



You Gotta Have Friends



A snapshot of NYS park and historic site Friends groups in 2016

Friends groups are poised and ready to make an even greater contribution to the renaissance of the New York State park system.

INTRODUCTION

Non-profit Friends organizations have been supporting New York's state parks and historic sites for nearly a century. Yet recent years have seen a dramatic acceleration in the number, effort, activities and impact of these dedicated groups.

Under the leadership of Governor Cuomo, the state is making a historic multi-year commitment of \$900 million in private and public funding for state parks through 2020. Continuing to build and strengthen Friends organizations—and their partnership with the Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation (OPRHP)—will provide a significant complement to New York State's ongoing revitalization of its iconic park system and provide more opportunities for the 65 million annual park and historic site visitors to engage with and appreciate our natural, cultural and historical treasures.

A NATIONAL LEADER IN PARKS

New York State has the oldest park system in the nation. From the 1885 establishment of America's first state park, Niagara Falls, to the protection of Long Island's beaches in the twentieth century, New York has been a national leader in conserving its diverse and unique natural and cultural heritage.

Yet, the existence of parks is not a given—as New Yorkers learned in 2010, when at the height of the Great Recession, the state threatened to close over one-third of the state park system. Among the more than 80 parks and sites threatened with full or partial closure were the spectacular Chimney Bluffs on the shores of Lake Ontario, popular Thacher Park on the Helderberg escarpment, the Hudson Valley site where George Washington spent the last winter of the Revolutionary War, and the majestic sands of Orient Beach on Long Island.

Why did these parks and historic sites remain open? A big part of the answer is that Friends groups—some of them longstanding, some of them created in the heat of crisis—rose up and led the fight to prevent the closure of treasured public spaces. They rallied, protested, spread the word on social media, and made it clear to their elected officials that parks were sacrosanct to New Yorkers.



HELP WHERE IT'S NEEDED MOST

Friends groups have been a demonstrably effective way to support the New York State park system for almost 100 years, with the first Friends group, Old Fort Niagara Association, founded in 1927. Many Friends groups were created from the 1970s through the 1990s, but more than one-third have been established in just the past 15 years. Currently there are 90 state park and historic site Friends groups in New York State.

Today these groups are poised and ready to make an even greater contribution to the renaissance of the New York State park system. This report looks at their current resources—and their potential.

FRIENDS GROUPS IN 2016: A SNAPSHOT

In the winter of 2015-2016, Parks & Trails New York (PTNY) conducted a census of state park and historic site Friends groups in the state, with 53 of the 90 groups responding. The census elicited mainly quantitative data, but respondents were also asked what resources, such as fundraising tools and administrative support, they needed most to succeed.

Friends groups often accomplish Herculean tasks on shoestring budgets. Although a few organizations are large and well-funded, more than half of respondents have budgets of \$10,000 or less. What they lack in funds, they make up for in time, creativity, hard work and commitment.

In addition to advocating for their parks and historic sites, Friends groups often supplement park staff with programmatic and maintenance tasks. They fill in as docents and lead nature walks, they pick up trash and plant trees, they raise funds for the construction of new facilities, and they work with park and site management to think creatively about how to expand programs and public services.

SIGNIFICANT IMPACT

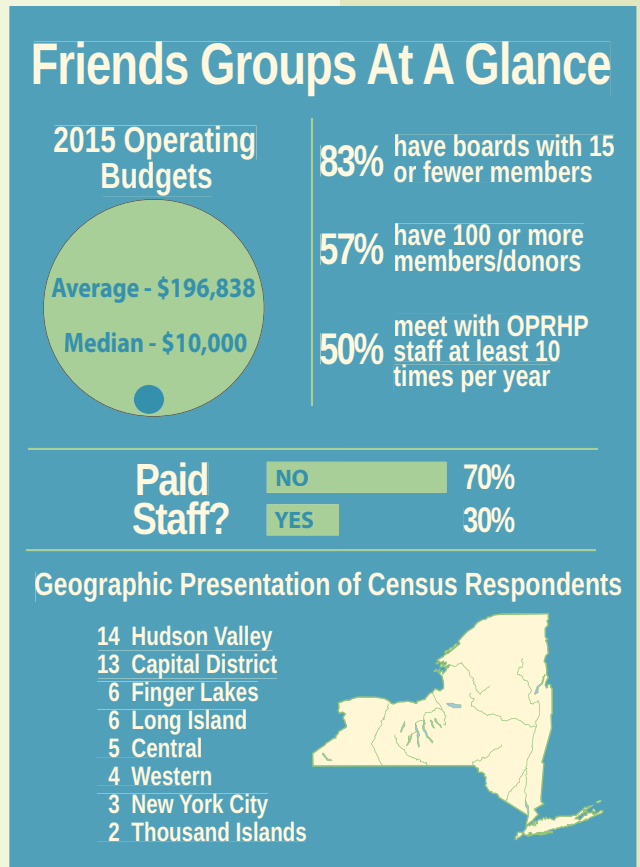
According to our survey, Friends groups raised nearly \$9 million in 2015. But their contribution goes well beyond money.

