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“For What We Do Today Becomes the History of Tomorrow”: A History of the Bay View Historical Society, 1979-2015

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“FOR WHAT WE DO TODAY BECOMES THE HISTORY OF TOMORROW”:
A HISTORY OF THE BAY VIEW HISTORICAL SOCIETY, 1979-2015

by

Bradley J. Wiles

A Dissertation Submitted in
Partial Fulfillment of the
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August 2023

ABSTRACT

“FOR WHAT WE DO TODAY BECOMES THE HISTORY OF TOMORROW”:
A HISTORY OF THE BAY VIEW HISTORICAL SOCIETY, 1979-2015

by

Bradley J. Wiles

The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 2023
Under the Supervision of Associate Professor Donald Force

This dissertation presents a history of the Bay View Historical Society (BVHS), a non-profit cultural heritage institution located in the Bay View neighborhood of Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Since its creation in 1979, the BVHS has assumed numerous roles related to preservation, documentation, education, information provision, social interaction, and public appreciation around the neighborhood’s history. This study’s overarching purpose is to examine how a modern local historical society assumes and approaches its role within the community it seeks to document, preserve, celebrate, and enrich. The central contention is that such institutions are given life when a range of conditions are conducive for the streams of historical consciousness within a community to converge with the structures and instruments of the historical enterprise. The analysis and narrative tracks internal and external developments that influenced the BVHS’s creation and growth over four decades (1979-2015), focusing on its primary activities, goals, and pursuits, and how it communicated its self-assigned or assumed roles. During this time, the BVHS assumed a position of authority on the neighborhood’s history by emphasizing both physical symbols and historical storytelling that inspired its membership and engaged the wider community.

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To
Molly, Evan, and Iris

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Introduction: Small Scale History

In June 2022, the American Association for State and Local History (AASLH) released a report detailing their National Census of History Organizations, which it billed as the “first national effort to produce an up-to-date, comprehensive, and high-quality data file of history, historic preservation, and history-related organizations in the public and non-profit sectors of the United States.”¹ The census was taken partially in preparation for the United States’ 250th Anniversary in 2026, with the report specifically calling out the Bicentennial period in the 1970s as an especially propitious growth era for historical societies, preservation groups, museums, and other popular manifestations of the historical enterprise.² But the main purpose of the census was to gain a better understanding of the substantial role history institutions play in American life, fortuitously at a time when the debate over historical representation, history education, and public commemorations are at a fever pitch.³ Data gathering commenced and was completed prior to 2020, so the information compiled offers a snapshot of the situation prior to the COVID-19 disruption, which may help provide an empirical foundation for developing or re-shaping

¹ Carole Rosenstein and Neville Vakharia. “2022 National Census of History Organizations: A Report on the History Community in the United States,” American Association for State and Local History, June 2022, <https://aaslh.org/census/>. The report further states this effort represents “the clearest picture of the U.S. public history community yet available,” but admits possible limitations since it was drawn from a variety of existing federal, state, and association sources that the study’s authors did not “‘knock on doors’ to find new institutions,” 5.

² Robert B. Townsend, *History’s Babel: Scholarship, Professionalization, and the Historical Enterprise in the United States, 1880-1940* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013): 3-5. Blending the notions of history discipline and history profession, Townsend uses the term *historical enterprise* to denote “the broad range of activities where such knowledge about the past is produced and used in an organized or systematic way... This encompasses history work taking place in a wide variety of forms and settings by a diverse group of people, including the writers of academic monographs, the staff at historical societies and public archives who collect and organize historical materials, the public historians who shape history for various audiences, and the teachers who impart history in a variety of classrooms.”

³ Jake Silverstein, “The 1619 Project and the Long Battle over U.S. History,” *The New York Times Magazine*, November 9, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/11/09/magazine/1619-project-us-history.html>.

policies and procedures, as many institutions remain in a prolonged state of recovery just a few years out from the Semiquincentennial milestone.

The census pulled data from a combination of sources and in all it documented 21,588 history institutions in the non-profit and public sectors—a conservative number that likely would have been considerably higher if it had included private and for-profit institutions.⁴ In any case, this indicates a ubiquity that supersedes other areas of the general arts and culture domain, and the census found that history-related activities are embedded in a range of hybrid organizations that have both public and private funding support, and that serve multiple purposes and functions for many different audiences often not instantly associated with history.⁵ As with other institutional activity in the arts and culture sector, the presence of history organizations largely aligns with population concentrations around the U.S., but unlike many of these other sectors, the census found a relatively high ratio of history organizations in less densely populated areas.⁶ As the study concludes, “looking at all of the ways that people incorporate history into the missions and programs in their organizations gives a powerful sense of the way people think of history as fundamental to community and public purpose.”⁷

The census report implicitly speaks to a high level of historical consciousness within communities of all sizes where people work diligently to preserve historical collections, places, events, and traditions both inside and outside of formal organizational structures.⁸ Crucially,

⁴ Rosenstein and Vakharia, “2022 National Census,” 6-7, 20. The report also concedes that “looking at the formal, incorporated dimension of the history subsector in some ways serves only to show how much history and preservation activity goes on outside of it: in families, through social media, in friend and enthusiast groups, and in the everyday life of a community.”

⁵ Rosenstein and Vakharia, 6.

⁶ Rosenstein and Vakharia, 7.

⁷ Rosenstein and Vakharia, 20.

⁸ Anna Clark and Carla L. Peck, “Historical Consciousness: Theory and Practice,” in *Contemplating Historical Consciousness: Notes from the Field*, ed. Anna Clark and Carla L. Peck (New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2018), 1-15. According to Clark and Peck, “the concept of historical

nearly 66% of the institutions identified in the census self-identify as historical societies and nearly 80% of those fall under the smallest Internal Revenue Service designations for income reporting.⁹ Small and local historical societies are frequently where the formal and informal history and preservation activities within a community converge and the report explicitly calls out the “need for focused attention to and tailored support for very small and small nonprofit history organizations” that keep a community’s past alive.¹⁰ Tacitly, the census and report draw attention to small, local historical societies as vital, but often taken for granted, community institutions in a larger web of history-focused activity, and thus worthy of further understanding.

Study Subject and Background

This dissertation presents a history of the Bay View Historical Society (BVHS), a non-profit cultural heritage institution located in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. This small but multifaceted organization is representative of the historical enterprise at the most immediate level. As a distinctive organization, the BVHS embodies, reflects, and influences how people in the community understand the history of the Bay View neighborhood and the city more generally. The BVHS is the only historical society in the state of Wisconsin dedicated to a single urban neighborhood and one of only a handful to do so outside of major metropolitan areas across the United States.¹¹ Since its creation, the BVHS has assumed numerous roles related to

consciousness refers both to the ways people orient themselves in time, and how they are bound by the historical and cultural contexts which shape their sense of temporality and collective memory... More than simply understanding how people think about history... historical consciousness also reveals history as fundamental to the ways we think about ourselves.”

⁹ Rosenstein and Vakharia, “2022 National Census,” 15-17.

¹⁰ Rosenstein and Vakharia, 22.

¹¹ John Gurda, *Milwaukee: City of Neighborhoods* (Milwaukee, WI: Historic Milwaukee Incorporated, 2016), 437. Gurda writes that the BVHS is Wisconsin’s “largest neighborhood-based historical society,” but elsewhere claims that it is the only one (See: *Around the Corner with John McGivern*, season 1, episode 101, “Bay View,” produced by John McGivern, featuring John Gurda, aired January 26, 2012, Milwaukee PBS, 2012. Additionally, analysis of current listings in the Wisconsin Historical Society Local History Affiliate Directory (<https://wisconsinhistory.org/Records/Article/CS3110>), the Preservation

preservation, documentation, education, information provision, social interaction, and public appreciation around the neighborhood's history.

The BVHS operates on the premise that the history of the neighborhood and its people over time is important and of interest beyond those most involved with its day-to-day operations and activities, and that the substantial human and financial resources expended in celebrating, sharing, and sustaining that history is worthwhile. This study examines the circumstances of the BVHS's creation, the instruments and characteristics of its existence, and how this organization managed its evolving role within the immediate community as a steward of neighborhood history. The study also considers the BVHS within the larger context of collection-based cultural heritage institutions (historical societies in particular) and how these relate to historical consciousness within a community.

The BVHS's evolving mission speaks to its relevance in the current era of encroaching virtual dominance over public life and historical memory. At its founding in 1979, its objective was "to gather, preserve, and disseminate artifacts and information relating to the Bay View area."¹² The current mission statement is more extensive, stating that the BVHS "encourages a sense of community by conserving, celebrating and sharing Bay View's rich heritage," and "will serve as a portal to, and archive for, celebrating Bay View's history and promise for the future."¹³ Clearly, the BVHS has long assumed a mandate for gathering materials relevant to neighborhood history that may otherwise be lost or forgotten, but the current verbiage places their priorities beyond the preservation function and into that of a forward-thinking community

Directory.com database (<https://www.preservationdirectory.com/preservationorganizationsresources/OrganizationListings.aspx?catid=3>), and the Wikipedia entry for U.S. state historical societies (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_historical_societies#United_States_societies) verify this claim.

¹² "About Us," Bay View Historical Society, accessed October 15, 2020, <https://bayviewhistoricalsociety.org/about-us/#mission>.

¹³ "About Us," 2020.

service.

Shifting focus to the future is not uncommon for historical societies and other local cultural heritage institutions as they develop over time, but there is scant study on the impacts and implications of this phenomenon—both for the institutions and the communities they serve.¹⁴ This study attempts to address the sizable gap in understanding “why awareness of the past and of change is so pronounced at the local level” and how local historical societies create, influence, and circulate narratives about their communities.¹⁵ The BVHS is a prime candidate to provide insights and understanding into how such organizations have remained viable in the decades of accelerated social change that have enveloped its existence.

This dissertation examines how a modern local historical society assumes and approaches its role within the community it seeks to document, preserve, celebrate, and enrich. Local historical societies have long been integral to both scholarly and popular understandings of history in regional, national, and global contexts.¹⁶ Institutions based around local history are

¹⁴ Dirk H. R. Spennemann, “The Futurist Stance of Historical Societies: Analysis of Position Statements,” *International Journal of Arts Management* 9, no. 2 (2007): 4. Spennemann writes that “it is important to understand the nature of that envisaged future, as the actions of today will shape the transmission of the tangible evidence of the past and thus predicate what future generations can do with it.”

¹⁵ Fiona Cosson, “The Small Politics of Everyday Life: Local History Society Archives and the Production of Public Histories,” *Archives and Records* 38, no. 1 (2017): 55. Cosson also indicates that the stories local historical societies capture and share can add context and understanding to “local manifestations of wider social forces related to de-industrialized, neoliberal, globalized economic regimes” that impact community history and memory everywhere.

¹⁶ Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen, *The Presence of the Past: Popular Uses of History in American Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 105, 205. Based on their extensive survey of popular “historymaking,” the authors found that Americans put more trust in cultural heritage institutions like museums and historical sites “than in any other sources for exploring the past.” They ascertained that this engagement manifests in several ways: “The first is that everyone uses the past for similar and fundamentally human purposes—such as to establish identity, mortality, immortality, and agency. People use the past to imagine how they might change and be changed by other people and by circumstances. And they use the past critically, creatively, and actively, in making and testing narratives of change and continuity. They re-examine trajectories of their lives and imagine how they might fit differently into their worlds.”

perhaps the most immediately accessible and recognizable manifestations of the historical enterprise and historical consciousness in a given community, and they hold the potential to be among the most meaningful for members of that community.¹⁷ In recent years, the institutions responsible for stewarding local history and heritage have been under increasing pressure to shape their missions and operations to be at once diverse, inclusive, authentic, complete, and self-sustaining, while also shedding excessive antiquarianism, parochialism, and nostalgia in highlighting historical change and continuity.¹⁸

However, several factors exert a homogenizing influence that significantly alters how cultural heritage institutions contribute to a community's understanding of itself and its history.¹⁹ Technological, political, and demographic trends in recent decades have disrupted traditional notions of community, memory, heritage, and identity.²⁰ Individuals and families are increasingly mobile and less bound by geographic limitations in how they learn, work, interact with others, and maintain social ties across time. The exponential growth of digital social networks is at once liberating and isolating, but often proves most effective at revealing and sharpening underlying ideological and social divisions in a low accountability zone of virtual existence.²¹ The fracture lines reach into communities, families, and other social groups, where

¹⁷ Charles Stanish, "On Museums in a Postmodern World," *Daedalus* 137, no. 3 (2008): 149.

