space to enhance and expand the activities of the institution.

The Russell Library was built during a time when ‘library’ meant something different than it does today. The unwelcoming facade lacks any hint to what is inside. Once inside the building, there is no welcoming sense of arrival due to an awkward physical setup. Sight lines -- which are required for safety, efficient staff deployment, and beckoning visitors to new spaces -- are blocked. Supportive environments of proper lighting, adequate electrical outlets, restroom design, air exchange, and effective or efficient heating and cooling are all severely lacking.

Today’s library should signal to its users that “We want you here.” “Stay and get comfortable with a cup of coffee.” “Join in and create something new.” “Meet up or be alone at any time during your stay.” “This is your space, you belong here.” With a comprehensive facilities plan, the Russell Library can achieve these goals.



historic features balanced with modern amenities

<https://lappe.com/project-item/keene-public-library/>



inviting interior

<https://wearelibrarypeople.com/project-gallery/carpets-need-not-be-linear/>



physical play space

<https://www.wikiwand.com/en/Dok1>



artful courtyard

https://www.moma.org/explore/inside_out/2010/05/27/a-room-with-a-view/



Public Perception

Every institution that has the word 'library' in its name faces the challenge of public perception. People know best what they learn first, and to most people the library is a place to get a book. Helping the community see the public library as a place that brings people together to learn, grow, and thrive without judgment requires a major shift in thinking. In addition, some populations have felt unwelcome at the Russell Library. To open minds requires a unified communications plan that includes all formats: written, spoken, social media, signs, color, sounds, and, most important, an agreement by all key parties about what the Russell Library is and what it stands for. Racial justice training has begun and needs to continue in order to be successful. The Library needs to reflect the Middletown community. Changing perceptions requires buy-in from key stakeholders and a constant effort to embed the new, expanded definition of 'library' without losing the loyalty of individuals who love what they know. This will require a team approach, diligence, and, if possible, guidance by a professional communications team.



Deployment of resources

The key resource in every library is its staff. They are the engines of activity, and they are the link between the library user and the resources available. They are the encouragers of learning. However, library organizations have traditionally been set up to handle materials, react to questions, and oversee activities from the sidelines.

Technology has enabled library users to accomplish the transactional activities such as checking items in and out, signing up for a library card, reserving a room, etc. That technology frees staff to work side-by-side with users in the building and out in the community.

To accomplish this shift in focus from "things" to "people," a new organizational chart allowing for nimble, adaptable staffing structures should be created. Current staff needs the opportunity to redefine their roles and be placed in flexible assignments that are commensurate with the objectives of the library. For example, in order to accomplish many of the goals of this plan, staff need to be outside the building interacting with community members. New hiring practices need to be in place to assure that staff have the right tools to take on flexible roles. Recruitment and selection should be geared to community representation. An individualized learning program should be set for each staff member that ties back to the goals, objectives, and activities outlined in this plan and the operating plan. Statistics and metrics that libraries monitor should reflect these new goals. Rather than count just the number of items checked in and out, or the number of questions answered, for example, add statistics on the number of interactions initiated by staff, names learned, interests learned, connections made, new ways to do things learned, etc.



External relationships

The creation of public libraries in New England reflects a hybrid situation. Some libraries are completely private, self-funded, and operate as their own entity. Some are completely public and operate under the local governmental structure. Many, such as the Russell Library, are quasi-municipal, receiving funds from the tax base and following guidelines and mandates from the city while independently setting policy, establishing procedures, and raising supplemental income. The benefit to setting policy is that the library can follow the principles and tenets set forth by the American Library Association which advocates for open access to information and service for all.

However, confusion as to who is responsible for what -- such as physical improvements, practices related to health and safety -- can arise and slow down progress. Ownership of buildings and property becomes complex when a library was established by a member of the community, leading to misperceptions about financial responsibility with regard to capital improvements.

These possible conflicts are often avoided with a general memorandum of understanding that assists those in charge now and in the future.



Next Steps

The purpose of this strategic plan is to serve as a road map to guide future decision- and policy-making for the Russell Library. To that end, the broad strategic goals, objectives, foundational strategy, vision and mission statements will now be incorporated into a more detailed five-year operating plan that will include teams, benchmarks, time frames, deliverables, and outcomes. The operating plan will be created by library staff and Trustees and will serve as a guide for accountability for all employees and Board members going forward. In fact, the principles and activities in our strategic plan and operating plan will be foundational to each employee's annual performance management process. Library Board communications will be structured according to the strategic plan, and the organization of Library staff will adjust to prioritize the goals and objectives established herein.

PLANNING TEAM MEMBERS



Key Community Stakeholders/Interviewees

Dr. Michael Conner, Superintendent of Middletown Public Schools
The Honorable Benjamin Florsheim, Mayor of Middletown
Izzi Greenberg, Executive Director, Middletown Coalition for Children
Matthew Lesser, State Senator, CT District 9
Larry McHugh, President, Middlesex County Chamber of Commerce
Precious Price, Director, Middletown Racial Justice Coalition
Joseph Samolis, Director of Planning, Conservation and Development, City of Middletown
Captain Gary Wallace, Middletown Police Department
Clifton Watson, Director, Jewett Center for Community Partnerships, Wesleyan University

Community Advisory Council

Tawana Bourne
Cynthia Clegg
Grady Faulkner
Reverend Debra Hopkins
Thomas Marano
Diana Martinez
Ailish McKenna and Marie McKenna
Dr. Steven Minkler
Precious Price
Michele Rulnick
Sara Schulenburg
Scarlett Tsahalís and Zack Tsahalís
Andrew White
Kevin Wilhelm

Work Group

Ramona Burkey
Taneisha Duggan
Shanay Fulton
Jennifer Hadley
Amy Slowik
Kimberly Spachman
Eamonn Wisneski
Ayanna Wright

Russell Library Board of Trustees

Eamonn Wisneski, President*
Shanay Fulton, Vice President*
Wendy Berlind, Secretary
Andrew Becker, Treasurer
Kellin Atherton
Taneisha Duggan*
Jennifer Hadley*
Gregory Harris
Sheila Jones
Stephen Nelson
Thomas Russell IV
Bryan Skowera
Dr. Alison Williams
Tisha Zawisky+

* Strategic Planning committee member

+ Strategic Planning committee member,
former board member

Consultants – Maxine Bleiweis & Associates

Maxine Bleiweis, Principal
Erica Byrne, Senior Associate



GENEROUS FINANCIAL SUPPORT PROVIDED BY



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CT State Library

Preserving the Past. Informing the Future.



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