Friends group volunteers donate more than 10,000 hours of work in preserving and enhancing our state parks and historic sites every year. In many cases, individual volunteers are contributing hundreds of hours of service each year, from guiding nature walks and leading tours to maintaining trails. In 2015, Friends groups held more than 700 events and programs at their parks and historic sites that were enjoyed by nearly 300,000 people.

DEDICATED VOLUNTEERS

While about one-third of Friends groups have paid staff, with positions ranging from part-time gardeners and tour guides to full-time executive directors managing multiple employees, the majority have no paid staff. The important work they perform is undertaken completely by volunteers.

Friends staff and volunteers are more important than ever given the flat operating budget of OPRHP over the past decade, particularly in light of a surge in parks visitation in recent years, up to 65 million in 2015. In addition to on-the-ground volunteers, most Friends groups have boards of directors who volunteer their time and expertise to help direct the organization and keep it on mission.



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COMMITTED FUNDRAISERS

Of the 52% of respondents that operate with annual budgets of \$10,000 or less, more than half raise additional funds for their parks and historic sites, an impressive feat given their limited capacity and the high costs associated with fundraising efforts.

Following are aggregate sources of revenue for those Friends groups reporting individual operating budgets of less than \$10,000 per year:

- ▶ \$36,000 from member dues
 - ▶ \$21,000 from special events
 - ▶ \$2,000 from gift shop sales
 - ▶ \$460,000 from government grants
 - ▶ \$120,000 from private donors and foundation grants
 - ▶ \$11,000 from board member contributions
 - ▶ \$5,000 donated from businesses
 - ▶ \$11,000 from general fundraising
- \$718,000 TOTAL**



Most of the funds raised go towards capital improvements, programs, and events, with many groups also providing significant operations support to OPRHP and producing printed materials (newsletters and other publications). Whether for capital projects, operations support, events, or publications, the significant funds raised by Friends groups enhance the capacity of OPRHP to engage the public and make much-needed improvements to state park infrastructure.

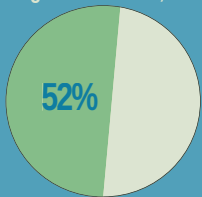
COMMUNITY AMBASSADORS

Friends groups use a variety of tools to communicate about programs, events, and fundraising efforts. More than three-quarters (81%) have a website and a Facebook page, and many use additional social media outlets such as Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube. Most groups produce a newsletter, whether it's printed and mailed or sent electronically.

Friends groups provide a cohesive voice of grassroots support for state parks and historic sites. Their advocacy efforts paid off during the Great Recession, and the lessons learned will not soon be forgotten. Many Friends groups have developed relationships with their local legislators, inviting them to events and paying legislative visits during the budget season. Many Friends groups also participate in an annual Park Advocacy Day in Albany, organized by PTNY and the Open Space Institute's Alliance for New York State Parks program.

Friends Groups Fast Facts

Friends Groups with Operating Budgets under \$10,000



730 Events and Programs

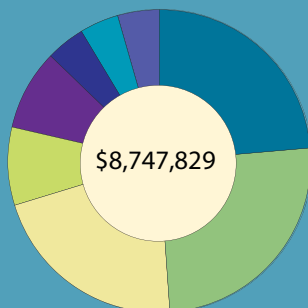


290,152 People Attending



Money Raised in 2015

- Special Events
- Government Grants
- Other
- Gift Shop Sales
- Foundation/Private Donors
- Member Dues
- Endowments
- Fundraising



FEATURED FRIEND

FRIENDS OF LETCHWORTH STATE PARK

The story of the Friends of Letchworth State Park demonstrates how small successes can help propel an organization forward.