¹⁸ Jamil S. Zainaldin, "History Now: History and the Public," *The Georgia Historical Quarterly* 95, no. 4 (2011): 531, 533. Zainaldin discusses some of the challenges to the current historical enterprise writing, "if this is the era of budget deficits, then it also seems to be an era of history deficits," but then makes a strong case for the role of history organizations that "serve our national interest by providing the means of understanding and integrating valuable lessons into our daily lives, lives enriched by the addition of a historical perspective."

¹⁹ Jacqueline Spence, "Small Organisations and Cultural Institutions - A Digital Future?" *Program* 39, no. 4 (2005): 370.

²⁰ Ian Willis, "Stories and Things: The Role of the Local Historical Society, Campbelltown, Camden and The Oaks," *Journal of the Royal Australian Historical Society* 95, no. 1 (2009): 18.

²¹ Janna Anderson and Lee Rainie, "Many Tech Experts Say Digital Disruption Will Hurt Democracy," Pew Research Center Internet & Technology, February 21, 2020, <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2020/02/21/many-tech-experts-say-digital-disruption-will-hurt-democracy/>.

at one time efforts to address current challenges and future aspirations were more readily informed by a sense of history and shared experience.²²

Local historical societies, like other cultural heritage institutions, serve as a bonding element that helps hold communities together and offer its members a venue of expression and representation.²³ There have been thousands of historical societies and other community-based history agencies founded at various times throughout the United States, but each instance has its own unique circumstances and origins. Their creation frequently begins with the perception that a group's history or capacity for historical understanding is at risk or is inadequately addressed by other established institutions or agencies. The central contention of this dissertation is that historical societies and similar institutions are given life when a range of conditions are conducive for the streams of historical consciousness within a community to converge with the structures and instruments of the historical enterprise. Yet this is less characterized by one causing the other, rather than by reciprocal interplay; historical consciousness both feeds off of and inspires the historical enterprise and vice versa. What seems less apparent is how this admixture of tangible and intangible phenomenon prompts substantive and lasting human action in some instances but not in others.

The BVHS was founded as an independent organization by history-minded people focused on capturing certain threads of neighborhood history that many of its members felt were at risk, and thus as an institution it assumed responsibility for creating and sustaining neighborhood memory and historical narratives. Over the decades, the BVHS's efforts to define

²² Robert R. Archibald, *A Place to Remember: Using History to Build Community* (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 1999), 202. According to Archibald, "acceleration of change causes individual bewilderment, diminishes identity, and devalues communities because ties of common memory are broken."

²³ David Carr, *The Promise of Cultural Institutions* (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 2003), 39-40.

and realize its role have evolved within the broader contexts of historical understanding and its immediate memory-keeping field of activity, a process accompanied by ongoing negotiations between the organization and the community it serves. This dissertation tracks internal and external developments that influenced the BVHS's creation and growth over four decades (1979-2015), focusing on its primary activities, goals, and pursuits, and how it communicated its self-assigned or assumed roles within its community.

Research Objectives and Purpose

The dissertation's inquiry is guided by four main research questions: What conditions and factors led to the creation of the BVHS? What factors influenced the BVHS's subsequent operations and development? What characterized the BVHS's relationships and interactions within its community and how did this evolve over time? How has the BVHS understood its role within the community it represents? In short, a variety of factors and conditions led to the creation of the BVHS, including a spike in interest around national, state, and local historical milestones, and the expansion of initiatives related to local history and heritage at the state and city levels. More immediately, efforts to facilitate historic preservation and appreciation emerged at the grassroots level in the Bay View neighborhood and other areas around Milwaukee, prompting community conversations and programs around education, urban renewal, and quality of life issues. The BVHS's operations were continually informed by interactions and relationships within the neighborhood community, which helped sustain a relatively large and active membership composed of old and new residents.

As with nearly every small local historical society, financial and logistic factors influenced the BVHS's development, even as the organization became a fixture in the neighborhood's vibrant social life, civic culture, and economic revitalization. As to how it

understood and continues to understand its role within the community, perhaps this passage written by founding member, Ray Bethke, sums it up best: “I remind you that in Bay View we still have the richness of heritage that originally led us to believe that it was worthwhile to form our own Historical Society. There are still hundreds of untold stories to be saved from oblivion. There is still plenty of work for anyone who would put his mind to it. There is still excitement in living today, for what we do today becomes the history of tomorrow.”²⁴ Driven by this sense of purpose, the BVHS assumed a position of authority on the neighborhood’s history by emphasizing both physical symbols and historical storytelling that inspired its membership and engaged the wider community.

As an examination of the historical society phenomenon, the main purpose of this dissertation is to look at a microlevel, local example of that phenomenon, while also considering the BVHS in larger historical and community contexts—taking care to not overstate or obscure the subject’s significance. From a philosophical and methodological standpoint, this dissertation is grounded in the notion that careful consideration of a single example can elicit insights about phenomena deemed mostly homogeneous and stable, thus helping illuminate areas of the past that history at the large scale tends to overlook.²⁵ There are three primary reasons this dissertation focuses on a single historical society with a local, community-specific collecting and operational emphasis.

First, historical societies are ubiquitous cultural heritage institutions throughout much of the developed world, but they have played an especially prominent role in American history

²⁴ Ray Bethke, “President’s Message,” *Bay View Historian*, February 1980, 1. *Bay View Historian* Collection, 1980-2019, Bay View Historical Society, Beulah Brinton House Maritime Room (hereafter all references deriving from this publication are cited by individual article and/or issue).

²⁵ Sigurður Gylfi Magnússon and Istvan Szijarto, *What is Microhistory?: Theory and Practice*, (London and New York: Routledge, 2013), 106.

from its earliest days.²⁶ The development of historical societies corresponds to the development of other durable cultural entities like museums, public libraries, and research universities.²⁷

However, there is very little study of local historical societies as a distinctive intellectual and cultural movement or as an instrument of larger social structures.²⁸ This study considers the BVHS within this wider intellectual and institutional lineage.

Second, historical societies in the United States have always been founded primarily to document and preserve the legacy of a specific locality and its people, a trend that stretches from the creation of city and state historical societies in the first half of the nineteenth century and into

²⁶ See: Julian P. Boyd, "State and Local Historical Societies in the United States," *The American Historical Review* 40, no 1 (1934): 10-37; J. Franklin Jameson, "History of Historical Societies." Address Given at the Seventy-Fifth Anniversary of the Georgia Historical Society, Savannah, GA. Morning News Print, 1914, accessed October 3, 2020, <https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/011596279/Home>; Alea Henle, *Rescued from Oblivion: Historical Cultures in the Early United States* (Amherst and Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2020); Clifford L. Lord, *Keepers of the Past* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1965), 4; David Van Tassel, *Recording America's Past: An Interpretation of the Development of Historical Societies in America, 1607-1884* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960). According to Clifford L. Lord, "As is true of any continuingly important segment of our economy or society, the history of historical organizations can be understood only in terms of the over-all history of the country; conversely, in a certain sense the history of the country could be taught and understood in terms of the history of its historical organizations. Yet the field has been largely ignored."

²⁷ H. G. Jones, "Preface," *Historical Consciousness in the Early Republic: The Origins of State Historical Societies, Museums, and Collections, 1791-1861*, ed. H. G. Jones (Chapel Hill: North Caroliniana Society, Inc., and North Carolina Collection, 1995), vii-viii. Jones is even more effusive about the influence of historical societies, advancing the claim that "virtually every branch of current liberal education was influenced by historical societies in the early republic. The list encompasses, in embryonic stage, the breadth of history—political, military, social, ethnic, family, community, oral, and geographical. It also includes the collection, copying, editing, reformatting, publication, and preservation of primary documents, and their administration in libraries and historical societies; identification, marking, and preservation of historic properties and sites; and collection of zoology, geology, and other sciences. The societies pioneered the development of both history and nature museums; they utilized oral history in recording interviews and anecdotes; they multiplied access by printing previously unpublished documents and by reprinting rare and out-of-print materials; they built libraries, archives, and manuscript collections; and they started some of the nation's outstanding art collections."

²⁸ Richard J. Cox, "Other Atlantic States: Delaware, Florida, Georgia, Maryland, New Jersey, and South Carolina." In *Historical Consciousness in the Early Republic: The Origins of State Historical Societies, Museums, and Collections, 1791-1861*, ed. H. G. Jones (Chapel Hill: North Caroliniana Society, Inc., and North Carolina Collection, 1995), 103.

the more recent community archives movement.²⁹ During this time, local historical societies and similar agencies have increasingly sought to expand historical narratives, capture fading or forgotten memories, and highlight new and diverse voices in historical storytelling.³⁰ This study locates the BVHS within this transhistorical process and analyzes how it has served these functions within the community it represents.

Third, while there are several monographs, dissertations, theses, articles, and book chapters that provide historical accounts of individual local historical societies or that investigate some aspect of them as single or comparative case studies, these tend to be descriptive, devoid of conceptual or methodological framing, and largely ignore the experience of historical societies created after World War II.³¹ This dissertation presents the history of a contemporary

²⁹ See: Andrew Flinn, "Community Histories, Community Archives: Some Opportunities and Challenges," *Journal of the Society of Archivists* 28, no. 2 (2007); Amanda Laugesen, *The Making of Public Historical Culture in the American West, 1880-1910: The Role of Historical Societies* (Lewiston, NY: The Edwin Mellen Press, Ltd., 2006); Clifford L. Lord and Carl Ubbelohde, *Clio's Servant: The State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1846-1954* (Madison: The State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1967); Rebecca Sheffield, "Community Archives," in *Currents of Archival Thinking, Second Edition*, eds. Heather MacNeil and Terry Eastwood (Santa Barbara and Denver: Libraries Unlimited, 2017); Walter Muir Whitehill, *Independent Historical Societies: An Enquiry into Their Research and Publication Features and Their Financial Future* (Lunenburg, Vermont: The Stinehour Press, 1962).

³⁰ Debbie Ann Doyle, "The Future of Local Historical Societies," *Perspectives on History*, December 1, 2012; Barbara Franco, "Personal Connections to History: The Context for a Changing Historical Society," *Washington History* 7, no. 2 (1995): 26-35. As Doyle indicates, "Small historical societies play an important role in protecting and preserving the historical record and also interpret the past to the public. Their future is thus intertwined with the future of the historical profession... Many local historical societies serve communities that are rapidly changing due to immigration and changes in the local economy. These new audiences might feel less connected to the local history that interested the founders and is documented in current exhibits. The local historical societies are, therefore, struggling to tell stories that remain relevant and significant to their evolving constituencies."

³¹ Some exceptions to this include the following works, which are covered more thoroughly in chapter one: Su Kim Chung, "'We Seek to Be Patient': Jeanne Wier and the Nevada Historical Society, 1904-1950," (doctoral dissertation, University of California, 2015); Tom Kanon, "Material Culture and Public Memory in Nineteenth Century Historical Societies: A Case Study of the Tennessee Historical Society," (doctoral dissertation, Middle Tennessee State University, 2010); Catherine Melissa Lewis, "From Temple to Forum: The Changing Face of the Chicago Historical Society," (doctoral dissertation, University of Iowa, 1997); Adriana Milinic, "Three Versions of History: The Tempe, Chandler, and Scottsdale History Museums," (master's thesis, Arizona State University, 2012); Elizabeth A. Potens, "Connecting Neighborhoods with Their Past: An Analysis of Local Historical Societies and the Value of Engaging Local Communities through Public Programs," (master's thesis, University of the Arts, 2015).

manifestation of small, local history that embodies and illuminates the broader themes of historical consciousness, historical enterprise, collective memory, and community identity.

Approach and Methods

As with most histories, intensive archival research informs this dissertation's analysis and presentation. The primary data collection consisted of carefully reviewing manuscripts, record groupings, oral histories, and other primary sources at the Beulah Brinton House, which is the BVHS headquarters, activity space, archives repository, and artifact display location. These sources included board, committee, and working group records (foundational documents, meeting agendas and minutes, project files, research files, collaboration and partnership documents); internal and external communications and correspondence files; collection registries and accessioning documentation; print and digital photographs; video and audio oral history recordings and transcripts; press clippings, ephemera, vertical file content, and other publications.

BVHS organizational records are fairly complete for the duration its existence and of particular use in researching this history were the *Bay View Historian* newsletter, the personal papers of Ray Bethke (the BVHS's first board president), 70+ hours of interviews and transcripts from BVHS leaders, members, and community associates gathered at different times for specific BVHS initiatives.³² Primary archival research began in June 2021 and continued through October of that year with multiple additional visits to the Wisconsin Historical Society, the Milwaukee County Historical Society, the Milwaukee Public Library, and UW-Milwaukee

³² Bill McDowell, *Historical Research: A Guide for Writers of Dissertations, Theses, Articles, and Books* (New York: Taylor & Francis, 2002), 75. Even with the relative completeness of the BVHS's records, I am well aware that "the volume of evidence which is available is not, of course, a guide to its reliability or usefulness."

