

GENEALOGY OF A MISSION: THE AMERICAN PRESERVATION MOVEMENT, HERITAGE RESOURCE LAW, AND THE OPTOMETRIC HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Kirsten Hebert, B.A.

Heritage Services Specialist
Optometry Cares - The AOA Foundation

khebert@aoa.org

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ABSTRACT

The Optometric Historical Society (OHS) was one of many similar public history organizations created during the third wave of the preservation movement in the United States. This article traces the genealogy of the OHS mission through American heritage resource law and delineates the social and political context that led to its passage.

KEYWORDS

Heritage resource law; cultural resource management; historical societies; optometric historical society; public history

This final issue of *Hindsight's* three-part commemoration of the 50th anniversary of the Optometric Historical Society (OHS) outlines the work that has been done during the last five decades to advance the society's original purpose and mission. The editorials in this issue revisit the importance of the OHS' efforts to promote scholarship in optometry history: Dr. David Goss has laid out the reasons why practicing optometrists may gain insight, encouragement and a stronger professional identity through the study of optometry history, and asks us to press on with our efforts, and OHS Past President, Dr. Ron Ferrucci, has identified the foundational importance of history as a lodestar for the profession. Other articles in this issue evaluate the status of optometry historiography in the United States, and provide updates on optometry history both domestically and internationally, profiling public repositories and private collections of ophthalmic objects and archives, while also recognizing the work of their patrons, professional staff, and docents.

To provide context for this issue and for understanding the OHS as an organization, this article describes the historical setting in which the OHS came to be by outlining how popular movements, social and intellectual trends, and responsive public policy laid the foundation for the preservationist movement in the United States, and set the stage for the founding of the OHS in 1969. In this way, I hope to throw into sharp relief how the language of American heritage resource legislation is embedded in the following five components of the OHS' original mission:

- To encourage the collection and preservation of materials relating to the history of optometry
- To assist in securing and documenting the recollections of those who participated in the development of optometry
- To encourage and assist in the care of archives of optometric interest
- To identify and mark sites, landmarks, monuments, and structures of significance in optometric development
- To shed honor and recognition on persons, groups, and agencies making notable contributions toward the goals of the society.¹

The OHS as Public History

The OHS was one of many similar organizations founded between 1964 and 1975 precipitated by the rise of an applied discipline called "public history." Public history coalesced into a distinct subfield of academic history in the late 1960s and 1970s, taking historical scholarship out of the rarified world of academia, and making it accessible and relevant to the general public. Led by a group of interdisciplinary professionals and avocational historians working at public libraries, small museums and archives, and historical societies, public historians created educational programming that recognized, honored, and interpreted the history of people, places, and events significant to specific communities of place or interest.²

But public historians did more than simply take traditional history to laypeople. First, they documented and interpreted the history of groups ignored by the establishment, ensuring the documentation and preservation of American life in a way that radicalized American historiography. Second, they collaborated with and engaged their unique constituencies in telling their own stories. In this way, they made history truly “public,” not only in terms of the intended audience, but also in its methodology. This network of organizations and individuals erected the scaffolding for the contemporary cultural resource infrastructure, rallying public support in favor of legislation that provided economic incentives and the political space to sustain it. Moreover, this fertile ground led to the growth of ancillary fields like oral history, museum education, and history tourism.

Empowered by the public historian’s do-it-yourself mandate, and motivated by the urgency of the advanced age of optometry’s elder statesmen, the promise of public funding, and a favorable tax structure, the OHS and the International Library, Archives & Museum of Optometry (ILAMO) became optometry’s nodes in this emerging heritage resource landscape. The five directives outlined in the original OHS bylaws embody the fundamental elements of public history programs: collecting reminiscences and stories, constructing specialized collections, placing historical landmarks, and developing and hosting commemorative exhibitions and events. Moreover, the OHS’ narrow focus (optometry history), coupled with its open membership structure and eschewing of the trappings of academic history, firmly established it within the rubric of public history.