In 2013, the Friends were awarded a modest \$2,550 Growing the Grassroots grant from PTNY. That grant made a major difference in the visibility and energy of the group. The Friends used the funds and in-kind donations to undertake several projects, which resulted in a dramatic

increase in memberships, donations, website hits, Facebook members, and additional grants.

In the year following the initial grant, the group's membership grew by 30% and donations went from \$2,700 to more than \$18,000. The Friends also credit PTNY's grant for helping them receive a \$3,000 Every Day Capacity Building Grant from the National Environmental Education Foundation and a \$3,000 state grant through the Finger Lakes Regional Economic Development Council (REDC) for interpretive trail signs. They received a second REDC grant the following year for \$16,200 to repair and repaint the two standing Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) Chimneys in the park. This construction is part of a larger effort to preserve and increase public awareness of the CCC legacy in Letchworth.

The group raised the bar even higher when it set out to raise \$25,000 for a butterfly garden at the new state-of-the-art Humphrey Nature Center at Letchworth. Using a variety of fundraising strategies, the Friends not only met that goal, they exceeded it. Their efforts included securing a matching donation of \$12,500 from a local bank.

Most recently, the Friends were awarded \$20,980 through the NYS Park and Trail Partnership Program for materials and training that will augment volunteer recruitment and engagement to enable the group to better steward the park and its trails.



WHAT IS A FRIENDS GROUP?

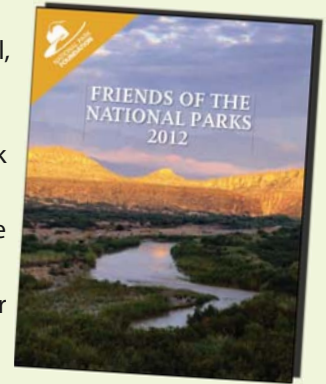
A Friends group is a group of individuals who work to support, steward, and promote a park or historic site, or multiple sites. They come in all shapes and sizes. The smallest are all-volunteer organizations, some of which are only loosely organized; others are registered non-profit organizations with regular meetings and bylaws. The largest Friends groups are conservancies and foundations capable of raising large sums of money for the care of their parks and historic sites.

Challenges faced by Friends groups in other states are similar to those faced by New York's groups, but one major way in which New York stands out is the bipartisan support from state leaders.

FRIENDS FAR AND WIDE

Park and historic site supporters across the nation have formed Friends groups. The advocacy, fundraising and programmatic abilities of Friends groups might vary from group to group or even state to state, but they all share the mission of protecting and enhancing natural, cultural and historical resources and ensuring public access.

The 2012 Friends of National Parks report by the National Park Foundation highlights the governance and programmatic strategies of Friends groups of national parks. It found that the top three activities performed by Friends groups were fundraising, major events, and programmatic management. Similar to the findings of the PTNY census, the greatest needs of the national parks Friends groups are support with fundraising, membership, and communications and marketing.



Across the country, the number of Friends groups supporting state parks is on the rise as state budget support for park and site operations and capital improvements has shrunk. Most Friends groups in states like Florida, Pennsylvania and California are run by dedicated volunteer boards with limited financial resources. According to a study conducted by the California State Parks Foundation, 44% of organizations in that state have annual gross incomes of \$50,000 or less yet face increasing pressure to help the state generate greater revenue and supplement financial support for the park system.

As government support continues to shrink and the private sector is asked to do more and help fill some of the gaps, non-profit organizations throughout the U.S. will face similar pressures to increase their financial resources to step up and meet these needs.

Although the challenges faced by Friends groups in other states are similar to those identified by New York's Friends groups, one major way in which New York stands out is the bipartisan support from state leaders. States such as Florida struggle to convince state leaders of the benefits of volunteers or the value that they bring to the park system. In this area, New York is fortunate to have strong support from the Governor's office and legislative leaders on both sides of the aisle as demonstrated by the creation of the innovative NYS Park and Trail Partnership Program, a \$500,000 capacity-building grant program for state park and historic Friends groups funded through the NYS Environmental Protection Fund.



FEATURED FRIEND

THE CAUMSETT FOUNDATION

The Caumsett Foundation has worked closely with OPRHP since its founding in 1997 toward a common mission: to support and enhance Caumsett State Historic Park Preserve on Long Island's North Shore as a unique and historic environment.

Over the past 15 years, the Foundation has restored the exteriors of the most important historic buildings on the former Gold Coast estate, securing more than \$2.5 million in grant funds alone. For example, the historic Dairy Barn complex (pictured), which was almost beyond repair, was meticulously restored. The exterior of Marshall Field's polo barn has been brought back to its former elegance, including restored windows and iron work.