Libraries Special Collections. These repositories contain collections with firsthand documentation that was crucial to understanding the institutional and intellectual environment from which the BVHS emerged.³³

The analysis and narrative presentation incorporated all sources and information that could help address the main research questions. The archival material date range stretches from the late 1800s to the present, but the bulk is from between 1970-2015. The sources directly referenced in the dissertation footnotes and bibliography represent only a portion of what was consulted and gathered from all physical and virtual repositories. The sources used were created primarily by the BVHS for operational and administrative purposes, but also includes many relevant items created by outside entities that served as BVHS stakeholders, partners, or chroniclers. The archival research process involved identifying potentially relevant repositories, collections, and series; consulting databases, finding aids, catalog records, and other metadata to prioritize candidates; and scheduling research visits to review collection contents, compile notes, and photograph selected records. All content was arranged by date and topic descriptors to allow for a thorough reading and detailed timeline development, which provided a structure around which to arrange evidence and insights into thematic categories.

The analytical process involved synthesizing the emerging themes and supporting evidence into an original narrative, while constantly revisiting the records as new questions or insights emerged. This recursive analysis was initiated with a series of questions aimed at discerning the records' authenticity and meaning: Who wrote or created it? What is it about? When was it written? Where did it come from? How did it end up here? Why is useful (or not) for this study? The records were also examined for notes, marginalia, placement, completeness,

³³ See the Bibliography for a listing of all archival collections consulted for this dissertation project.

anomalies, and other context clues that might affect their value as information and evidence, or suggest possible reasons for gaps, lacunae, or otherwise help refute or confirm that the records were what they appeared to be. The aim of this approach was to impose a thoroughness and level of deliberation to effectively tie pieces of evidence to external actions, decisions, consequences, or outcomes related to the BVHS and other ancillary subjects examined in the study. Employing this systematic approach also facilitated some ability to read between the lines and get a better sense of tone and motivation where these qualities were not instantly apparent. Over many hours ensconced in the documentation, the iterative nature of this process allowed gradually quicker identification of those bits of information and record types that were most relevant.

Historical research is based on document analysis because in most instances human informants are not available and whatever recorded information that was kept may be all that is known about a subject. There are aspects of the BVHS's existence that may only show up in the record and would otherwise be unobtainable. The documents capture the activities and functions of an organization, and thus, depending on their completeness, they speak to that organization's values and what it deemed important. They offer a collective perspective, which is crucial to a study that does not incorporate data gathered directly from individual informants expressly for this research project. The possibility of conducting interviews or otherwise gathering direct accounts from people associated with the BVHS proved untenable for various reasons, compounded by the fact that most of the research occurred during the thick of the COVID-19 pandemic. Many of the people who could have directly informed parts of the history were gone, either because they died or no longer lived in the Milwaukee area, or they were otherwise inaccessible.

Those who might still be available could bring only a single perspective that, while probably interesting, would not have necessarily contributed to the study, especially if claims were made that were unverifiable through other evidence. Even for those few individuals who may have comprehensive knowledge of many facets of the organization over time, theirs ultimately is just one perspective.³⁴ Human subjects can be unreliable, especially when asked to recall events in the past, sometimes over many decades.³⁵ Furthermore, it is difficult to control for bias and subjectivity, especially in secondhand accounts, and there were already relevant resources based on firsthand accounts in the form of oral history interviews. These offered a preferable alternative because they included multiple perspectives on different aspects of the BVHS over time from people who served as leaders and volunteers. The purpose of these interviews, however, was not expressly to capture information specifically for this dissertation, which made them more credible, even if their utility for the study was limited.

Fiona Cosson insists that sources derived from local historical societies “lend themselves to the ‘doing’ of a myriad different types of history such as microhistories to facilitate micro-social levels of analysis,” and this dissertation utilizes methods often associated with microhistory.³⁶ Sigurður Gylfi Magnússon and Istvan Szijarto define microhistory as “the intensive historical investigation of a relatively well-defined smaller object,” which may be a

³⁴ McDowell, *Historical Research*, 60-62. According to McDowell, interviews are not simply vehicles “for obtaining facts in response to questions. Factual data may be interspersed with errors of judgement, and inconsistent replies may be influenced by opinions, values, beliefs, and attitudes... Recollections are always partial because only a selection of events will ever be recalled.”

³⁵ McDowell, *Historical Research*, 61-62; Nicole C. Rust, “Our Memory is Even Better Than Our Experts Thought,” *Scientific American*, May 25, 2021, <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/our-memory-is-even-better-than-experts-thought/>. Rust indicates that conclusions about the reliability of human memory “vary tremendously” among scholar, but recent research on memory and cognition indicates that a person’s age and the time lapsed from an event produce deficiencies in accurate recall.

³⁶ Fiona Cosson, “The Small Politics of Everyday Life,” 53.

single event, person, family, group, or other distinct phenomenon tied to human agency.³⁷ For microhistorians, “people who lived in the past are not merely puppets on the hands of great underlying forces of history, but they are regarded as active individuals, conscious actors.”³⁸ Microhistory focuses on certain cases, persons, or circumstances within a defined temporal range to achieve a granular understanding of the subject in the context of larger historical phenomenon.³⁹

Like most historical research, microhistory is documents-based and may incorporate any relevant media or format that helps address the research objectives.⁴⁰ Indeed, contemporaneous documentation lies at the heart of microhistory—its sourcing, its analysis, its interpretation, and its presentation. Traditional case studies and other methods are often used to test larger generalizations, but microhistory aims at avoiding or minimizing generalizations, both in terms of how these might inform the study and in what the study produces. Microhistory largely eschews the abstract for the real, even while acknowledging that the data investigated, and the interpretative narrative produced, can never be absolutely certain and complete.⁴¹

There are several viewpoints and historiographical arguments as to what microhistory means, how it should be conducted, and what it ultimately aims to accomplish, but it generally involves scaling down historical investigation away from sweeping narratives and theory-dependent macroanalysis to scrutinize and understand history in small units.⁴² The ensuing

³⁷ Magnússon and Szijarto, *What is Microhistory?*, 4.

³⁸ Magnússon and Szijarto, 5.

³⁹ Magnússon and Szijarto, 5.

⁴⁰ Martha Howell and Walter Prevenier, *From Reliable Sources: An Introduction to Historical Methods* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2001).

⁴¹ Sigurður Gylfi Magnússon, “Far-reaching Microhistory: The Use of Microhistorical Perspective in a Globalized World,” *Rethinking History* 21, no. 3 (2017): 312-41.

⁴² See: John Brewer, “Microhistory and the Histories of Everyday Life,” *Cultural and Social History* 7, no. 1 (2010): 87-109; Richard D. Brown, “Microhistory and the Post-Modern Challenge,” *Journal of the Early Republic* 23, no. 1 (2003): 1—20; Carlo Ginzburg, “Microhistory: Two or Three Things That I

chapters infrequently make explicit reference or rigidly adhere to any one application of microhistory, which is by design a flexible interpretive and methodological approach. Instead, microhistory serves as a general guideline to consistently analyze the sources and incorporate them into a compelling narrative.

A Note on Historical Inquiry in LIS

The Library and Information Studies (LIS) field has long utilized historical research in building the disciplinary body of knowledge, informing institutional decision-making, fostering professional identity and awareness, and providing a perspectival foundation for present activity and future directions.⁴³ Even so, there is continuing disagreement about the efficacy, rigor, and relevance of historiographical methods in LIS as both scholarly and applied researchers have more firmly embraced empirical social science models of inquiry in recent decades.⁴⁴ Indeed, the adoption in LIS of more systematic interdisciplinary research approaches corresponds to the fading popularity of library history, which by the 1960s was viewed by some critics as “mere antiquarianism” because it mainly offered “an accumulation of facts and dates having little or no obvious relation to the larger issues facing librarianship.”⁴⁵ This mirrors the same type of disdain some “professional” historians have directed toward the vernacular and locally-focused history work that has occurred in historical societies long before there was a history profession.

Know About It,” *Critical Inquiry*. 20, no. 1 (1993): 10—35; Sigurður Gylfi Magnússon, “‘The Singularization of History’: Social History and Microhistory within the Postmodern State of Knowledge,” *Journal of Social History* 36, no. 3 (2003): 701-35.

⁴³ Lynn Silipigni Connaway and Ronald R. Powell, *Basic Research Methods for Librarians* (Santa Barbara, CA: Libraries Unlimited, 2010), 245-46; See also Felix Reichmann, “Historical Research and Library Science,” *Library Trends* 13, (1964): 31-41.

⁴⁴ Connaway and Powell, *Basic Research Methods for Librarians*, 251. See also Orvin Lee Shiflett, “Clio’s Claim: The Role of Historical Research in Library and Information Science,” *Library Trends* 32, (1984): 387-88.

⁴⁵ Shiflett, “Clio’s Claim,” 388, 393.

Lynn S. Connaway and Ronald L. Powell find LIS's resistance toward historical research in its "*ex post facto*" nature: "The historical researcher must work from evidence back to the event. In addition, the historian is usually in the situation of having to investigate exceptionally complex phenomena. Consequently, it is especially difficult for the historian to support causality within a relationship, or even to draw conclusions with a very high level of confidence."⁴⁶ The potential for such ambiguity often runs counter to the practical results-oriented research agendas increasingly common across the contemporary LIS field.⁴⁷ Connaway and Powell further reflect the prevailing attitude in current LIS thinking on research, writing that "it is generally considered advisable for the historical researcher to follow some sort of scientific method of inquiry, including the formulation and testing of a hypothesis and the analysis and interpretation of data. Such processes help to distinguish true historical research from mere chronology."⁴⁸ However, as Orvin Lee Shiflett notes:

In history, little beyond the purely factual can be proven or disproven absolutely—and that only as far as the records are complete and accessible. Historians can only describe and arrive at general conclusions about their data. History rarely offers the opportunity to apply elaborate or even the simplest statistical tests to data to convince readers of the validity of their findings. Historians convince—or fail to convince—their audience not by elaborate numerology, but by the facts at their command and their ability to argue

⁴⁶ Connaway and Powell, *Basic Research Methods for Librarians*, 257.

⁴⁷ Shiflett, "Clio's Claim," 387-88. Shiflett writes: "The new emphasis reflects a growing demand for utility in library research and a feeling that to be of value, research must sustain external indicators of validity. That is, it must fit into the paradigm of what is known about the question under investigation. In these two elements—utility and validity—many feel that history has failed and they demand more productive, in the sense of 'more practical,' forms of investigation."

⁴⁸ Connaway and Powell, *Basic Research Methods for Librarians*, 257.

persuasively, ever conscious that they may have missed something and that the nature of historical records only allow, at best, a partial picture of the reality of past events.⁴⁹

Once a mainstay of dissertations and theses, the amount of history-based LIS scholarship has declined in the last three decades, even while interest in the multidisciplinary historical study of information, libraries, archives, and related subjects has grown in non-LIS disciplines.⁵⁰ Pierre Delsaerdt cautioned that the continued de-emphasis of history within the LIS profession may mean this area of study is “doomed to become a stepchild of historiography, much to the detriment of libraries and cultural history.”⁵¹ Edward Goedeken called for a more expansive approach to LIS history that includes “all kinds of cultural repositories” and allows the presentation of “informed analyses of libraries as cultural agents in our society.”⁵² Shiflett asserts that the small pieces of “approximate truth” that might arise from library history “are better than no truth at all and attempts by other methodologies to sort out truth suffer from the same difficulty because of their inability to control an environment in which variables are measured, recorded and evaluated.”⁵³

⁴⁹ Shiflett, “Clio’s Claim,” 390.

⁵⁰ Paula R. Dempsey, “How LIS Scholars Conceptualize Rigor in Qualitative Data,” *portal: Libraries and the Academy* 18, no. 2 (2018): 365; See also James Elmborg and Christine Pawley, “Historical Research as Critical Practice and Relationship: The ‘Carnegie Libraries in Iowa Project,’” *Journal of Education for Library and Information Science* 44, no. 3-4 (2003): 235-45; Jean-Pierre V. M. Herubel, “Clio’s Dream, or Has the Muse Departed from the Temple? Implications for Library History: A Review Essay,” *Libraries & Culture* 39, no. 4 (2004): 429-45; Jean-Pierre V. M. Herubel, “To Honor Our Past: Historical Research, Library History, and the Historiographical Imperative: Conceptual Reflections and Exploratory Observations,” *Libraries Faculty and Staff Scholarship and Research*, Paper 140 (2016); Christine Pawley, “History in the Library and Information Science Curriculum: Outline of a Debate,” *Libraries & Culture* 40, no. 3 (2005): 223-224; Veronica Gauchi Risso, “Research Methods used in Library and Information Science During the 1970-2010,” *New Library World* 117, no. 1-2 (2016): 78.

