This year marks the 135th anniversary of the History Center, the oldest cultural organization in Western Pennsylvania. Pittsburgh’s first historical society burned in the Great Fire of 1845, but its founders did not give up. Today’s History Center traces its roots back to 1879 with the formation of a group called the “Old Residents of Pittsburgh and Western Pennsylvania,” which later became the Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania. At first, the organization preserved archival materials and objects related to the French & Indian War and later brought the region’s history to the public by organizing major events such as Pittsburgh’s 150th anniversary in 1908 and the region’s bicentennial celebration in 1958.

In 1996, the History Center moved from Bigelow Boulevard in Oakland to its current home in the Strip District in the former Chautauqua Ice Company building. Four years later, the Smithsonian Institution named the History Center an affiliate museum, which allowed unprecedented access to millions of Smithsonian collections and award-winning exhibitions. With the opening of our Smithsonian wing in 2004, the History Center became the largest history museum in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. The five-story wing includes the 20,000-square-foot Western Pennsylvania Sports Museum; the Mueller Education Center for large-scale educational events and rentals; the Falk Collections Center, which features our region’s ethnic and corporate history; and the first-floor McGuinn Gallery for travelling exhibitions.

In the decade since the opening of the Smithsonian wing, the History Center has nearly doubled its annual attendance, reaching as many as 300,000 visitors a year. Along the way, museum exhibitions (including First Ladies, Vatican Splendors, 1968: The Year That Rocked America, Pennsylvania’s Civil War, and our upcoming exhibition, Pittsburgh’s Lost Steamboat: Treasures of the Arabia) and a variety of educational programs, publications, and outreach activities have earned accolades across the nation.

The History Center’s museum system includes the Western Pennsylvania Sports Museum, a museum-within-a-museum inside the History Center; the Fort Pitt Museum, located in historic Point State Park; and Meadowcroft Rockshelter and Historic Village, the oldest site of human habitation in North America and a National Historic Landmark located in Avella, Washington County, Pa.

Later this spring, the History Center will continue its growth with the opening of the new Museum Conservation Center, located just behind the museum in the Dietrich Building at 1221 Penn Avenue. The nine-story, 55,000-square-foot LEED Certified Green Building will allow the museum’s artifacts to be stored under one roof with Smithsonian-quality security, temperature, and humidity controls throughout. On the first floor, the Museum Conservation Center will provide the public with expert services and advice on how to preserve family collections of artwork, textiles, archival materials, furniture, and much more.

Looking toward the next 135 years, the History Center will continue to engage and inspire a large and diverse audience with links to the past, understanding in the present, and guidance for the future. We thank our members and loyal donors for your continued support of the History Center – past, present, and future.