The Mount Airy Museum of Regional History was honored at the North Carolina Museum Council's annual conference with the Award of Excellence for the "Geocaching for History" program. Executive Director of the Mount Airy Museum of Regional History Matt Edwards said the award was a "reinforcement of the belief that museums should be active and vibrant community partners." "That is something we have really been working toward at the museum, and this project is a great example," Edwards added. "The museum staff, Amy Snyder in particular, have been working very hard on this project over the course of the last 18 months or so. For their hard work and our institution's efforts to be recognized by a group of peers is a tremendous honor, and we hope it speaks well of the work we are doing and the work we want to continue to do in moving forward."

The "Geocaching for History" was launched last year when the museum partnered with Mount Airy Parks and Recreation and the Kids in Parks for what Edwards described as a national pilot program. Funding for the program came from Kids in Parks, as well as additional funding from the Blue Cross Blue Shield of North Carolina Foundation, for purchase of the GPS Units. The North Carolina Humanities Council provided implementation money, which Edwards said allowed "broad regional implementation" for the geocache program.

Geocaching is an outdoor treasure hunting activity using GPS-enabled devices. The GPS units are available for rent for $5 each from the museum as well as Reeves Community Center. Participants navigate to a specific set of GPS coordinates and then attempt to find the cache hidden at that location. Edwards said there are 22 geocaching sites around the region that were researched by the museum, with caches designed and placed in each location, as well as a corresponding online exhibit. Each site can be discovered by participants and if they have a smart phone with a QR code reader, they are able to see additional interpretive material about the site, including history about the location and sometimes corresponding video and photos. "This is a great way for us to teach local history where it happened, not just within the four walls of the museum," Edwards shared.

Edwards invited anyone who wanted to participate to visit the museum or Reeves Community Center to rent the GPS units. The $5 rental fee per GPS unit, per day, will go into a pool of money that will be used to upgrade the program. All GPS units come loaded with the 22 cache sites, and the units will give varying degrees of directions to locate the sites. Seven of the sites are located on the Emily B. Taylor and Ararat River Greenway Trails. Participants select which cache they want to search for, then follow the directions on the screen, which will lead to the approximate coordinates, then an audible chime will let them know when they are close and clues are available to assist with the treasure hunt of sorts. “The treasure you are seeking is knowledge,” Edwards added. Caches range in size from small, about the size of a double-A battery, to larger caches the size of a two-quart water bottle. In addition to the museum’s GPS caches, there are about six to ten other locations within walking distance of the downtown area, Edwards shared.

The activity is great for families, visitors, school groups, scout troop, and anyone who wants to be outdoors and in nature, as well as those who have an interest in local history. Edwards shared that the museum is in the process of developing materials and activities for classroom use of the GPS units. The award, one of three given out to North Carolina museums, were designed to recognize, encourage, and promote excellence within activities of the museum community and organizations in related fields of interest. The awards are focused on programs, projects, and services offered by museums.

For more information about the GPS program and rental of the units, contact the Mount Airy Museum of Regional History at 786-4478.