⁵¹ Pierre Delsaerdt, “Heritage Libraries and Historical Research,” *Fontes Artis Musicae* 62, no. 1 (2014): 2.

⁵² Edward A. Goedeken, “Our Historiographical Enterprise: Shifting Emphases and Directions,” *Libraries & the Cultural Record* 45, no. 3 (2010): 353.

⁵³ Shiflett, “Clio’s Claim,” 394.

Shiflett defines *library history* as: “a rubric that covers a myriad of topics associated with libraries and other information systems. Its major form consists of the history of the traditional library, but it also includes the history of any activity or event that might be part of the domain of library and information science.”⁵⁴ This dissertation advances knowledge in this domain, not simply for the potential practical applications it may produce for LIS, but because it helps illuminate a phenomenon (historical societies) that has long blended the full range of functions carried out by library, information, and cultural institutions.⁵⁵ Su Kim Chung speculates that the hybrid nature of historical societies may be a reason why it has been absent from disciplinary discussions: “The historical society in the United States, with its unique amalgamation of books, manuscripts and objects, has sometimes defied categorization as an institution; not quite a library, nor a museum nor an archive, it can claim membership in all three categories. Perhaps for this reason, it has never attracted the scholarly attention that has been devoted to academic and public libraries, museums, and even archives.”⁵⁶ Interestingly, Shiflett likens the criticism of library history to that of local history (often emanating from the academy), which posits that such pursuits are not worth the effort and are unable to contribute to larger understandings of history or historical consciousness beyond a very limited scope.⁵⁷

⁵⁴ Shiflett, “Clio’s Claim,” 402.

⁵⁵ Anne L. Buchanan and Jean-Pierre V. M. Herubel, “Subject and Historiographic Characteristics of Library History: Disciplinary Considerations and Scholarship,” *Journal of Scholarly Publishing* 42, no. 4 (2011): 516.

⁵⁶ Chung, “We Seek to Be Patient,” 3.

⁵⁷ Shiflett, “Clio’s Claim,” 392-393. This brings to mind Richard J. Cox’s comparison (Cox, “Other Atlantic States,” 116) of the overall lack of scholarly consideration for historical societies with a similar deficit in efforts to track archival history: “The value of archival history should be unmistakable and certainly not controversial. It can be used in archival self-evaluation and planning, to understand contemporary issues facing the archival profession, as case studies for archival education and training, to understand the development and nature of recordkeeping, and to support the scholarly bent of archivists (especially those viewing themselves as historians).”

Further justification for undertaking a historical study of a history-based institution comes from LIS scholars such as Wayne Wiegand, Jean-Pierre V. M. Herubel, and others who have called for more robust and critical approaches to library and library-adjacent (archives, special collections, reading, books and print culture) historiography.⁵⁸ Wiegand specifically calls out historical societies as under-researched civic institutions that serve communities as affinity spaces—similar in purpose to public libraries—where people access stories and exchange social capital.⁵⁹ Herubel envisions LIS research as “open and receptive to continual importation of ideas, perspectives, and techniques,” and that library history “transcends specific forms of institutional configuration... to embrace all forms of cultural production.”⁶⁰ The BVHS history presented here offers an account of a single institution within this larger historical context of cultural production and consumption, while responding to persistent calls within the LIS discipline for diverse approaches to research and reflection as the scope of LIS expands and evolves within and beyond institutions.⁶¹

⁵⁸ Jean-Pierre V. M. Herubel, “Observations on an Emergent Specialization: Contemporary French Cultural History—Significance for Scholarship,” *Journal of Scholarly Publishing* 41, no. 2 (2010): 215-40; Wayne A. Wiegand, “To Reposition a Research Agenda: What American Studies Can Teach the LIS Community about the Library in the Life of the User,” *The Library Quarterly: Information, Community, Policy* 73, no. 4 (2003): 369-83; Wayne A. Wiegand, “‘Tunnel Vision and Blind Spots’ Reconsidered: *Part of Our Lives* (2015) as a Test Case,” *Library Quarterly: Information, Community, Policy* 85, no. 4 (2015): 347-70; Wayne A. Wiegand, “Tunnel Vision and Blind Spots: What the Past Tells Us about the Present: Reflections on the Twentieth-Century History of American Librarianship,” *The Library Quarterly* 69 no. 1 (1999): 1-32.

⁵⁹ Wiegand, “Tunnel Vision and Blind Spots,” 2; Wiegand, “‘Tunnel Vision and Blind Spots’ Reconsidered,” 354.

⁶⁰ Herubel, “Characteristics of Library History,” 517.

⁶¹ William Aspray, “The History of Information Science and Other Traditional Information Domains: Models for Future Research,” *Libraries & The Cultural Record* 46, no. 2 (2011): 80. Aspray writes: “Given the universal applicability of information technology and the spread of information technology into most sectors of modern society, our picture of the world needs to include information-gathering not only within archives, museums, and libraries but in homes, businesses, and ‘third places’ that are neither home nor work.”

Narrative Structure

Historical consciousness and the historical enterprise are inextricably linked in the institutions that individuals and communities create, and these concepts emerge throughout this chronological examination, along with how they relate to the immediate circumstances of the BVHS and in its evolving community and institutional milieu. The first two chapters begin at the 30,000-foot view and gradually pull focus to the BVHS history proper. Chapter one lays the groundwork for understanding historical societies as a ubiquitous social phenomenon with deep roots in the American experience, and as a vastly overlooked subject of scholarly study. Chapter two accounts for the broader context of the preceding decades that gave birth to the BVHS—how elevated historical consciousness and increased activity in the local, state, and national historical enterprise made fertile ground for the creation of a new institution within a community already in tune with its history.

The BVHS history unfolds over the next three chapters, with chapter three covering the organization's founding and early years of growth (1979-1986), chapter four focusing on the middle years characterized by uncertainty and financial precarity (1987-2005), and chapter five discussing the BVHS's efforts to modernize in the years following its purchase of the Beulah Brinton home as its headquarters (2006-2015). The conclusion synthesizes themes and ideas from the previous chapters to provide a critical profile of the BVHS and some of the current issues it faces as a mature organization forging ahead in an uncertain environment. It also attempts to make the case for why the entire range of cultural heritage agencies merits further consideration in theoretical and practical scholarship to facilitate continued institutional development across all communities, local or otherwise.

Chapter 1: American Historical Societies in Context

This chapter provides the conceptual groundwork for understanding the historical society movement in general and the Bay View Historical Society (BVHS) as a component or outgrowth of this phenomenon. It incorporates literature from a variety of fields (i.e., history, public history, museum studies, archival studies, etc.) linking historical societies with concepts like cultural heritage, local history, and the historical enterprise, while setting up the historical, scholarly, and operational context for examining the BVHS's creation and ongoing activity, which is explored in subsequent chapters. The BVHS is a cultural heritage institution built around local history, and the following sections attempt to position the BVHS as both actor and study subject within the larger analytical narrative of the historical society movement.

History, Heritage, and Memory at the Local Level

Cultural heritage encompasses a wide range of activities, products, and traditions but most people are most likely familiar with the institutional forms developed to capture and curate a community's tangible and intangible cultural expressions and heritage interests. David Carr defined cultural heritage institutions as “places created to hold and preserve objects and texts, to expand the boundaries of public knowledge associated with those artifacts and words, and to open the possibilities of learning in the contexts of everyday life.”¹ According to Carr, all cultural heritage institutions are characterized by: the presence of collections (objects, living things, knowledge, information, lessons, memories) that are offered freely to users or learners; a systemic, continuous, and organized knowledge structure that signifies an inherent social and

¹ David Carr, *The Promise of Cultural Institutions* (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 2003), xiii.

intellectual context for the collections that is readily apparent to users and enriches their experience; scholarship, information, and thought that exhibits a culture of inquiry around the collections and motivates user engagement.²

Carr insisted that “human communities, visible and invisible, past and present, are embedded in cultural institutions,” and when operating at their best they “compose the purposeful intelligence of their society, holding the culture’s memory and minding its continuing community.”³ Furthermore, “a community will be engaged by its cultures only if it is a community where memory resides, where the possibilities and satisfaction of learning are present and valued, and where the future is held not only in its families, churches, and schools, but also in its understandings of the past, wherever that past occurred.”⁴ This study shares Carr’s view and considers historical societies an integral and foundational part of the global network of collections-based cultural heritage institutions that shape and are shaped by scholarly and popular conceptions of memory, history, and identity.

According to Barbara Franco, historical societies of all sizes fulfill many roles and cover a range of geographic and subject interests, but this makes these durable cultural entities difficult to categorize both for the organizations themselves and for those observing externally:

Is a historical society a building, an association of members, or a collection? Most historical societies combine several functions. Some are libraries; many operate museums and provide educational services in the form of public programs; others are best known for their publications, ranging from scholarly books to popular magazines. Most collect

² Carr, *The Promise of Cultural Institutions*, xiv-xv.

³ Carr, *The Promise of Cultural Institutions*, 56.

⁴ Carr, *The Promise of Cultural Institutions*, 58.

information in the form of books and manuscripts as well as material culture in the form of artifacts, buildings, and historic sites.⁵

Frequently originating as closed institutions for the educated elite (and often the financially and politically connected), modern historical societies display a variety of operational models, activities, and specializations, but most are community-facing collecting entities with a limited, localized base of participation, drawing support from a combination of public, private, and charitable stakeholders.⁶ As such, most historical societies are entirely concerned with local history at some level.

Carol Kammen offered a flexible definition for local history that rejects traditional views focusing on the “origin, growth, and decline of communities,” or others that contend local history is simply national history writ small.⁷ Kammen views local history as a study of past events, people, and groups in a given geographic area using a wide variety of documentary evidence and analysis that may include regional, national, and international comparative contexts.⁸ The study of local history should proceed following the general rules of historical inquiry (e.g. open-mindedness, honesty, accountability, and accuracy) to examine the human condition across time. As such, local history potentially involves a broad and diverse field of inquiry including political, social, economic, religious, and intellectual history, as well as more specific areas like gender, organizations, and community dynamics. Local history is open to all

⁵ Barbara Franco, “Personal Connections to History: The Context for a Changing Historical Society,” *Washington History* 7, no. 2 (1995): 30.

⁶ Sara Lawrence, “History of Historical Societies in the U.S.,” Public History Resource Center, January 23, 2003, <https://web.archive.org/web/20080209230934/http://www.publichistory.org/features/HistoricalSocietyHistory.html>.

⁷ Kammen, Carol, *On Doing Local History: Reflections on What Local Historians Do, Why, and What It Means* (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 1995), 4.

⁸ Kammen, *On Doing Local History*, 5.

manner of research methodologies and contributors. Although often associated (sometimes derisively) with amateurs and hobbyists, local history as a process and product has contributed significantly to both popular and scholarly understanding of communities all over the world, often through the history and memory work undertaken at local historical societies.

Indeed, the historical society movement as a whole—and thus the preservation of large pockets of American culture and memory—would not have been possible without the labor of amateur hobbyists toiling away in local history organizations. Clement Silvestro collectively referred to these as “the principal storehouse” of local American history and praised the significant contributions of the countless unheralded “loyal enthusiasts” most responsible for marshaling the necessary community support to create and sustain these institutions.⁹ In a publication focused on archival collections management in local historical societies, Robert S. Gordon wrote about the precarious nature of institutional knowledge and expertise in organizations that are largely reliant on volunteers and have limited capacity for effective management and preservation:

There is abundant evidence of local societies being virtually carried, as it were, on the shoulders of a single public-spirited person. With the passing away of such a person the society tends to slip into a period of inactivity until another selfless historian will undertake to reactivate it and to carry the torch. It is during such periods of interregnum that the local archives are virtually inaccessible. With the dedicated and experienced

⁹ Clement M. Silvestro, *Organizing a Local Historical Society* (Madison, WI: American Association for State and Local History, 1958), 189-192.

custodian gone, the papers of the society are often relegated to someone's attic or basement and exposed to the damaging elements of weather.¹⁰

Dorothy Weyer Creigh described working in a local historical society as a way of life, “for that is what it has become—a way of living, really, wherein we think, plan, talk, even dream, about local history.”¹¹ Creigh’s how-to book is aimed at the historical society that is “short on money, but long on enthusiasm, imagination and ingenuity, and is geographically remote from professional help and advice. It is written for the group that will rely on volunteer labor, will have to spend much time raising money through various means, and will not know the meaning of the word Impossible. It is written for the society which will contribute harmony and cohesiveness to the community as it preserves local history.”¹² Creigh outlined the key administrative and programmatic aspects that continue to define the local historical society model including guidelines on organizational structure and finance, developing and maintaining projects on limited budgets, recruiting and managing volunteers, and branching out to more ambitious services and activities like oral histories, site-marking, tours, libraries, building preservation, building restoration, museums, and publishing. Although practical in nature, Creigh’s book and similar works often indicate a philosophical, emotional, or even moral reasoning behind the impressive efforts and thankless tasks required to keep local history and memory alive.

