Our Mission

The Montana Heritage Commission preserves and promotes Montana’s Territorial Capital history and resources through quality visitor experiences and preservation of state-owned buildings and artifacts.
Background and History

In 1997, the Montana Legislature purchased Virginia City and Nevada City from the Senator Charles Bovey family for $6.5 million.

In 2000, Reeder's Alley was gifted to the state by Darrell and Kathy Guston.

The Montana Heritage Commission takes pride in managing some of the most valuable and fascinating historic sites in Montana — Virginia City and Nevada City, plus Reeder's Alley and the Pioneer Cabin in Helena. Our goal is to preserve and promote these sites while encouraging Montanans and our children to become excited about the rich history of this great state. Virginia City was the site of our territorial capital from 1864 – 1875.
Strategic Highlights

We Preserve Montana’s Territorial History, for our Future

MHC operating budget FY 2020:

$1,343,708 (expenses) ÷ $74.6 Million (economic footprint) = 5,536% Return on Investment

Investing in history pays for Montana!

74.4 million economic footprint in Montana

Contributes to 1,226 jobs in Montana

Has stewardship over 276 heritage properties from the 1860s to 1875 time period

Over 500k tourists visit Virginia and Nevada City from Memorial Day to Labor Day each year, making it Montana’s #1 state-owned tourist destination

Reeder’s Alley is one of the few original structures from Helena’s territorial time period

Over 1 million Americana artifacts from the 1860 to 1960 time period
The Montana Heritage Commission has the following (4) strategic priorities:

1. **PRESERVE**: Establish a more effective system to ensure proper allocation of resources, preservation and maintenance prioritization, and cataloging of historic buildings and artifacts.

2. **PROMOTE**: Expand marketing and promotional efforts to strengthen image and identity of the historic resources managed by The Montana Heritage Commission.

3. **PARTNER**: Broaden local, state, and federal support and understanding of the important contribution heritage makes to Montana's economy, cultural identity and sense of historic community.

4. **PROTECT**: Implement programs to enhance inventory to be compliant with insurance guidelines, fire suppression services and safe practices for our tourists to avoid injury and exposure to litigation.
Implement approved preservation and maintenance projects based on available funding from revenue generated from tourists and funding from the Montana Legislature and Governor's Office.

Promote at key locations that have demonstrated higher traffic referrals such as National Parks, visitor centers and expand our collection of tourism data through e-commerce and trackable marketing venues.

Engage and educate state, local and non-profit partners to increase a sustainable funding resource for the long-term stabilization of state-owned resources and continue to enhance the visitor experience under our stewardship.

Improve and increase educational outreach programs, internships and interpretation programs to enhance the visitor experience and understanding of our history.

Seek all available funding support through grants, donations and legislative appropriations to further our preservation of state-owned buildings and resources; and increase our economic footprint, job creation, and business development.

Recruit and utilize volunteers/interns to give educational opportunities and to increase efficiency of operations with limited state funding.

Continue to educate and implement best practices from other historic and tourism sites on financials, marketing and enhancement of visitor experiences.

Improve ways to streamline inventory for artifacts and historic buildings to make it transparent to the public, visitors to historic site and compliance with insurance and protection of state-owned assets.
**HOW ARE WE FUNDED?**

**INCOME:**
The Montana Heritage Commission operates on tourist related income from bed tax allocations, a voluntary vehicle license plate fee, and MHC earned revenue generated from MHC property vacation rentals, hotels, and entrance to museum fees.

**FY 2020 Income Summary:**
- **Total Revenue/Allocation - $1,343,708**
  - $689,357 - MHC Earned Income
  - $400,000 - Statutorily Appropriated Bed Tax (has not changed for 23 years)
  - $264,426 - Voluntary Vehicle License Fees

**WHERE DOES THE MONEY GO?**

**EXPENSES: MHC Operations**
MHC Operations in Virginia City, Nevada City, and Reeder’s Alley Operating costs include all personal services, preservation, promotion, repairs, maintenance, insurance, administrative and fees.

**FY 2020 Total Operations Summary:**
- **Total - $1,343,708**
  - $558,095 - Preservation, Repairs, & Operational Expenditures
  - $497,425 - Personal Services (5 Full Time, 15 Seasonal Employees)
  - $123,458 - Insurance/Admin Fee*
  - $92,570 - Utilities
  - $72,160 - Advertising

*Administrative Fee to Department of Commerce is 14.22% of Personal Services
Preserve

Collections and Archaeology

“Virginia City has one of the largest Americana artifact collections in the United States.”

