

PEOPLE, PROJECTS, AND PRESERVATION

1. Do you remember the 5 flag poles with 5 historic flags at the end of Main Street? Do you know who erected them?
2. Did you ever dine on placemats depicting antebellum homes in color?
3. Do you know who opposed the razing of Memorial Hall?
4. Who opposed the building of a new library on Memorial Park?
5. In 1974, who spawned the Historic Natchez Foundation?

The answer to all of these is the Natchez Historical Society, which has been a significant force in historic preservation through its members and their projects.

The Natchez Historical Society, as it is known today, was founded on January 12, 1954, at Connelly's Tavern (now called The House on Ellicott Hill). The name of the organization was the Old Natchez District Historical Society comprising Adams, Jefferson, and Wilkinson Counties.

Mrs. Edith Wyatt Moore, known to many as the lady of the Pilgrimage Pink Edition, was the first President. The *raison d'etre* of the Society was simply preservation – the collection and preservation of historical material. Dues were set at \$1 per year. By September of 1954 the record showed a big balance of \$21.48. But that did not deter the group from dreaming about preservation and projects. As early as 1956, the group had visions of a building with a museum.

To arouse public interest in the preservation of historical items found in Museums, the Society sponsored an exhibit in the Old Economy Drugstore. For newcomers, the Economy Drugstore was located on the site of the present Britton and Koontz Bank. Thirty-two donors responded to the call for historical items for display. On the day of the exhibit, 164 people attended – 126 adults at 25 cents each and 38 children at 10 cents. The door prize was a \$2 Confederate bill. This was the beginning of fundraising efforts to acquire a building for their headquarters, since they had been meeting at Connelly's Tavern, the Fisk Library, Miss Power and Light Company, and private homes.

In 1960, they made plans to purchase the Coyle House on South Wall Street. They solicited donations from citizens "with no overlapping of canvassing." One member suggested placing "sucker boxes" at hotels and motels, but this was vetoed. Initially, there were dues, donations, and a pledge card system used by churches, but it was still necessary to borrow money for the purchase in 1960. From 1960 until the mortgage was paid in 1972, fundraising was a primary focus. There were the usual things – food, attic, and bric-a-brac sales. Undoubtedly, Amanda Geisengerger, who was a historian and genealogist in her own right, was the queen of fundraising. She organized benefit house tours each fall and spring. There was a bridge benefit at the Coyle House with 10 tables netting \$107.15 and a promise of \$2.85 for a total of \$110.

And there were raffles. Dolls seemed to be the favorite one. Mrs. Laurie Ratcliffe of Routhland donated the dolls, and wardrobes were made by Mrs. John Mesick. There was a Barbie, a Dolly Madison, and a Pilgrimage doll.

Of course, they had other historical items manufactured to sell. There were the placemats of antebellum homes hawked at each meeting by Bill Stewart, Coyle house note paper, and small wrought iron plaques for lesser known antebellum homes (Barnes House and Biggs House).

But what they really wanted to do was publish historical material to raise money. In February 1974, they published the Tooley Print for sale, (last ones sold in 2005), and in November 1974, they published SILHOUETTES OF SETTLERS, (out of print). In 1982, the Genealogical Committee, under the leadership of Mrs. Sue Tipton, published MONUMENTS OF THE NATCHEZ CITY CEMETERY after many years of hard work. Mrs. Tipton also operated a Genealogical Library in the Coyle House until it was sold.

The Coyle House, like King's Tavern which was restored by the Pilgrimage Garden Club, had to be rebuilt. Even after the mortgage was retired, fundraising continued for necessary repairs and restoration. Then there were furnishings and landscaping.