¹⁰ Robert S. Gordon, “Suggestions for Organization and Description of Archival Holdings of Local Historical Societies,” *American Archivist* 26, no. 1 (1963): 19-20.

¹¹ Dorothy Weyer Creigh, *A Primer for Local Historical Societies* (Nashville, TN: American Association for State and Local History, 1976), ix.

¹² Creigh, *A Primer for Local Historical Societies*, ix.

This responsibility falls to local historians and history enthusiasts, most frequently embodied in the membership of local historical societies, because often there is no other instrumentality to serve as custodian and gatekeeper over the long term and in ways that do justice to the local community. Ian Willis related the importance of physical spaces in reinforcing this larger notion of place and the many roles local historical societies play in community education and memorialization.¹³ These roles are at once practical, symbolic, and aspirational: each facility is an important local social and cultural institution that presents the collective memory of its community to visitors; each is a site for the preservation and promotion of the material aspects of local history, which are often unique, uncatalogued, and underused; each provides a material statement of its community's past and represents the community's values, traditions, icons, culture, and symbolism to itself; each is a site of past memories where people can go to remember; each is a site of philanthropy that offers the opportunity to create social capital through volunteerism, active citizenship, and cross-institutional collaboration; each is an important site for community partnerships that strengthen it and promote sustainability; each participates in the local economy through heritage tourism and information provision.¹⁴

Similarly, Fiona Cosson discussed the essential role of local historical societies in the production of history outside of academy-dominated channels, claiming that history constructed by, created for, and consumed within a local community is often “one of the few means with which people engage with history and frequently the sole source of historical knowledge for and within their locale.”¹⁵ These collections are “saturated with local peculiarities and biases,” and are often assembled from what the under-resourced leaders and volunteers can gather or

¹³ Willis, “Stories and Things,” 19.

¹⁴ Willis, “Stories and Things,” 29-32.

¹⁵ Cosson, “The Small Politics of Everyday Life,” 46.

manufacture within the community.¹⁶ These might include the volunteers' own family archives or artifact collections, oral history interviews, autobiographical reminiscences, or whatever else is offered by donors, whether or not it is actually wanted. Such material traces of everyday life frequently remain undescribed, uncatalogued, and unused throughout their existence at the local historical society, but this process of history making—of creating and curating stories through collecting—is crucial for these organizations and how they relate to their communities.¹⁷ Perhaps more consequentially, local historical societies and the collections they contain help facilitate “the act of collective remembering... where memories of the town ‘as it used to be’ could be refreshed, exchanged, and reinforced.”¹⁸

Contemporary historical societies provide tools, resources, and activities for coping with the present and future, understanding the present through the past, and transmitting ideas and values across generations and community subgroups. However, the historical track record— informed by very infrequent scholarly investigation—suggests that what J. Franklin Jameson claimed over a century ago remains true today: “it is indeed axiomatic to us that historical societies ought to exist and to flourish, but on the other hand it is by no means axiomatic to all the world.”¹⁹ The financial and operational uncertainty characterizing many historical societies over time seems less a result of the perceived disinterest in the general public towards history, than from historical societies' seemingly perpetual struggle to determine and capture the publics they are best suited to serve.

The primary rationale for historical societies is based on preserving the past for the future and this is often reflected in mission and position statements and other communication aimed at

¹⁶ Cosson, “The Small Politics of Everyday Life,” 46.

¹⁷ Cosson, “The Small Politics of Everyday Life,” 53.

¹⁸ Cosson, “The Small Politics of Everyday Life,” 55.

¹⁹ Jameson, “History of Historical Societies,” 1.

shoring up existing membership and appealing to new publics. Dirk Spennemann asserted that this communication is effective to the degree that the public considers historical societies to be reliable and trustworthy sources of historical information. This association, however, is complicated by widely held preconceptions about historical societies and the people typically associated with them, with Spennemann noting that they are often “perceived, rightly or wrongly, as populated by predominately old people, often with vested interests in the form of thematic hobby-horses, holding dull, interminable meetings and captivated by past events of a largely parochial nature.”²⁰

When communities seek refuge in the past during uncertain times, it is crucial for historical societies to remain focused on the future and constantly mindful of who they are meant to serve. Such focus allows organizations to fulfill their duties “in collecting historic resources at the local and regional level, in documenting and curating local material culture, and in acting as a repository of information used for school activities, student projects and community projects, as well as historic preservation activities.”²¹ But as a custodian of the past, the typical historical society “tends to be parsimonious in its application, with information often closely guarded, almost like personal property, and not readily handed out to the general public.”²² Therefore, these organizations must begin to understand “that if the past is a precondition of the present and the present is a precondition of the future, then the historic trend from past to present can be employed to actively shape both present and future.”²³

²⁰ Spennemann, “The Futurist Stance of Historical Societies,” 5.

²¹ Spennemann, “The Futurist Stance of Historical Societies,” 5.

²² Spennemann, “The Futurist Stance of Historical Societies,” 13.

²³ Spennemann, “The Futurist Stance of Historical Societies,” 13.

The American Historical Society Movement

In this regard, the long history of historical societies in the United States offers plentiful lessons for institutions of all sizes but may hold special relevance for those with a local history focus. If, as Spennemann claimed, “history provides a community, city, or region with an identity that enables it to withstand and manage the stress and changes of modern society,” it seems logical that local historical societies can and should find inspiration in their own pasts as paragons of stability and continuity in the face of constant change and, at times, withering criticism.²⁴

Alea Henle offers a definition for historical societies based on the understanding of their early American development from 1791-1850: “a historical society is an organization founded to collect and preserve materials for the writing of history.”²⁵ The initial wave of American organizations created in New England corresponded to the European historical and antiquarian societies founded earlier, but these two terms were not interchangeable. According to Henle, historical societies were the “province of men of letters and philosophers,” who “paid a degree of attention to non-written sources,” and emphasized literary texts, grand narrative, nations, and politics.²⁶ Antiquarians, by contrast, “were understood as closer in approach to natural history and science than philosophy, embracing comparison and classification of non-literary sources, and favoring investigation of the everyday over grand narratives.”²⁷ As historical societies proliferated in the United States in the following decades, they reflected historian and antiquarian characteristics and interests in various idiosyncratic settings, but with more of a focus on

²⁴ Spennemann, “The Futurist Stance of Historical Societies,” 13.

²⁵ Alea Henle, “Preserving the Past, Making History: Historical Societies in the Early United States,” (doctoral dissertation, University of Connecticut, 2012), 11.

²⁶ Henle, “Preserving the Past, Making History,” 11.

²⁷ Henle, “Preserving the Past, Making History,” 12.

capturing historical resources for future use, while expanding the membership base as social conventions allowed.²⁸ The early historical societies were almost entirely populated by the white merchants, landowners, and professionals of European descent, who frequently were the only people in most communities that could afford the membership fees.²⁹ Women were often not officially barred or legally restricted from participation, “but social customs kept the rolls all male,” and often women were relegated to supporting roles as auxiliaries or donors or some other lower tier of membership.³⁰

In addition to the European academic influence, Julian P. Boyd identified Puritan interest in history and emergent nationalism among the main initial driving forces in the development of historical and antiquarian organizations in the early American republic.³¹ This early “movement” was embodied in Jeremey Belknap’s attempts at the Massachusetts Historical Society to draw up a charter for a national organization of state-based historical societies with uniform standards for publications and printing, regular correspondence to share discoveries, and requirements for membership, with each node in the network becoming “academies for the exchange of facts and ideas among recognized men of learning.”³² From the beginning, historical societies were reliant on the volunteerism and financial and material support of its members, who often sought to emphasize the role of their location or state in American history.³³ The movement was motivated more generally by the need to preserve this history and the belief that this should be a proactive pursuit by the various society associates due to the shortcomings of official documentation

²⁸ Kanon, “Material Culture and Public Memory,” 40.

²⁹ Henle, “Preserving the Past, Making History,” 35.

³⁰ Henle, “Preserving the Past, Making History,” 35.

³¹ Julian P. Boyd, “State and Local Historical Societies in the United States,” *The American Historical Review* 40, no 1 (1934): 16.

³² Boyd, “State and Local Historical Societies,” 17.

³³ Clifford L. Lord, *Keepers of the Past* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1965), 14.

efforts.³⁴ However, these preservation and research objectives were not just limited to the acquisition, copying, and sharing of documents: “Out of their broad interests grew historical societies and museums devoted to special fields, such as natural history, science, religion, racial elements, and numismatics.”³⁵

Following a significant lull in growth after much initial interest in the first few decades of the American republic, membership and involvement gradually expanded and by the mid-1800s, both because of and in response to advances in historical understanding and historiography, historical societies leaders “inaugurated a new conception of the function of a historical society in a republic, that of making history serve a democratic role in the development of the community culture—to be, as was proper, at the community expense.”³⁶ The closing of the American frontier and approaching centennial celebrations toward the end of the century prompted a marked increase in the number of historical societies founded in the 1870s and 1880s.³⁷ By the early 1900s, the leading edge of the historical society movement was the state-sponsored institutions in the Midwest and Western states, while a distinctive historical society movement was just emerging in the former Confederate South.³⁸ This activity corresponded to the larger trends of professionalization, academicization, and the growing emphasis on scientific history, which would further demarcate roles and authority within the historical enterprise by

³⁴ Josephine L. Harper, “Lyman C. Draper and Early American Archives,” *American Archivist* 15, no. 3 (1953): 205.

³⁵ Boyd, “State and Local Historical Societies,” 19.

³⁶ Boyd, “State and Local Historical Societies,” 24.

³⁷ Clifford L. Lord, *Keepers of the Past*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1965.

³⁸ Amanda Laugesen, *The Making of Public Historical Culture in the American West, 1880-1910: The Role of Historical Societies* (Lewiston, NY: The Edwin Mellen Press, Ltd., 2006).

solidifying the functions of preservation, education, research, and publication along institutional and vocational lines as they developed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.³⁹

It was during this extended transition that the American historical society movement more firmly broke free of the early antiquarian model based on the European athenaeum.⁴⁰ Speaking to a group of Southern historians in 1914, J. Franklin Jameson insisted on the power of history to provide the American people with a sense of “sympathetic comprehension and national unity,” and called for historical study that sweeps away the “vestiges of provincialism... by attentive investigations of the development of American life in every state and every region alike.”⁴¹ In his speech, Jameson favorably calls out the development of a “special variety of state-supported historical society, ingeniously articulated with the state government,” and challenges those working in modern historical societies to “stop and ask themselves what things in history are really important.”⁴² As with other aspects of the historical enterprise, the administration of historical societies steadily shifted toward trained historians and were no longer dominated by the networks of elite local history enthusiasts.⁴³ This corresponds to a growing focus on the social relevance of history during the Progressive Era, particularly as “a tool for uplifting society through public education.”⁴⁴

³⁹ Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt, and Margaret Jacob, *Telling the Truth About History* (New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company, 1994); Michael Kammen, *Mystic Chords of Memory: The Transformation of Tradition in American Culture* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1991); Robert B. Townsend, *History's Babel: Scholarship, Professionalization, and the Historical Enterprise in the United States, 1880-1940* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2013); Ian Tyrell, *Historians in Public: The Practices of American History, 1890-1970* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

⁴⁰ Franco, “Personal Connections to History,” 28.

⁴¹ Jameson, J. Franklin, “History of Historical Societies,” Address given at the Seventy-Fifth Anniversary of the Georgia Historical Society (Savannah, GA: Morning News Print, 1914), 3-4.

⁴² Jameson, History of Historical Societies, 12-13, 19.

⁴³ Ryan Schumacher, “The *Wisconsin Magazine of History*: A Case Study in Scholarly and Popular Approaches to American Historical Society Publishing, 1917-2000,” *Journal of Scholarly Publishing* 44, no. 2 (2013): 138.