Our current Americana artifact inventory count is 1,317,281

We preserve, stabilize and track collections using museum practices and standards for historic sites, catalog the objects, establish a written and electronic record, research the objects and their significance to Virginia City and Nevada City and the rest of the collection. We educate the public through research and exhibition of these historic objects.

View our artifact collection online at: www.virginiacitymt.com

Gypsy Verbal Fortune Teller

U.S. Cartridge Box Plate as found in the Bonanza Inn

U.S. Cartridge Box Plate
In 2019 the Montana Heritage Commission restored this 1944 gas station and made it into a functioning gas station and Information Center for the many tourists that come visit each year.
Stay in Montana's History

The Montana Heritage Commission’s top priority was updating our accommodations so tourists and Montanans can come “Stay in Montana’s History”. Over the past 2-3 years we have upgraded facilities to have 64 available rooms in state owned-properties to accommodate weddings, social gatherings and family reunions.

Alder Gulch Accommodations
AlderGulchAccommodations.com

$149
Come and Stay & Play
One night stay in our historic properties
- Unlimited rides on the train
- Gold panning at the River of Gold
- Entry to the Living History Museum
- Discounts at participating businesses

The Fairweather Inn added 17 bathrooms along with a fire suppression system and furniture upgrades.

The Nevada City Cabins and Nevada City Hotel received updated bathrooms and furniture.
Preserve

Stay in Montana’s History

Heritage Accommodations
heritageaccommodations.com

Dr. Daems and Corbitt Residences were updated for vacation rental.

The Bonanza Inn bathrooms were remodeled, including electrical and plumbing upgrades as well as new furniture in the rooms.

Harding Residence was updated for vacation rental.

Governor Thomas Francis Meagher Cabin was updated for vacation rental.
Preserve & Promote

Discovery-Ellingsen Park

In 2019-2020 the Montana Heritage Commission completed Discovery-Ellingson Park that is dedicated to the men who discovered Virginia City and the man who dedicated his life to preserving it.

All revenue generated goes into future preservation projects in Virginia and Nevada City, MT.

This park was designed for Social Gatherings, Music Festivals and Weddings.
The Montana Heritage Commission’s marketing campaign has a diverse campaign that encompasses Social Media and E-Commerce, Print Ad, TV, Radio and affordable packages such as the Vigilante Stay and Play pass. Through collaborate efforts with the Town of Virginia City and business owners, Virginia and Nevada City are Montana’s number one state-owned tourist destination with over 500,000 tourists coming to visit each year.
Preservation for Seasonal Housing

The Montana Heritage Commission completed much needed Seasonal Housing upgrades with two new bath houses and maintenance on 34 units located at Daylight Village. These units help provide housing for the many businesses that operate during Memorial Day to Labor Day each year. The majority of this funding came from HB 652.
Promote

Business Development

The Montana Heritage Commission has business relationships with over 35 private businesses that rent from state-owned buildings.
Vigilante Family or Group Pass is good for 5 people for 2 days that include:

- Train rides on the Alder Gulch Short Line RR
- Gold panning at the River of Gold
- Entrance into the Living History Museum

The Montana Heritage Commission has developed the Vigilante family pass so Montana families and tourists can experience Montana’s History in an affordable way, for $99.”
Promote Films Shot in VC/NC

- Little Big Man - 1970
- Missouri Breaks - 1975
- Thousand Pieces of Gold - 1989
- Unsolved Mysteries, “Plummer’s Gold” - 1989
- Return to Lonesome Dove - 1993
- The Patriot - 1997
- History’s Mysteries: The Vigilantes - 1999
- Bob Viva’s Restore America - 1999
- Ligia - 2001
- Enemy of the People - 2001
- Frontier House - 2001
- A Moment of Peace - 2002
- Taking Chance - 2009
- History Channel Ghost Stories Series - 2009
- American Experience Series, “Custer’s Last Stand” - 2011
- La Route Du Western - 2011
- Absaroka: Sins - 2013
- Any Bullet Will Do - 2015
- Jack Slade - 2015
- BBC Production, “Mountains” - 2016
- Ride by Night - 2016
- Ballad of Lefty Brown - 2017
- C.M. Russell and the American West - 2017
- Discovery Channel - Expedition Uknown - 2018

Virginia City wins Film Friendly Community of the Year
Promote

Famous English Photographer
David Yarrow and Animals of Montana

Featured below is Cindy Crawford “America’s Supermodel”,
Olivia Culpo - Miss Universe and Kate Bock Sports Illustrated Model of the Year

A portion of proceeds from the David Yarrow Book went to preservation of buildings located in Virginia City and Nevada City, Montana.
Promote

Education Outreach and Living History Interpretation

The Montana Heritage Commission Living History program helps tourists understand what it was like to live in the 1860’s through interactive interpretive experiences.