The Genealogy of Heritage Resource Law

Despite its grassroots character, public history was not an ad hoc affair; its rise to prominence followed a well-tread path. Preservation movements are a common American response to rapid social and economic change,³ first gaining momentum as reactionary public sentiment, and then sustaining their saliency through co-optation by intellectuals and philanthropists who use their cultural influence to organize societies or associations. Eventually, movements with sufficient resonance inspire the establishment of government agencies with a mandate codified by law.

The First Wave: 1800-1920

The first wave of American cultural-revitalization-through-preservation began in the mid-nineteenth century, as social angst about the impact of urbanization and westward expansion on the American identity and landscape

manifested as the conservation movement and romantic agrarianism. These movements inspired the growth of local societies with missions ranging from urban “beautification” to the preservation of local community histories.^{4,5}

By the turn of the century, professionals and academics were founding preservation organizations at a rapid pace. For example, in 1884, Johns Hopkins historian, Herbert Baxter Adams, founded the American Historical Association (AHA).^{6,7} In 1889, the AHA was incorporated in the District of Columbia by an act of Congress “for the . . . collection and preservation of historical manuscripts and kindred purposes in the interest of American history and of history in America.”⁶ Shortly thereafter in 1890, naturalists John Muir and Robert Johnson lobbied Congress to create Yosemite National Park, later founding the Sierra Club (1892) to ensure the protection of other quintessentially American landscapes.⁸ Also in 1890, the Daughters of the American Revolution organized, declaring their mission to promote “historic preservation, education and patriotism.”⁹

A decade later, John D. Rockefeller, Jr. and John Pierpont Morgan founded the American Scenic and Historic Preservation Society, a national organization dedicated to the “protection of natural scenery [and the] preservation of historic landmarks” with a mission to “erect historical memorials, and . . . promote . . . respect for the history of the nation, its honored names and its physical memorials.”¹⁰ By the end of the Progressive Era, the administrations of presidents Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson had responded with the the designation of several national parks, the founding of the United States Forest Service (1905),¹¹ the Commission on Country Life (1908)⁵ and finally, the National Park Service (NPS) (1916).¹²

The *raison d’être* for these organizations was articulated in the first true heritage resource law: the 1906 Antiquities Act. The 1906 Act directed federal agencies to “preserve for present and future generations the historic, scientific, commemorative and cultural values” of historic sites and places and authorized the President to “protect landmarks, structures and objects of historic or scientific interest” by declaring them National Monuments.¹³ The consistency and familiarity of the language in the mission statements of the early preservation organizations, the government agencies that took up their work, and the 1906 Act make the genealogy of modern cultural resources law—and the OHS mission—obvious.

The Second Wave: 1929-1960

The second wave of American preservationism was also

inspired by trauma, albeit this time far less subtle than the long, slow arc of the earlier movement. The economic devastation of the Great Depression and the subsequent decade of geographic dislocation of American farmers fleeing the Dust Bowl raised substantial concerns about the death of rural communities and traditional “folk” ways. This time, the public was too preoccupied with quotidian worries to do more than lament. Likewise, intellectuals and philanthropists were too crippled by diminished fortunes to create civic organizations to fill the gap. Fortunately, the government was ready and able to step up to the plate. President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s (FDR) first New Deal legislation included the organization of the Civilian Conservation Corps (1933) which employed thousands of young people in building, improving and maintaining rural parks across the nation.¹⁴ The Tennessee Valley Authority’s (TVA) river basin development plans effectively created the field of cultural resources management and defined the role of American archeologists within its scope.¹⁵ The Works Progress Administration’s (WPA) Federal Writers Project and Historical Records Survey in 1935 sent writers, historians, photographers, ethnomusicologists and ethnographers across the country to “document the diversity of the American experience and ways *ordinary people* were coping with the hardships of the Great Depression” [Emphasis added].^{16, 17}

