

Tales from the Great Refuge
A Regular Series on Connecticut History
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CLHO –a history
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By Jamie and Kit Eves

“To Stimulate Activities and Act as a Clearinghouse”: A Brief History of The League

To help celebrate its 60th birthday, we were asked to write a short history of the Connecticut League of History Organizations. We discovered that CLHO’s history mirrored that of public history in general. The organization was founded in the 1940s by a core group of dedicated history buffs. It gained size and momentum through the bicentennial year of 1976, reaching a peak in 1980. Between 1980 and 1996, however, CLHO experienced major changes. Its membership shifted from strictly historical societies to a combination of historical societies, other history organizations, and individuals. Its core of activists metamorphosed from a mostly older group of individuals passionate about history to a mostly younger group of public history professionals. CLHO undertook new missions inconceivable to its founders: providing its members with continuing professional training, disseminating information about grants, lobbying for increased funding for public history, and supporting both large and small museums. This is CLHO’s story.

I

In the spring of 1948 a small group of Connecticut men and women—officers and volunteers from local historical societies and historic houses—accepted Elmer Keith’s invitation to gather at the Thomas Lee House in East Lyme. Their goal: consider forming a statewide association of historical societies that would “stimulate the activities of societies interested in Connecticut historical knowledge and materials” and “act as a clearinghouse for exchanging information.”

The time was right. Interest in public history was growing, in Connecticut and nationwide. Just eight years earlier in 1940, the American Association for State and Local History had broken away from the older, university-dominated American Historical Association, and become the first professional organization for public historians in the United States. Living history museums, an exciting new idea, were drawing crowds and transforming the way public history was done: Colonial Williamsburg opened in the late 1920s, Mystic Seaport in 1934, and Old Sturbridge Village in 1941. In Connecticut, the *State Register and Manual* showed a sudden increase in the number of historical societies, after decades of stagnation. While the *Register* listed only five historical societies in Connecticut in 1912, 1931, and 1935, it showed seven in 1940, nine in 1945, eleven in 1948, fourteen in 1950, 39 in 1955, 73 in 1960, and a peak of 173 in 1981—an extraordinary growth. (The *Register* lists only 125 historical societies in Connecticut today.)

Several factors explain the phenomenal growth of public history in the middle decades of the twentieth century: the invention of living history museums; nostalgia for a perceived lost agrarian past, destroyed by rapid industrialization; concern about social and political changes in the 1930s, which led many Americans to reexamine the past in order to better understand the tumultuous present; a heightened sense of shared American history and mission brought by the great cause of World War II; the threat of the Cold War (which began in 1947) to traditional American values; the deep social changes surrounding the Civil Rights and women’s movements of the 1950s and 1960s; and the looming bicentennial in 1976.

Responding to factors like these, the meeting at East Lyme decided to appoint a five-person committee to explore the feasibility of a statewide association of historical societies, modeled on Massachusetts's venerable Bay State Historical League, which had been founded in 1903 (and would be disbanded in 2005). The committee met during the summer of 1948 in Litchfield, decided to move forward, worked out some of the logistics, and called a second large meeting for October. As a result, that fall representatives from twenty Connecticut historical societies and organizations convened in East Haven at the Pardee-Morris House to hear the committee's report. Unanimously, they voted to accept the committee's recommendation and form the Connecticut League of Historical Societies, and appointed a new committee to draw up bylaws. On February 5, 1949, the League's birthday, the delegates reassembled, passed the bylaws, and elected officers. They selected as their first president Edgar Francis Waterman of Hartford, a former president of the Connecticut Historical Society, a retired businessman, and an amateur genealogist. They also appointed Ella Falconer Wood as executive secretary, a staff position analogous to executive director. The next year, 1950, the year-old League incorporated as a non-profit.

II

Typical of the era, the men and women who organized and managed the new League were mostly retired-history buffs. Waterman was followed as president by Whitney L. Brooks of Torrington (later chairman of the Connecticut State Historical Commission and vice chairman of the American Revolution Bicentennial Commission of Connecticut), Dr. Robert J. Craig of Cheshire (a dentist and founder of the Cheshire Historical Society), Dwight C. Lyman of New London (the chief librarian of the Naval Underwater Systems Center), Robert W. Carder of Madison (a retired oil executive), Janet G. Jainschigg of Darien (founder and benefactor of the Connecticut Trust for Historic Preservation, and the League's first woman president), and Peter Revill of Rocky Hill (another Connecticut Trust activist and the author of a history of Rocky Hill). Men outnumbered women on the League's board of directors (by eleven to four, in 1971), and the majority of the board came from the more populous western half of the state. When John Sutherland joined the board in 1972, he was unusual in two ways: a history professor at Manchester Community College, Sutherland was the only academic historian on the Board, and a resident of Rockville, he was the only member who lived east of the Connecticut River.