MHC offers a diverse range of educational programs and reaches out to Montana schools K-12. School groups from across Montana visit Reeder’s Alley and enjoy guided tours in Virginia City and Nevada City.

Approximately 5,000 Montana students come each year for school tours.

The Chicago Times has ranked the Montana Heritage Commission Living History program in Virginia and Nevada City #4 in the nation as a 'Top Living History Destination.'
The Montana Heritage Commission is active in protecting the state's heritage and resources through insurance programs and a strong supporter of the local Fire Departments.

The Montana Heritage Commission was able to upgrade the Nevada City fire pump that services fire protection of restaurants, hotels, cabins and museums located on state property.

It remains the top priority to have fire suppression services in all restaurants, vacation rentals and hotels.

The MHC purchased the state a fire truck to be on site at the NC Museum/NC Hotels and Cabins.

In FY 2020 the Montana Heritage Commission matches fundraising efforts for the Fire Department with this year giving a total $13,200.00

MHC pays $47,037 annually to insure (Risk Management) its building structures and artifacts. (Star) The estimated value of state owned resources in 2020 is $47.98 Million.
The Montana Heritage Commission (MHC) is a small state agency and partnerships are critical for us to leverage funding and staff resources. Partnerships help us gather expertise and skills to achieve our goals.

Some of the partners we have worked with over the past two years include:

- AmeriCorps (NCCC)
- Ancient Order of the Hibernians (Butte/Helena)
- Butte Silver Bow Public Archives
- Elderhostel (Dillon)
- Friends of the Cumbes Toltec Railroad
- Madison County
- Mai Wah Society
- Montana Conservation Corps
- Montana Historical Society
- Montana History Foundation
- Montana Preservation Alliance
- Montana State University - Project Archeology
- MT Fish, Wildlife and Parks
- MT Ghost Town Society
- National Trust for Historic Preservation
- Ruby Valley Conservation District
- Town of Virginia City
- Trout Unlimited
- University of Montana
- US Forest Service
- Virginia City Area Chamber of Commerce
- Virginia City Preservation Alliance
- Volunteers for the MT Heritage Commission
- Washington State University
- Youth Challenge (Dillon)
MHC Commissioners and Staff

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22 | Biennial Report | Montana Heritage Preservation and Development Commission (MHC)
John D. Ellingsen
Emeritus Curator for the Montana Heritage Commission | 1947-2020

The Montana Heritage Commission pays tribute to the man who dedicated much of his life to preserving Virginia City and Nevada City. John D. Ellingsen was a keeper of the stories of Montana’s past, which he shared liberally. John was a man of great integrity and was kind and thoughtful. He will be greatly missed, but his legacy will live on. John was one of the leading individuals at the Legislature in Helena to lobby the state to purchase the Bovey properties in Virginia and Nevada Cities, that served as Montana’s Territorial Capital from 1864-1875.

In 2019 the Montana Heritage Commission dedicated “Discovery-Ellingsen Park” in recognition to the men who discovered Virginia City and the man who dedicated his life to preserving it.

JDE & Horn Machine- Bale c. 1959. Young John Ellingsen’s fascination with music machines started early. John is next to the Wurlitzer Band Organ style 150, aka the Obnoxious Horn Machine, which was in the Bale of Hay Saloon, c. 1959. Photo Courtesy of John Ellingsen

Town sign with the logo that John Ellingsen designed

John Ellingsen at Ellingsen-Discovery Park
Dedication June 2019
74.4 million economic footprint in Montana
Contributes to 1,226 jobs in Montana

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Reeder's Alley is one of the few original structures from Helena's territorial time period. Reeder's Alley is considered to be one of the largest historic sites in Montana Virginia City & Nevada City.

Virginia City started the Montana Vigilantes movement. Virginia City was Montana's Territorial Capital from 1864 to 1875.

Virginia City was the largest placer gold strike in the United States and helped fund the Union Army.

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This report is required per MCA 22-3-1003 (12).

Sources: American Alliance of Museums, Rocky Mountain Economic Improvement District & Circa Analytics

montanaheritagecommission.mt.gov | virginiacity.com | reedersalley.com

Montana Heritage Commission
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