Finally, the 1935 Historic Sites Act consolidated the properties overseen by the NPS and spelled out more explicitly the federal government’s “duty to preserve for public use historic sites, buildings, and objects of national significance.”¹⁸ The new focus on “regular people,” local history and the economic recovery stimulated by New Deal policy caused the resurgence of civic societies dedicated to preservation,¹⁹ culminating in the establishment of the American Association of State and Local History (AASLH) in 1940. The AASLH began as a sub-group of the AHA, but its independence sowed the seeds for the growth of public history two decades later.²⁰

When the dust settled after the end of the Second World War, President Harry S. Truman jump-started FDR’s the New Deal legislation rebranding it the “Fair Deal.” Flush with post-war prosperity, the American Folklife Movement took flight, supported by the American Folklife Center Archives (AFCA). Established in 1928, by 1945 the AFCA held a substantial collection of sound recordings, images, and manuscripts generated by the WPA.²¹ The preservation movement continued to flourish assisted by a host of government agencies and analogous local societies that would continue to receive support from the Truman administration.¹⁹ In 1949, Truman signed the National Trust for Historic

Preservation into law.²² Consolidation of the heritage resource apparatus at the federal level continued during the 1950s with the passage of the Federal Records Act in 1950,²³ the Management of Museum Properties Act and establishment of Presidential Libraries in 1955,²⁴ and the Library Services Act in 1956.²⁵ The Reservoir Salvage Act of 1960²⁴ further outlined the government’s responsibility to recover and preserve archeological data impacted by construction under the auspices of the TVA, the Federal Aid Highway Act of 1956, and other infrastructure programs.²⁶

As with earlier periods of preservationism, the post-war American Folklife Movement was founded on a great deal of anxiety about societal change.³ From the spread of the national highway system to television, modern technology encouraged conformity and chipped away at traditional lifeways. While the new, more homogenous national identity was seen as inevitable and even desirable, fear of loss also accompanied the promise of the future. By the early 1960s, new concerns were brewing that would result in capstone cultural resource legislation and inaugurate an unprecedented era of popular engagement with public history.

The Third Wave: 1960-1972

The OHS came into existence during the the third wave of the preservationist movement. As with previous revivals, the concern about preserving America’s heritage waxed during times of conflict and change. In the early 1960s, these points of agitation are almost too many to list. The Cold War and its attendant ground wars in Vietnam and Korea, the assassinations of President John F. Kennedy, Martin Luther King, Jr. and Robert Kennedy, student activism, the civil rights movement, and the environmental movement all had the collective effect of destabilizing and threatening to fundamentally alter American society.

A positive outcome of all this conflict was the confluence of social activism and the preservation movement. The focus of activist movements on inclusivity, social justice, and collective action were embraced by the champions of the American Folklife Movement as exemplified by the July 1963 Newport Folk Festival where activist folk musicians engaged the audience in a rally in support of civil rights activists’ March on Washington the following August.²⁷

Academic historians joined the revolution. The “New Social History” spread through academia like wildfire, elevating the writing of history not only *about* underrepresented groups, but also *by* them. Radical activist and Yale historian Jesse Lemisch called this intellectual movement “history from the bottom up.”²⁸ So ubiquitous was this trend on

college campuses that professors in many disciplines began assigning WPA-style oral history interview assignments to their students, swelling the holdings of audiotapes in university archives. In 1966, university-based historians founded the Oral History Association.²⁹

Right on cue, President Lyndon B. Johnson (LBJ) launched his "Great Society" in 1964. LBJ's legislation was comprised of a suite of domestic social programs which, among other things, bolstered existing preservation law. In 1966, the National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA) created a trifecta of entities that consolidated the designation and administration of nationally significant cultural properties: the National Register of Historic Places, the National Historic Landmarks list, and a network of State Historic Preservation Offices.³⁰ The ripple effect of this national legislation cannot be overstated; extant municipal and state agencies charged with marking and preserving historical properties were emboldened by the NHPA, and new entities proliferated in the following two decades. By the late-1960s, local historical societies were popping up all over the country responding to increased funding and popular interest in community history.³¹