For more than twenty years, the League's members were historical societies (called "member-societies" in the bylaws) rather than individuals. Membership grew rapidly, though, reaching 151 member-societies in 1971. In 1972, the bylaws were amended to permit "associate members" (individuals) to join. In addition to these new associate members, the League boasted 157 member-societies in 1972, 161 in 1973, 178 in 1975, and "180-plus" in 1977, the peak year. These were years of growth.

From its beginning in 1949, the League published a quarterly booklet-style newsletter, the *League Bulletin*. The *Bulletin* carried notices of meetings and events, news about member-societies, and short articles about museum management, collections care, exhibits, and Connecticut history. Jim Newman served as an early *Bulletin* editor. Newman was an engineer, executive, and history buff who handled the job for 3 ½ years in the late 1960s and early 1970s. The longest serving editor, Louise Pittaway of Stonington, held the post from 1983 to 1999, when editorial chores were shifted to the league's new Publications Committee.

After 1980, however, the League began to change, reflecting new trends in public history. Interest in history among the public began to wane. Not surprisingly, League membership declined, to 166 member-societies (now called member organizations) in 1997—although the drop was balanced by a

substantial increase in the number of individual members. Indeed, by 1997 individual members outnumbered organization members 178-166. The composition of the board of directors changed, too. Women became the majority, in 1998 outnumbering men 12-7. In addition, board members and officers were more likely to be active museum professionals— directors, archivists, and curators— rather than retirees. Revenues seem either to have declined or failed to increase as rapidly as expenses. In the 1980s the board eliminated the executive secretary position, reduced the *Bulletin* from five issues a year to four, and then to three, and reduced the number of pages.

III

By 1996, when Steven Young, the director of the Fairfield Historical Society, became president, the League was in crisis. Museums and historical societies were struggling. The small museums and societies that made up the majority of the League's organizational members were especially threatened. The public historians who now made up the bulk of the League's individual members wanted more intense professional training than what the League had been offering—especially in grant writing and fundraising. As a prelude to making changes, the Board decided to survey the membership.

The results of the 1996 survey appeared in the June 1997 issue of the *Bulletin*. Sixty organizations had replied; 23 of the replies came from paid staff, 21 from board members, and 16 from volunteers. The results showed a sharp divide between the needs of small societies and museums with no paid staff, and organizations with fulltime staff. Seventeen member organizations reported annual budgets below \$10,000, while 12 had budgets of more than \$100,000, a wide gulf. Thirty-six had no paid staff at all, while five had eight or more full-time workers. If it was to remain relevant, the League needed to find a way to serve all its members: the small, all-volunteer organizations that had traditionally been its constituency, as well as larger, professionalized organizations.

The League received a grant from the Connecticut Humanities Council to develop a strategic plan, which it put into effect from 1997 to 2000. First, a special membership meeting on March 10, 1998, voted to restructure the League. The name was changed to the Connecticut League of History Organizations, to reflect the fact that its organizational members were no longer only historical societies, but now included museums, libraries, and archives. David Wolfram designed a new logo. And in the fall of 1998, a grant enabled the League to produce resource binders for all members, including information on grants, speakers, League bylaws, and a spot to file issues of the *Bulletin*, which was redesigned as an 8-1/2 x 11" newsletter, and reorganized and expanded to include regular articles on Connecticut history written by an academic historian and university professor, and his wife. It was produced electronically, and proofed via email. The League ramped up its training programs with a "core curriculum" for both members who were new to public history and advanced training for professionals. This initiative, called *Professional Basics*, was two-pronged. There were pullout printed articles in the *Bulletin* (beginning in 1999) and daylong training sessions beginning in 2001. In that year, CLHO also launched its Web site and established a permanent central office in Hamden. Previously, the headquarters had been the home or office of whomever happened to be president. Sandy Elgee was hired as the first CLHO professional staff member, and in 2007, Priscilla Brendler was hired as executive director.

The new League, CLHO, is not better or worse than the old League, but reflective of its era. The face of public history in Connecticut has changed much over the past sixty years.