⁴⁴ Franco, “Personal Connections to History,” 28.

According to Amanda Laugesen, “historical societies often served to establish an American claim to a new place, reinforcing statehood, community, and ties to the land through telling a narrative of the making of the state that could also provide a basis for unity of a community with disparate origins”⁴⁵ Historical societies were envisioned as sites “where desirable objects, chief among them books, manuscripts, and documents could exist” and become “the tangible substance of a community’s past.”⁴⁶ Even as historical societies became more professionalized and closely tied to academic scholarship during this era, “their role within the community, however, did not diminish—they continued to help shape the education and cultural sensibilities of their local people and through them the nation, this time with the authority of progressive science and professionalism.”⁴⁷ The public role of historical societies became more closely aligned with education, but as the “scholar’s workshop” that was part of a larger progressive response to changes in American society, such organizations were constantly challenged to remain relevant to the broader community.⁴⁸ For example, Laugesen identifies genealogy as a popular interest that drove participation in the State Historical Society of Wisconsin from its early development—indeed, personal interest in family history seems to be a universal theme in the historical society movement from its beginnings through the present day.⁴⁹

Historical societies became an essential part of the web of culture that further institutionalized standards of public morality and influenced communities through public education and emphasizing shared history. Even so, “while historical societies did much to shape

⁴⁵ Amanda Laugesen, “Keeper of Histories: The State Historical Society of Wisconsin Library and Its Cultural Work, 1860-1910,” *Libraries & Culture* 39, no. 1 (2004): 13-16.

⁴⁶ Laugesen, “Keeper of Histories,” 21.

⁴⁷ Laugesen, “Keeper of Histories,” 23.

⁴⁸ Laugesen, “Keeper of Histories,” 29.

⁴⁹ Laugesen, “Keeper of Histories,” 22.

public historical consciousness they could never dictate it.”⁵⁰ Historical societies contributed to an Americanization process underway as the safety valve of frontier expansion disappeared by the World War I era.⁵¹ Yet, the historical society movement was “fragmented by region, approach, and values,” and the underlying sectional differences helped academic history interests gain a stronger foothold in all areas of the historical enterprise, especially in Southern and Western locales with fewer ties to the older East Coast and Mid-Atlantic historical networks.⁵² The interwar years—punctuated by the influenza pandemic, Prohibition, and the Great Depression—saw both popular and scholarly historical interests emphasizing the “material culture that documented the experiences of ordinary people and everyday life.”⁵³ According to Ian Tyrell, the United States federal government became more involved in history-related initiatives during this period, which enabled the growing class of academic history professionals to assert further control over research, publication, and preservation agendas at the state and local levels.⁵⁴

Post-World War II history interests shifted the entire historical enterprise toward “the broad themes of national consensus, of industrial, agricultural, and technological progress, or of the ‘melting pot’ concept of cultural history.”⁵⁵ Although reflecting a larger social emphasis on American unity and triumphalism, the professionalization and specialization of history, along

⁵⁰ Laugesen, “Keeper of Histories,” 31.

⁵¹ Kanon, “Material Culture and Public Memory,” 45. According to Kanon, “At the turn of the nineteenth century, Americans faced the dilemma of explaining what being an American actually meant. Without the ancient traditions that the Old World possessed, the fledgling United States could not turn to the past for inspiration—at least not a distant past”

⁵² Tyrell, *Historians in Public*, 213.

⁵³ Franco, “Personal Connections to History,” 28.

⁵⁴ Tyrell, *Historians in Public*, 222, 229. Tyrell writes, “this erosion of purely local, amateur historiography reflected the hegemony of the state history movement, its professional leadership, and the increasingly national orientation of that leadership. Local history for the most part had to be interpreted through the national story and by state historians who took custody of local history.”

⁵⁵ Franco, “Personal Connections to History,” 28.

with the emphasis on national historical narratives and scientific approaches, “eroded links with amateurs, local history groups, genealogists, and antiquarians” whose tried-and-true methods, expertise, and experience were increasingly rejected as irrelevant and outdated.⁵⁶ The various camps comprising the historical enterprise became entrenched within their specialty areas and those outside of the dominant professional academic circles seemed especially determined to protect their turf. For example, a 1945 article by Bertha E. Josephson called for formal professional education for local and state historical society workers separate from the programs offered in history and library science departments, which she deemed inadequate for this specialized institutional work.⁵⁷ Josephson’s perspective is notable for both its strong advocacy and scathing critique of state and local historical societies, at once calling for the removal of the “misfits, cranks and esthetes” who have crept into institutional positions, while also scolding the academic historian to “readjust his point of view and descend from a sneering approach to one of eye-to-eye appreciation of the values and importance of the lesser characters and events that make up the history of his country.”⁵⁸

⁵⁶ Tyrell, *Historians in Public*, 209, 215.

⁵⁷ Bertha E. Josephson, “How Can We Improve Our Historical Societies?” *American Archivist* 8, no. 3 (1945): 197-198. Josephson writes, “Working in a historical society entails more than just a knowledge of history. One might as well qualify to run a restaurant because one has been a frequent patron of the place. Historians, it is true, frequent libraries of historical societies but only as patrons where the materials they seek is served up to them. Little conception do most of them have of the backbreaking, dirty, exacting jobs of sorting, arranging, cataloguing, labeling, and storing that must precede every piece that they handle so nonchalantly. Nor do these casual patrons realize the multitude of jack-of-all-trade duties that a historical society worker must perform.” Furthermore, “training in library science is not adequate preparation for historical society work except in the limited capacity of book cataloging; museum objects, archives, manuscripts, and maps offer problems which no Dewey or Cutter can answer to satisfaction. Library training may make the worker more aware of the importance of methodology but the multiplicity of objects dealt with in a historical society will either drive him mad or turn him into a pedantic grind. It will be especially difficult for the library graduate who hasn’t the saving perspective of training in history.”

⁵⁸ Josephson, “How Can We Improve Our Historical Societies,” 197-199.

Even with such divergent notions of participation, priorities, and standards, by the 1960s the composition of historical societies had not changed drastically in many decades.⁵⁹ In a comparative study of long-standing and leading historical societies in the United States, Walter Muir Whitehill identified two main types of organizations. The Massachusetts Historical Society embodied the independent model, “primarily concerned with learning,” while the State Historical Society of Wisconsin represented the publicly-funded model which aimed at wide dissemination of that learning.⁶⁰ According to Whitehill, “both seek to serve the scholar, but the former reaches a wide audience only indirectly through the work of others, while the latter seeks direct contact with large numbers of people.”⁶¹ Whitehill’s assessment was largely financial and concerned with the viability of historical societies, leading him to express some trepidation about the large number of existing organizations and whether continued proliferation was advisable:

The ‘cloud of witnesses’ of many kinds is already very great. Most existing organizations have inadequate resources for their present purposes. One may thus ask whether more are required? Whether the purpose is solely the advancement of history, or whether considerations of personal aggrandizement, undirected energies, local pride, or other irrelevancies enter in? If it is solely the advancement of history, a widespread community effort is needless, for it is only the serious workers that count, and their number will always be small.⁶²

⁵⁹ Lord, *Keepers of the Past*, 3-4. Lord mentions a few factors that contribute to such consistency: “Here is a field of endeavor that clearly reflects and responds to the major developments of American history. It could not have grown to its present proportions except in an affluent and highly mobile society, or in a society where the avocational enthusiasm of the middle-aged could be supplemented by the enthusiasm and support of many oldsters.”

⁶⁰ Whitehill, *Independent Historical Societies*, 564.

⁶¹ Whitehill, *Independent Historical Societies*, 564.

⁶² Whitehill, *Independent Historical Societies*, 576.

The post-1960s era witnessed the last major period of growth for historical societies as Americans looked to the Bicentennial celebration in the wake of social upheaval, a disastrous war in Vietnam, prolonged economic downturn, and the conclusion of Richard M. Nixon's scandal-plagued presidency. The emergence of more diverse players in the historical enterprise emphasized history from the bottom up that highlighted conflict, offered varied perspectives, and questioned the fundamental basis of scientific progress.⁶³ Lara Leigh Kelland claimed that through public critique and pressure campaigns, working with receptive cultural and educational organizations, and establishing networks of independent parallel institutions, various activist movements from traditionally marginalized sectors of the population worked both within and outside of historical societies to author "historical narratives that both significantly impacted their communities as well as shifted cultural authority toward the communities themselves, that these historians raised a question of *who can speak for whom* on community historical matters."⁶⁴ According to Franco, the "sharp divisions between academic and public history meant that historical societies often found themselves juggling conflicting traditions of antiquarians and academic, research and interpretation," as part of a larger struggle to stay relevant amidst this changing cultural landscape.⁶⁵

In the era corresponding to the BVHS's existence (approximately 1980 to present), small local historical societies in particular were increasingly disconnected from other areas of the historical enterprise experiencing their own existential issues. Historiographical trends influenced by post-structuralist and postmodern critiques of traditional history attacked long-

⁶³ Franco, "Personal Connections to History," 28.

⁶⁴ Lara Leigh Kelland, "Clio's Foot Soldiers: Twentieth-Century US Social Movements and the Uses of Collective Memory" (doctoral dissertation, University of Illinois at Chicago, 2013), 4-5.

⁶⁵ Franco, "Personal Connections to History," 28.

standing narratives and principles of disinterested, objective scholarship.⁶⁶ Reactionary politics made their way into public history education and interpretation as part of an overarching culture war centered on disagreements over what cultural expressions were valid, and thus deserving of public funding.⁶⁷ The new economy, driven largely by technological innovation, fundamentally altered the personal and professional lives of individuals, and thus how they participate and interact with other individuals and institutions within their communities.⁶⁸ The very composition of American communities changed rapidly during this time, with the overall population aging rapidly but also growing more ethnically and racially diverse especially among younger people in urban locations.⁶⁹ For historical societies this surfaced the “inherent tension in American history between celebrating the chronicle of progress and change while looking back with nostalgia to an idealized past.”⁷⁰

Historical Society Research Informing This Study

So much of the existing scholarly research on historical societies is limited to studying the early development of large venerable institutions, with little attention given to organizations created after the 1970s or, for longer tenured organizations, developmental issues and trends in more recent decades not focusing on management, funding, and technology.⁷¹ There are abundant organizational histories, website write ups, and other brief accounts documenting this

⁶⁶ Appleby, Hunt, and Jacob, *Telling the Truth About History*, 205.

⁶⁷ Appleby, Hunt, and Jacob, *Telling the Truth About History*, 199.

⁶⁸ Lawrence, “History of Historical Societies in the U.S.”

⁶⁹ William H. Frey, “The Nation is Diversifying Even Faster Than Predicted, According to New Census Data,” Brookings, July 1, 2020, <https://www.brookings.edu/research/new-census-data-shows-the-nation-is-diversifying-even-faster-than-predicted/>.

⁷⁰ Franco, “Personal Connections to History,” 30.

⁷¹ Milinic, “Three Versions of History,” 2. According to Milinic’s analysis, “the vast majority of studies looking at historical societies have focused on privately funded institutions founded in the nineteenth century and the management issues they have faced in the twentieth century.”

history outside of the works discussed here, but only a handful that offer comprehensive and critical accounts of single or multiple local historical societies. As such, the sources discussed in this section mostly serve as a prefacing framework to help understand the BVHS as an organization and historical subject.

Henle's dissertation and follow-up monograph detailed the development of the historical society movement prior to the Civil War.⁷² Henle's work provides a notable example in the application of critical analysis to the historical society phenomenon, which was seldom the case in previous research in this area. Her studies also introduced relevant theoretical frameworks and disciplinary positioning that help provide a fuller understanding of the overall subject and allow the identification of themes, structural factors, and social realities that resonate beyond the time frame, geographic location, and specific institutional activity analyzed in her work. For example, Henle wrote that her dissertation study is "intended as a historical examination of the process of archiving—of creating publicly accessible repositories of historical materials," and notes that historical societies have always sought "to gather and protect, collect and preserve, retrieve, rescue, communicate, and multiply materials... to serve current and future generations," even if the "public" aspect of this remains debatable.⁷³

Indeed, the early historical societies Henle wrote about set the precedent of limited public appeal that continues to characterize present day institutions. Historical societies were almost exclusively operated by "a small cadre of professional men," who primarily interacted with each other and occasionally allowed women from their racial and class grouping to participate in certain activities.⁷⁴ Some activities like lectures, speeches, and performances were open beyond

⁷² Henle, "Preserving the Past."; Henle, *Rescued from Oblivion*.

⁷³ Henle, "Preserving the Past," 4-5.