Recognizing, however, that without funding for maintenance, the buildings could fall into disrepair again, the Foundation is now focused on a plan for sustainable, ongoing funding.

The Foundation is currently working to adapt the Hay Barn and several attached buildings as a flexible space for events, both educational events sponsored by the Foundation and other events such as music and theatrical performances, lectures, community events and social events such as wedding receptions and fundraising galas. Once complete, the event space will not only enhance the public's enjoyment of the park and enable the Foundation to offer many more programs, it will also provide a new source of revenue for the Foundation. Income generated from the event space will be put toward a maintenance fund to maintain the extensive restoration work on the park's historic buildings.



Friends volunteers annually donate more than 10,000 hours of work preserving and enhancing our state parks and historic sites.

“ Our state parks and historic sites are thriving thanks in no small part to the dedication and hard work of Friends groups. Friends, our Regional Park Commissions, agency staff, elected officials, donors and other partners are all integral to the revitalization of our beloved” park system.

- Lucy Rockefeller Waletzky,
Chair, NYS Council of Parks, Recreation and



DREAMING BIG

Aware of these national trends, Friends groups in New York report wanting to do even more to support their parks and historic sites. They dream of additional nature-related and educational programs, historical tours led by docents, exciting special events, and new museums and education centers.

When asked to identify the greatest obstacles to accomplishing these goals and increasing their effectiveness and productivity, Friends groups cite the need to expand and strengthen their membership, more fully engage their boards and volunteers, and enhance their expertise. Many groups feel they have reached a point where some staffing is needed. Half of the respondents cite a desire for increased communications among Friends groups across the state. These organizations also indicate that webinars, sample documents, and a statewide conference of Friends groups would be the most useful types of support to them.

UNLOCKING THE POTENTIAL: RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the results of the census, and building on the tremendous successes and contributions of Friends groups to-date, there is much that can be done to unlock the potential of Friends organizations to support and strengthen New York’s state park system.

1. PROVIDE FINANCIAL RESOURCES TO BUILD THE CAPACITY OF FRIENDS GROUPS

Friends groups do a lot with so little. For several years, PTNY operated the Growing the Grassroots grant program, supported by the philanthropist Meryll H. Tisch, providing organizations with grants of up to \$4,000 focused on capacity-building projects. PTNY saw grantees grow by leaps and bounds with such small sums of money and began thinking of ways to provide them with more significant funding to truly transform their organizations, leading to even greater stewardship of our state’s outdoor resources.

In 2015, the final state budget included \$500,000 within the Environmental Protection Fund for a new grant program for Friends groups. The Park and Trail Partnership Program, administered by PTNY in partnership with OPRHP, provides capacity-building grants to state park and historic site Friends groups.

The first 20 grantees were announced in March 2016, and a second round of funding was provided in the state’s FY2016-2017 Environmental Protection Fund appropriation. Continuing to provide critical funding for capacity-building will reap large benefits, enabling groups to leverage more private and federal funding, marshal more volunteer power, and augment the state’s historic investment in parks through the Governor’s Parks 2020 initiative.

2. PROVIDE OPPORTUNITIES FOR NETWORKING AND INFORMATION-SHARING AMONG FRIENDS GROUPS

PTNY, in collaboration with OPRHP, Regional Park Commissions, and our partner, the Alliance for New York State Parks, hosted a series of five Regional Friends Gatherings across the state in the fall of 2015 and 2016. Continuing to provide opportunities for

FEATURED FRIEND

FRIENDS OF THE OLD CROTON AQUEDUCT

Visitors have been hiking and biking the Hudson Valley's Old Croton Aqueduct trail for almost 50 years. Yet, this State Historic Park has never had a visitor center to provide information and visitor services for the park's patrons.

The Friends of the Old Croton Aqueduct have been working for nearly 15 years to create a new Visitor and Education Center. The organization led the effort to renovate the 1840s Keeper's House, which

sits in downtown Dobbs Ferry overlooking the Hudson River. The plan is to open a Visitor and Education Center within the house, which is part of the Old Croton Aqueduct National Historic Landmark designation.

Raising the funds for the rehabilitation of the Keeper's House has been a daunting task, with the lowest bid coming in at \$1.2 million. To meet the challenge, the Friends have sought and obtained funds from private individuals, corporations, and governmental entities. They have also received capacity-building grants through PTNY's Growing the Grassroots and Park and Trail Partnership Programs.