The Birth of Optometry History and the OHS

Optometry was going through its own revolution at mid-century which reflected the national mood. The American Optometric Association (AOA) engaged heavily with the federal government's ever-growing body of public health agencies during the New Deal era. By 1961, the AOA had opened an office in Washington, D.C., increasing advocacy efforts and congressional outreach. Between 1964 and 1968, the AOA was busily carving out a role for optometrists in the Johnson administration's many programs, holding conferences, issuing policy statements and testifying before congress on optometry's place in the "War on Poverty." At the same time, the AOA was expanding its footprint in the non-profit arena, deploying the (Woman's) Auxiliary to coordinate with Head Start programs, expanding positions in the Public Health Service and the armed forces, and positioning optometry for inclusion in Medicare.³²

A grassroots uprising was also brewing among academic optometrists to recast optometrists as primary care providers. In 1968, the dean of the College of Optometry at the State University of New York, Dr. Alden Haffner, called an informal meeting of his colleagues and laid out his plan to expand the scope of optometric practice. Haffner's position was clearly explicated in his speech "The Evolving Health Care System in the American Democracy's Welfare State and the Potential Role of the Profession of Optometry."³³ That same year, OHS founder Dr. Henry W Hofstetter became the first

academic to serve as AOA President. In 1969, the AOA's Airlie House Conference contemplated taking an official position on expanding the scope of optometry practice with the new model for optometric care in view.³⁴

In the face of what was clearly becoming inexorable change, many optometrists were still not convinced. The old guard in particular were leery of changing the traditional model of optometry which rejected encroachment on the jurisdiction of medicine and opposed pursuit of privileges for use of diagnostic and therapeutic pharmaceuticals. The response to this tension was self-reflection and, eventually, a movement to preserve optometry's past before it embarked on a new path.

As a young profession, optometry revered its founders, many of whom were still alive and even active in the AOA in the early 1960s. In 1963, the association appointed an ad hoc History Committee to investigate the documentation of the association's first 75 years in a book, thus honoring its founding members and ensuring that, however much the profession changed, its roots would be remembered.³⁵

Headed by the AOA's first Secretary, Ernest Kiekenapp, the committee got a slow start, but in 1964 they received an infusion of energy and direction in the person of Maria Dablemont. The AOA hired Dablemont in October as a full-time librarian. Her first duty was to rationalize the association's organizational records, which had been consolidated at the new headquarters in 1953. At the same time, AOA president V. Eugene McCrary was lobbying congress in support of an amendment that would allow the AOA to acquire federal funding to build a library under the Medical Library Assistance Act.³⁶

Dablemont had a lot of ideas about how to proceed with building the heritage resources of the AOA. First, she engaged the committee to launch an oral history program under the direction of Milton Eger, O.D. and George Milkie, O.D. Second, she began a campaign of correspondence with optometry's founders to gather their professional papers and other archival records which would form the bedrock research for James Gregg's history book (1972) and further develop the archives. As her staff grew, Dablemont began directing historical research on a variety of topics, building an impressive set of subject and biographical files.³⁷ Finally, she pestered Henry Hofstetter to found a historical society almost from the moment of their first acquaintance.³⁸ In 1969, Hofstetter finished his term as AOA President and acquiesced to Dablemont's request.

Conclusion

The OHS and the International Library, Archives & Museum of Optometry (ILAMO) would both incorporate as non-profit charities by 1975, becoming two among a growing constellation of AOA-sponsored entities that would spring up in the decade following the 1969 Tax Reform Law's designation of the 501c3. Together they would constitute important connectors in the cultural resources landscape, bridging a gap between optometry history and a broader history of medicine, science and society, as well as acquainting optometrists with their own past.

A direct line can be drawn from the founding of the OHS to the larger preservationist movement. The process that led to its formation is reflected over and over in other public history organizations, and the precedent for the OHS' five-point mission is laid out in the language of national heritage resource law. Therefore, while we celebrate the hindsight of the OHS' founders and the contributions of its members, it is only right that we also acknowledge the guidance they had in building their programs from the larger public history community, and give credit for the tools we still use in service of the society's purpose today.

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