⁷⁴ Henle, *Rescued from Oblivion*, 158.

the group to invited guests or fee-paying denizens from the general public, but more substantial efforts to recruit new members, expand participation, and open organizational governance usually did not proceed too far beyond rhetoric.⁷⁵ In addition, the cultural products (mainly the publication of historical narratives and edited manuscripts) typically made available outside of the organizations did not satisfy the public's preference for exciting stories, engaging anecdotes, and extensive illustrations, offering instead dry facts and information that could be difficult to access and tedious to use.⁷⁶ As a result, "historical societies were not popular" by their very design and the early choices that reflected this narrow vision seemed to stamp the entire historical society movement with perpetual fiscal and sustainability woes.⁷⁷

Henle incorporated ideas from anthropologist Michel-Rolph Trouillot on how inclusions and exclusions in the archival record create silences through the privileging of some voices over others—an inevitable result of the closed participation that reinforced pre-existing group preferences and hierarchies in traditional historical societies.⁷⁸ Such transhistorical realities are reflected in current institutions and Henle approached the ongoing process of historical society collecting as a sort of dialogic exercise between the institution and its holdings: "The contents have one history or set of histories. Each physical artifact—an edition of a book, broadside, or letter—another. In addition, items have histories based on any criteria around which they may be collected, including creator(s), owner(s), reader(s), collector(s), archives or repositories, subgenres, and genres."⁷⁹ Henle used this to comprehend the collecting motivations of those responsible for building historical society collections in the early republic, stating that "many

⁷⁵ Henle, *Rescued from Oblivion*, 140.

⁷⁶ Henle, *Rescued from Oblivion*, 129, 158.

⁷⁷ Henle, *Rescued from Oblivion*, 132.

⁷⁸ Henle, "Preserving the Past," 6-9.

⁷⁹ Henle, "Preserving the Past," 6-9.

people vested in ideas of progress and innovation valued historical materials as a means of measuring how much generations improved on one another. Amid competition with and between states, historical documents field claims for achievement.”⁸⁰ This emphasis on the importance of archives also informed Henle’s source selection and examination, which is entirely based on institutional archives and related surviving materials created during the era she studies.

Other recent works by Tom Kanon and Su Kim Chung studied single state historical societies and shared many of the same themes and concepts from Henle’s work, while offering more focused accounts of the independent and publicly-supported institutional models identified by Whitehill.⁸¹ Kanon’s study examined the intersection of material culture and public memory from the perspective of the “collectors, preservers, and disseminators of historical knowledge” in nineteenth-century historical societies.⁸² The author presented a historical case study on the Tennessee Historical Society (THS) asserting that these cultural institutions—while responding and operating at the behest of social forces that “determined the compilation, retention, and propagation of history”—defined and shaped the contours of the country’s collective memory. As the author noted, “by looking at how THS members looked at the past, we catch a glimpse of how they dealt with their today and how they pictured their tomorrow.”⁸³ Kanon considered the THS in the context of its nineteenth-century peer organizations and found that these “served a multitude of purposes,” often functioning as natural museums, reliquaries, *ad hoc* art galleries, members’ private libraries, and lyceums for all manner of discussion topics.⁸⁴

⁸⁰ Henle, *Rescued from Oblivion*, 2.

⁸¹ Whitehill, *Independent Historical Societies*, 564.

⁸² Kanon, “Material Culture and Public Memory,” 3.

⁸³ Kanon, “Material Culture and Public Memory,” 3-4.

⁸⁴ Kanon, “Material Culture and Public Memory,” 14.

Kanon further contextualized his examination of the THS with three themes that were especially prevalent in the nineteenth century in both keeping the past and shaping it: progress (the teleological view of American advancement and achievement), order (a pre-Darwinian religious understanding of divine providence combined with the industrial emphasis on efficiency and organization), and elites (the representatives of financial, social, and political authority).⁸⁵ Kanon concluded that even with the limited participation characterizing the core member cohort and leadership of historical societies during the early years, these were still outward facing institutions operated by people who believed in a long-term duty to the public. This duty was further informed by “patriotism, state and local pride, antiquarian aggression, individual inspiration, peer pressure, and the desire to preserve the past,” but Kanon also insisted that “snob appeal” played a role, “particularly in the societies that looked to the prestige of historical societies in the East.”⁸⁶

The data for Kanon’s study was composed almost entirely of materials from the THS, including office files, personal and public papers of select members, and contemporary newspapers. Chung’s in-depth case study around the creation and first five decades of the Nevada Historical Society (NHS) was similarly informed by a close reading of institutional archives, but is also filtered through the biography and writings of the individual most associated with its founding and initial growth in the early twentieth century, Jeanne Wier. Chung noted Wier’s unusual status as a college educated professional woman occupying an official leadership position in a newly created state dominated by men who were “more concerned with exploiting the latest mining bonanza than gathering the history of those pioneers who had come before

⁸⁵ Kanon, “Material Culture and Public Memory,” 52.

⁸⁶ Kanon, “Material Culture and Public Memory,” 52.

them.”⁸⁷ According to Chung, “without Wier’s indomitable spirit, and unceasing drive in the face of such apathy, Nevada might never have seen its early historical documents and objects preserved, the stories of its pioneer citizens collected, and a foundation laid from which other cultural heritage institutions in the state could take inspiration and guidance.”⁸⁸

Chung evaluated Wier’s success in fulfilling the NHS’s mission and goals over several decades by providing a qualitative assessment of the research and publications the NHS sponsored, and using quantitative information related to the volume and frequency of collection donations, annual patron visits, attendance at society events, and funding received from public and private sources.⁸⁹ However, Chung’s study also provided an account of how Wier’s unique position and impressive efforts permanently affected what the NHS collected and created a legacy for expanding the types of memories, archives, and histories that merited preservation.⁹⁰ Chung incorporated ideas from the interrelated theoretical frameworks of New Western History and Western Women’s History. The first is an outgrowth of and response to Frederick Jackson Turner’s frontier thesis that conceives of the West “as a meeting ground where people of various cultures, languages, and religions came together, and as a location for the cross-fertilization of customs, ideas and worldviews.”⁹¹ It emphasizes frequently acrimonious relationships between different groups of people who arrived at these remote areas “to trade, to fight, to procreate, to preach contrary conceptions of the good life, to restore old worlds, and to make sense of new worlds,” which in turn produced a distinctive regional identity that is constantly in flux.⁹²

⁸⁷ Chung, “We Seek to Be Patient,” 2-3.

⁸⁸ Chung, “We Seek to Be Patient,” 2.

⁸⁹ Chung, “We Seek to Be Patient,” 6.

⁹⁰ Chung, “We Seek to Be Patient,” 6.

⁹¹ Chung, “We Seek to Be Patient,” 12.

⁹² Chung, “We Seek to Be Patient,” 12.

Similarly, *Western Women's History* challenges traditional portrayals of women in the West, which have often been reduced to four mostly false stereotypes: “the gentle tamers, the women who acted as a civilizing influence by bringing the social and cultural values of home to the frontier; the sunbonneted helpmates whose duty was to work diligently to help their men succeed; and finally collapsing the last two categories into one, the hell-raisers and bad women, the women whose behavior placed them on the fringes of society such as cowgirls like Calamity Jane, and prostitutes respectively.”⁹³ Certainly, Wier charted her own path and Chung used her story and words to explore Western women's diversity, intersectionality, evolving gender roles, and their contributions to community and institution building, all areas not typically covered in the existing literature on historical societies.

The critical approaches in these regional and state-based studies of historical societies are also present in a few notable dissertations and theses focusing on city and neighborhood-based organizations. In a study of the Chicago Historical Society (CHS), Catherine Melissa Lewis considered the implications of “the rise of multiculturalism, the erosion of expert authority, the culture wars, and the unique problems associated with merging popular and academic presentations of the past” on historical interpretation and community relationships for a single cultural institution during the 1980s and 1990s.⁹⁴ Lewis identified the lack of scholarly examination of American local historical societies in the three decades leading up to her project, indicating that much of the relevant contemporary scholarship “surveys individual programs or initiatives without providing a critical perspective on how they fit into larger patterns.”⁹⁵ Using a mixed methods approach, Lewis assessed the transformation of the CHS into a more

⁹³ Chung, “We Seek to Be Patient,” 14.

⁹⁴ Lewis, “From Temple to Forum,” 26.

⁹⁵ Lewis, “From Temple to Forum,” 26.

representative civil institution through an examination of key programs, initiatives, and exhibitions that reverberated throughout the organization and community, required intensive financial and intellectual support from organizational leadership, and challenged the institution's exclusive authority over interpretative processes and narrative formation.⁹⁶

Adriana Milinic's historical analysis focused on the relatively recent (since the 1970s) development of three museums founded by local historical societies in Tempe, Scottsdale, and Chandler, Arizona, and how these institutions' conception of their respective communities—which have become less Anglo-American and more Latino-American—evolved in response to increasing demands for diverse representation. Like other research focused on local historical societies, Milinic explored the professionalization of the history discipline, the tension between popular and scholarly history, the financial precarity of history-based institutions regardless of size or location, and the museums' ongoing struggle to remain relevant to their various publics.⁹⁷ Elizabeth A. Potens employed a similar comparative approach in a study of public engagement by several neighborhood historical societies in Philadelphia, in particular how they engaged with the public through museum programs and services.⁹⁸ Potens used a qualitative empirical approach that relies on interviews with the principal leadership and members of the organizations involved with public engagement efforts. The data revealed a shared desire among these organizations “to expand the reach of their collections to their communities, to partner with community organizations and larger local history-focused institutions, and to better provide

⁹⁶ Lewis, “From Temple to Forum,” 320.

⁹⁷ Milinic, “Three Versions of History,” 4. Milinic specifically references Lewis' dissertation on the CHS and others works examining the recent history of historical societies in New York and Pennsylvania.

⁹⁸ Potens, “Connecting Neighborhoods with Their Past,” 3.

engaging and valuable experiences to all audiences through their public programs and community history initiatives.”⁹⁹

Although Potens’ comparative empirical approach is different from what is employed to analyze the BVHS, there are several components from her study that align with the Bay View neighborhood and the role of memory and history in urban communities. Like Philadelphia, Milwaukee is a cultural crucible “that has led to the dynamic development of numerous local communities and distinctly identified neighborhoods.”¹⁰⁰ This active and evolving dynamic challenges local historical societies like the BVHS “to foster an engaging narrative on a local history” that is relevant to new neighborhood residents and community members who may feel the existing ones are irrelevant or unrepresentative of their backgrounds.¹⁰¹ Potens recognized a unique opportunity for local historical societies “to better interpret the rich historical narratives of these neighborhoods, to engage local populations, to address issues vital to these communities, and to activate citizens to prepare for the future of their neighborhood,” which would in turn benefit those organizations.¹⁰² This notion of an assumed reciprocal relationship between historical societies and the communities whose history they seek to preserve and celebrate may represent the central conundrum of the entire discussion around organizational sustainability and relevance. Looking at the BVHS in its immediate environment and developmental context offers the chance to see how this reciprocity reveals itself (or does not) over time

⁹⁹ Potens, “Connecting Neighborhoods with Their Past,” 4.

¹⁰⁰ Potens, “Connecting Neighborhoods with Their Past,” 2.

¹⁰¹ Potens, “Connecting Neighborhoods with Their Past,” 2.

¹⁰² Potens, “Connecting Neighborhoods with Their Past,” 2.

Chapter 2: Historical Consciousness and Enterprise in Milwaukee, 1966-1978

While the immediate circumstances surrounding the creation of the BVHS is described in more detail in the following chapters, this chapter illustrates and analyzes factors that presaged and contributed to the environment from which the BVHS emerged. Although it is probable that whatever degree of historical consciousness was present in the Bay View neighborhood during this era eventually would have taken some sort of institutional form, an uptick in history-focused activity in the 1960s and 1970s undoubtedly influenced the timing and direction of the BVHS enterprise. This chapter focuses on three related and overlapping events prior to 1979: the reconfiguration of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin's Local History Affiliate Program; the American Bicentennial celebration and concurrent founding of new history agencies in the Milwaukee metro area; and the dynamic but brief tenure of the citywide multimedia Milwaukee Humanities Program. The relationship of these events to each other is not necessarily causal, nor was their impact decisively cumulative; rather, it demonstrates how historical consciousness and the historical enterprise converge during periods of elevated memory-oriented activity within a community.

