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March 1, 2009

The B&O Railroad Museum: Getting Back on Track (A)

At 11:30 p.m. on Sunday, February 16, 2003, Courtney Wilson, director of the B&O Railroad Museum, was awakened by an urgent phone call from Steven Johnson, the museum's director of facilities, safety and security. Johnson informed Wilson that two sections of the roof of the museum's historic Roundhouse had collapsed, damaging and destroying many irreplaceable artifacts in the collection. The museum was only six months away from launching one of its largest endeavors to date – the *Fair of the Iron Horse*, an event planned to celebrate the 175th anniversary of American railroading – which was to be a turning point for the long-staid museum.

By the following morning, half of the roof had collapsed. Wilson had to quickly shift from a building and promotions mode, working towards the long-term transformation of the museum, to disaster recovery mode. He feared that all the organizational progress he had accomplished was now at risk. What steps should he take to minimize the organizational damage and to salvage something upon which to build the future of the museum?

The Establishment of the B&O Railroad Museum

The B&O Railroad Museum was established as part of the Baltimore and Ohio (B&O) Railroad, which was founded in 1829 as the first railroad in the United States. From early in its history, the B&O Railroad had collected cars, locomotives, and railroad artifacts. Before the establishment of a permanent collection, the artifacts were shown at national and local fairs. While popular at first, as the decades passed and railroading became less prominent in American culture, the B&O's collection was neglected. The B&O Railroad also went through a series of mergers as the industry consolidated – first with the Chesapeake & Ohio Railroad, then with the Chessie System Railroads, and finally with CSX.

In 1990, CSX decided that it was in the freight, not the museum, business. It spun off the railroad collection as a private, non-profit, 501(c)(3) museum, gifting the land, the collection, and a five-million-dollar endowment. The museum was established on the former site of the B&O railroad's headquarters in Baltimore, MD (see **Exhibit 1**).

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