If the Society had a fairy godmother, it was Mrs. Marian Kelly Ferry of Melrose. She donated \$19,000 and sent a generous donation annually. Two major benefactors were the Callons, who gave Callon stock which was later sold for \$26,500 and Mrs. Grace MacNeil, a loyal supporter, who gave contents for the museum in Memorial Hall and left a bequest in her will. The most outstanding volunteer was Mrs. Annie Ruth Ogden who kept detailed minutes for many years and was also the groundskeeper of the Coyle House. Mrs. Ogden mowed the grass, clipped the hedges, and raked the leaves. One of her relatives told me her husband forgot her birthday one year and promptly went out and bought her a new lawnmower, which she loved.

The Society enjoyed fantastic cooperation with other organizations, such as the UDC, DAR, Natchez Trace Association, Rosecraft Club, the two garden clubs, and the Jefferson and Claiborne Counties Historical Societies.

Most of the antebellum homeowners were members and supported the Society for many years. On one occasion Mrs. William Kendall (now Shields) and Mrs. S. H. Lambdin met with the Board to donate \$500 for the grounds. Of course, the Pilgrimage Garden Club would get credit for Beautification Committee. One Pilgrimage guide, Mrs. Lillian McLaurin donated \$20— given to her by two California ladies who gave it for a worthy organization. Later, Mrs. McLaurin donated the \$20 given her by a Natchez tourist.

The next step was furnishing the house. This task fell to Dr. and Mrs. Robert Barnes. Some furnishings were purchased, and some were loaned from members, like Mrs. Betty Ratcliffe. In 1973, the Coyle House opened for tours and was featured on the Candlelight Tour along with Kings Tavern.

During these years, the Society was the recipient of all kinds of memorabilia. Some is in tact, some has been sold, but some is missing.

In 1966, two descendants of Anna Maria Dunbar Smith Affleck gave the Society a portrait of Mrs. Affleck, who lived at Ingleside with her husband, Thomas Affleck, well-known horticulturist. The portrait was restored by the Society. It hung in the Coyle House and is now on loan to Natchez Garden Club to hang in the House on Ellicott Hill.

In the early 1980s the Society, backed by Dr. David Steckler, operated a museum in Memorial Hall. There were farm implements and lots of stuffed animals and birds. The museum was rather grim — open windows, etc. Finally, the Museum was closed, and the collection sold in 1986.

There were two significant collections donated to the Society. The Scharff Collection of Natchez prints was given by Maurice Scharff in 1966. Scharff grew up in Natchez but worked in New York City as an engineer. The collection of framed prints hung at the Coyle House and later at the Armstrong Library. Now it has been inventoried and placed in acid-free folders in the vault at the Historic Natchez Foundation, thanks to the work of Joe Frank, Kathleen Jenkins, and David Preziosi. The Society has made the prints available upon request to authors of publications with the stipulation that the NHS receives credit. The prints have been used in two recent publications.

The Natchez Printing Collection was donated to the Society by Sallie Dix Abbott in 1975, after Natchez Printing was sold. It was the largest and most unwieldy collection. Inventoried and moved to Jefferson College for storage for about 30 years, the collection included machinery (such as book-binders and stitchers), 15 wooden cabinets with trays for type, and hundreds of cuts and plates. The Society wrestled with the collection for years — tried to give it to a museum or sell it except for cuts and plates. For at least 15 years, members cleaned and identified cuts and plates with the goal of a publication. After volunteers contributed thousands of hours, the book rolled off the press in 2002. The rest of the collection was sold to individuals and antique dealers in 2004 during two sales at Jefferson College. Richard Branyon masterminded the sales after 30+ years of good intentions.

The Society met monthly at the Coyle House although it was not ideal. As expenses mounted for utilities, repairs, and insurance, there was talk of selling the property as early as 1982. A committee studied the issue and recommended selling. If you want to get people to a meeting, controversy is the key. There was a called meeting in August 1990, and there were too many people to get inside, even though the meeting was held in August heat. The final decision was to sell. The contents were sold first in 1991. after appraisal and procedures worked out by John Williams, Sim Callon, Jimmy Guercio, and Stratton Bull.