In 2016, the Friends received \$47,475 through the Park and Trail Partnership Program for the creation and installation of seven storytelling exhibits in the new Visitor and Education Center. The interpretive materials will emphasize the advanced engineering of the Aqueduct and its importance to New York City's growth.

The Friends of the Old Croton Aqueduct have masterfully shepherded this project through all stages and provided significant monetary support. Thanks to the Friends, this State Historic Park will finally have an active focal point, a center where the public can visit to learn about the park's rich history.



Mavis Cain, President, Friends of the Old Croton Aqueduct

Friends groups dream of additional nature-related and educational programs, historical tours led by docents, exciting special events, new museums and education centers, and more.

FRIENDS GROUPS PLUG INTO I LOVE MY PARK DAY



For the past five years, tens of thousands of New Yorkers have pitched in at their favorite state park or historic site on the first Saturday of May. I Love My Park Day is an important event at which Friends groups, working collaboratively with park staff, provide community members the opportunity to give back, whether it's planting trees, removing invasive species, marking trails, building benches, or cleaning up litter. 2016 was the biggest year yet for I Love My Park Day, with 110 participating parks and historic sites and 7,500 volunteers contributing more than 18,000 volunteer hours. Friends groups view I Love My Park Day as an important outreach tool to gain new members and volunteers.

“Our Friends groups go above and beyond to make our park system a success. We rely on their energy, talents and commitment to improve and connect people to parks, historic sites and trails across New York.”

- Rose Harvey,
Commissioner,
NYS Office of Parks,
Recreation and
Historic
Preservation

Friends groups to connect with each other, whether in-person or online, will enable these organizations to share best practices and learn from each other's successes and challenges.

3. PROVIDE OPPORTUNITIES FOR DEVELOPING RESOURCES AND TRAINING

As part of the census, Friends groups were asked questions related to non-profit governance and management. Based on the results, there are several areas where additional resources and training on non-profit best practices would be beneficial as part of any efforts to strengthen these organizations.

Board committees—The work of the board is generally not accomplished through standing committees. 62.7% of Friends groups report having an executive committee and 56.9% have a fundraising, development or membership committee. Less than half have a nominating committee, and only 13.7% have a governance committee. Nearly 10% have no active committees.

Insurance—32.1% of organizations do not carry insurance of any kind. Of the nearly 68% that do, only 44.1% carry Directors' and Officers' (D&O) insurance, which is important for protecting board members who have legal and fiduciary responsibility for the organization.

Planning—47.1% of responding organizations do not have a current strategic plan to identify goals and strategies for achieving the group's mission. 51% do not have a current fundraising or development plan.

Software—43% of organizations do not use software of any kind to track volunteers, members or donors. Of those that do, many use a spreadsheet or other non-specialized tool.

Annual Report—51% of groups do not produce an annual report highlighting their accomplishments and providing financial information.

Board Commitment—73.6% of groups do not require a minimum financial or other commitment from board or steering committee members. As these organizations seek more private support, it will be important to demonstrate board financial commitment to potential funders.

FEATURED FRIEND

FRIENDS OF MOREAU LAKE STATE PARK

The Friends of Moreau Lake State Park, 100% volunteer-driven, offer a wide variety of workshops, nature walks, and other events for visitors and community members. In a given week during the summer volunteers host guided hikes, story time for kids, and kayak trips. During the winter, weekly events include cross-country skiing, bald eagle watches, and snowshoeing clinics. New inclusive nature classes are designed for children with developmental disabilities and on the autism spectrum. The Friends group also supplements the park's docent program by filling in at the Nature Center while the naturalist gives tours.



When staff at Moreau Lake were faced with a recurring problem of torn down trail markers, they turned to the Friends for help. The result was a successful program and an exciting new discovery.

The program involves Friends members being assigned a trail to steward, which they agree to hike once per month. There are currently 12 trail stewards.

The program recently led to a major discovery at the park. While on one of her monthly hikes, a Friends member discovered the whorled Mountain-mint (*Pycnanthemum verticillatum* var. *verticillatum*), an endangered plant and one of only seven populations found in all of New York State.

Friends groups provide a cohesive voice of grassroots support for state parks and historic sites.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Parks & Trails New York is New York's leading statewide advocate for parks and trails, dedicated since 1985 to improving our health, economy, and quality of life through the use and enjoyment of green space.