Although realtors clamored to sell house, the Society decided to accept bids two week-ends in August 1992. The strip on north side sold to the Jex family for \$500, and the house itself was sold for \$100,000 to Mr. and Mrs. Roger Smith. The money was invested with interest to be used for future projects.

When you have money, people seem to know about it and want to share it. In the mid-1980s, there was a proposal to merge with the Foundation. Hot issue! Ballots were mailed to members for voting. A full meeting was held to debate the issue. But the final decision was no merger.

On February 10, 1998, two gentlemen came before the Board to ask for \$5,000. They were appointed by the mayor to raise money for the Old Guard Fife and Drum Corps for the Spanish Bicentennial on March 27-30, 1998 – about 6 weeks away. Talk about surprised!!!! The Board was astounded at the audacity. These gentlemen apparently defaulted on their job and wanted the Society to bail them out. The Board declined – too much money for something outside the realm of bylaws. Then political pressure was exerted. There was phone call after phone call. The matter was brought before the general membership, and people came out of the woodwork. They voted to donate the \$5,000. Attendance to see the Old Guard was very, very poor. The dimes and dollars of all the fundraising and volunteer efforts of members through the years quickly vanished.

But the Society is amenable to supporting worthwhile projects. In recent years, the Society has made contributions to Armstrong Library (upward of \$10,000), Crepe Myrtle Project (\$200), DAR Genealogical Library (\$200), Marker for Judith Sargent Murray (\$200), Natchez City Cemetery (\$250), George Washington Bicentennial Program with DAR (\$500), Restoration of House on Ellicott Hill (\$500), Jefferson College (\$500), Auburn Club (\$150) and the Historic Natchez Foundation (\$500). Perhaps, the biggest beneficiary has been the Natchez Literary and Cinema Celebration which the Society has supported since its inception with donations from \$250 up to \$1,000 annually.

The biggest project of the Society in the last decade was the re-location of the George and Elizabeth Miller Memorial Fountain at a cost of about \$16,000. Sons of the Millers met with Mayor Benbrook and the aldermen in 1911 to discuss the Fountain to honor their parents. The design of the Fountain was unique since it featured troughs at different levels for human beings, small animals (such as dogs and goats), and large animals (like horses). The City accepted the offer and decided the Fountain should be placed at the southwest corner of Main and Commerce Streets. However, in 1926, the fountain was moved to the Bluff to make way for paving contractors. For over 70 years, it remained there. Relocating it to its original site was the brainchild of Mrs. Mavis Feltus. After much research, the Society hired a stonemason and worked with the city to relocate it. The dedication was held on January 25, 1999, when a sizeable crowd attended the event.

One of the current projects of the Society is transcribing local municipal records now stored at Armstrong Library with the goal of putting them on CDs and on the Society's website sometime in the future.

The first Grace MacNeil Memorial Lecture took place, on March 28, 2006 at the Natchez Convention Center. The topic was Eudora Welty, and the speakers were Suzanne Marrs, her biographer, and Susan Halton, her garden consultant. Free and open to public, it was very well attended. The Society plans to continue the free lecture series every March.

The Society has programs of historic interest at regular meetings in September, October, November, February, and April that include social hours prior to the program. January is the Annual Dinner Meeting, where officers are elected and a special speaker is featured. December is the Christmas Party, and May is the picnic. You see, the Society mixes preservation with pleasure! All of the events are free and open to the public.

The Society also gives a Preservation Award to someone who has made a significant contribution to historic preservation. A plaque is given annually, if there is a worthy recipient.

The minutes of the Society chronicle the work of many ordinary citizens who worked so diligently to carry out the goals of the founders. It is the dedication of these ordinary people who have made possible the extraordinary accomplishments of the Society.

The Society moves forward, and the minutes of all meetings will be significant to record in detail People, Projects, and Preservation of the future.

Mary Eidt
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