Historical Preservation, Demographic Shifts, and Social Upheaval

In Milwaukee and the Bay View neighborhood, this convergence was foregrounded by other larger trends and events that are worth a brief mention here. First, building on public and private efforts in the first half of the twentieth century aimed at rescuing antiquities, historic sites, and natural landmarks, the national historic preservation movement began in earnest with legislation creating the National Trust for Historic Preservation in 1949 and the National Historic

Preservation Act in 1966.¹ The latter established the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation, State Historic Preservation Offices, National Register of Historic Places, and the Section 106 review process that assesses any potential adverse effects of federally-funded projects on historically or archaeologically significant sites.² In Milwaukee, local preservation efforts predated these federal initiatives, mostly in response to post-World War II urban renewal programs which frequently targeted historic structures for demolition and redevelopment in aging or blighted areas.³ For example, the Milwaukee County Historical Society (MCHS) was primarily concerned with saving historic documents and photographs when it was initially founded in 1935, but after the war—mostly in reaction to the destruction of old buildings—it incorporated site-based programs and facility development as part of its overall preservation strategy.⁴

In 1964, Land Ethics, Inc. was founded to preserve sections of Milwaukee’s downtown and East Side neighborhoods, followed by the creation of the Walker’s Point Project in 1969, Historic Walker’s Point, Inc. in 1973, and their successor agency Historic Milwaukee, Inc. in 1981, which had by then assumed a citywide historic preservation advocacy and education mission.⁵ These efforts utilized existing connections and resources from official bodies like the Milwaukee City Landmarks Committee and civic organizations like the Junior League of Milwaukee, helping set the precedent for local history-driven programming and awareness

¹ “A Brief History of the National Trust,” National Trust for Historic Preservation, accessed October 10, 2022, <https://savingplaces.org/trust-history>; “National Historic Preservation Act,” National Park Service, December 1, 2022, <https://www.nps.gov/subjects/historicpreservation/national-historic-preservation-act.htm>.

² Hugh W. Swofford, “HMI Reflects on 25 Years of Teaching History,” *Historic Milwaukee* 2, no. 5 (1998): 4, box 2, folder 18, Historic Milwaukee, Inc. Records, UWM Mss. 113, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, Archives Department.

³ William C. Mona, “An Analysis of Historic Preservation and Planning Policy in Milwaukee, 1964-1994.” (doctoral dissertation, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 1995), 13-15.

⁴ Frederic Heath, “The Milwaukee County Historical Society,” *The Wisconsin Magazine of History* 31, no. 2. (1947): 179-180.

⁵ Swofford, “HMI Reflects,” 4.

amongst communities and individuals not necessarily already involved in history-oriented activities. Programs associated with Historic Milwaukee, Inc., such as neighborhood landmark designation and walking tours, would be later adopted by the BVHS and other history organizations around the metro area. Similarly, the BVHS would later attempt to emulate the MCHS's creation of the Milwaukee County Historical Center in 1965, which was made possible by the First Wisconsin National Bank's donation of its historic Second Ward branch office to serve as the society's headquarters, archive, museum, research library, and event space.⁶

Second, like many other aging industrial cities in the Midwest and Northeast, Milwaukee experienced tremendous demographic shifts and civic upheaval in the 1960s and 1970s.⁷ The 1970 federal census revealed Milwaukee losing population for the first time in its history, largely due to deindustrialization and white flight into surrounding suburban communities.⁸ Several of the city's older neighborhoods were run down and increasingly populated by minority racial and ethnic groups, including a substantial and segregated Black citizenry composed largely of recent migrants from Southern states.⁹ Many Black residents faced severe limitations in housing options due to ingrained racial attitudes and discriminatory policies, compounded by the recent loss of long-standing living space in the city's urban core to commercial and infrastructural

⁶ "About MCHS," Milwaukee County Historical Society, accessed May 12, 2023, <https://milwaukeehistory.net/about/>; Milwaukee County Historical Society Information Sheet, undated, BVHS Subject Files.

⁷ Leila Saboori, "New Urbanism as Redevelopment Scheme: New Urbanism's Role in Revitalization of Downtown Milwaukee" (master's thesis, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 2013), 13.

⁸ "Summary of General Population and Housing Characteristics, City of Milwaukee, 1970-1980," box 1, folder 11, Mary Anne McNulty Aldermanic Records, 1980-1992, City of Milwaukee Archival Collection 47, Milwaukee Public Library, Frank P. Zeidler Room.

⁹ Barbara Miner, "The Promised Land," *Urban Milwaukee*, January 22, 2013, <https://urbanmilwaukee.com/2013/01/22/the-promised-land/>. See also, Robert S. Smith, "African Americans" Encyclopedia of Milwaukee, accessed September 12, 2022, <https://emke.uwm.edu/entry/african-americans/>.

development.¹⁰ Mass demonstrations, sometimes resulting in violence, and political unrest in the late 1960s, followed by the stagflation and surging crime rates in the early 1970s, contributed to a wide public perception of a city divided and in serious decline.¹¹ A newsletter article published in the mid-1970s by a Third Ward preservation collective called Urban Real Design Group puts a fine point on prevailing attitudes likely shared by many throughout the city at the time:

A visitor's walk from the train station to Wisconsin Avenue is a degrading experience; the environment beyond the front door of our largest hotel is appalling; our lakefront has become a parking lot for our 'highest and best use' office building; we allow the stench of certain industries to permeate the air, depreciating the entire downtown... We provide no pleasant spots on the street to just sit down and watch, no protection for bus riders and little for pedestrians. And only the naive would try checking their coats in any of our department stores.¹²

In 1976, the Milwaukee Public School system began its program of integration and busing resulting from the settlement of a civil rights lawsuit stretching back into the previous

¹⁰ Niles Niemuth, "Urban Renewal and the Development of Milwaukee's African American Community: 1960-1980" (master's thesis, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 2014), 31-36. See also Greg J. Carman, "Wall of Exclusion: The Persistence of Residential Racial Segregation in Metropolitan Milwaukee" (doctoral dissertation, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 2010), 51-53.

¹¹ Patrick D. Jones, *The Selma of the North: Civil Rights Insurgency in Milwaukee* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), 6-7. Jones notes that in Milwaukee, "campaigns that were morally complex, politically realistic, and sometimes effective, local activists, like many of their counterparts in the South, professed peace but provoked violence." For a comprehensive account of how racialized policing in Milwaukee attempted to link civil rights activity to rising crime rates, see William I. Tchakirides, "'Accountable to No One': Confronting Police Power in Black Milwaukee" (doctoral dissertation, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 2020).

¹² Dan Thompson, "Editorial," *Urban Real Newsletter*, Spring 1976, 5, box 3, folder 28, Frederick I. Olson Papers, 1943-1993, UWM Mss. 26, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Libraries, Archives Department.

decade, further expediting white flight to the suburbs and challenging the image the city and many of its neighborhoods projected around its European ethnic heritage, progressive governance, festive culture, and industrial achievement.¹³ The following year, the City of Milwaukee completed construction on the Hoan Bridge, which altered Bay View's relative geographic isolation by more directly connecting the neighborhood to other parts of the city.¹⁴ Combined with a growing number of new immigrant enclaves in adjacent neighborhoods and the influx of Black students into Bay View public schools, many long-term residents in this overwhelmingly white neighborhood feared Bay View might lose its long-held status as a culturally unique town-within-the-city.¹⁵

For the Bay View neighborhood, the year 1979 marked the 100th anniversary of the original founding of Bay View as its own village municipality on the outskirts of Milwaukee proper.¹⁶ It was also a few years before the 100th anniversary of the Bay View Tragedy, where several workers from the local community were killed by the Wisconsin state militia during a labor uprising at the Milwaukee Iron Works rolling mill in 1886.¹⁷ The Bay View Tragedy helped galvanize the nascent labor movement in Milwaukee and occurred at a tipping point in the city's history that saw it transform from a lake-side port city specializing in the exchange of agricultural goods from the Wisconsin interior, to a full-fledged industrial center specializing in

¹³ James Kenneth Nelsen, "From No Choice to Forced Choice to School Choice: A History of Educational Options in Milwaukee Public Schools" (doctoral dissertation, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 2012), 115, 136-141. See also Jack Dougherty, *More Than One Struggle: The Evolution of Black School Reform* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 137-40.

¹⁴ John Gurda, *Bay View, Wis., Centennial Edition* (Milwaukee, WI: Milwaukee Humanities Program and University of Wisconsin Board of Regents, 1979), 92-93.

¹⁵ Gurda, *Bay View, Wis.*, 5.

¹⁶ Frederick I. Olson, "Suburbanization: The Bay View and Residential Models," In *Trading Post to Metropolis: Milwaukee County's First 150 Years*, 30-38, Milwaukee, WI: Milwaukee County Historical Society, 1987.

¹⁷ Corn, *The Story of Bay View*, 82-90.

manufactured products for worldwide distribution.¹⁸ Milwaukee was by then a city of immigrants and Bay View became very strongly associated with the various ethnic communities who settled there and composed its working class.

The initial wave of immigrants to the Bay View area in the late 1800s included skilled steelworkers from the United Kingdom, especially England and Wales.¹⁹ Later waves of Irish, German, Polish, Greek, Serbian, and Italian immigrants eclipsed this initial group and dominated the neighborhood up through the post-World War II era.²⁰ Although other cultural groups and more recent immigrant communities (Latin American, South Asian, and Middle Eastern, for example) have established a significant presence in Bay View in the last 40 years, the overall demographic composition remains mostly white and of European descent. Even with the advent of busing and open school enrollment, Bay View has never had a sizable Black resident community, especially in comparison with other Milwaukee neighborhoods.²¹

By the time of BVHS's founding in 1979, Milwaukee remained a city of neighborhoods, but those neighborhoods looked quite different than in previous generations. It seems that the need to preserve something of the past—whether authentic or idealized—was linked to resisting real or imagined community change and decline, which in turn provided the catalyst for groups and individuals in the Milwaukee metro area to organize around their pasts. A 1967 newsletter article by the Milwaukee Junior League encouraging member volunteer participation at the Milwaukee County Historical Society exemplifies this notion, as it praised those in the community “who are concerned with preserving our yesteryears and today,” while fretting over

¹⁸ John Gurda, *The Making of Milwaukee*, 4th Edition (Milwaukee, WI: Milwaukee County Historical Society, 2018).

¹⁹ Corn, *The Story of Bay View*, 65-70.

²⁰ Corn, *The Story of Bay View*, 65-70.

²¹ Joseph B. Walzer, “Making an Old-World Milwaukee: German Heritage, Nostalgia and the Reshaping of the Twentieth Century City” (PhD diss., University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 2017).

the possibility that the 1960s would be mis-remembered as “an undecipherable mélange of rockets and rock-and-roll, pop-art and mod clothes,” which would “hardly be an accurate picture of the decade (particularly in Milwaukee).”²² Clearly, a combination of community-minded preservation, demographic realities, and an ambivalence around historical identity in Milwaukee (and beyond) had both direct and indirect influence on the very local conditions that the BVHS grew out of, but the events and factors described in the remainder of this chapter provided a more concrete administrative, instrumental, and affectual basis for the organization to take shape.

The Local History Affiliate Program in Wisconsin

In recognition of Wisconsin’s 50th statehood anniversary, State Historical Society of Wisconsin (SHSW) superintendent Reuben Gold Thwaites oversaw the creation of what would become the society’s local history affiliate program. Formalized in 1898 by an act of the Wisconsin State Legislature, the program initially allowed independent organizations to incorporate as auxiliaries that effectively functioned as branches of the SHSW charged with collecting historical materials within their specific communities.²³ Although there were already several city, town, and special interest history and antiquarian groups in existence prior to the auxiliary program, these rarely had any official corporate designation and usually operated without any relationship to the formal history agencies responsible for the collection, preservation, and dissemination of historic archives, artifacts, and information. Gold Thwaites ushered in the SHSW’s emphasis on expanded public services and outreach to non-academic researchers, schools, civic groups, peer organizations, and others who could benefit from the vast

²² Connie Frank, “The Milwaukee County Historical Society: A Revival of the Past,” Junior League Newsletter, 1967, 9-11, box 11, folder 4, Junior League of Milwaukee Records, 1916-2002, UWM Mss. 306, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Libraries, Archives Department.

²³ “Frequently Asked Questions About Affiliation,” Wisconsin Historical Society, accessed October 22, 2022, <https://www.wisconsinhistory.org/pdfs/cms/Affiliation-FAQ-Sheet-2021.pdf>.

holdings and expertise concentrated at the society's headquarters in Madison.²⁴

From its beginnings, the SHSW assumed a wide mandate to document all of Wisconsin history and heritage, but this collecting scope also extended to the American West and eventually all of North America, which inevitably stressed the organization's ability to provide adequate access, storage, and collections care for its proliferating holdings.²⁵ Originally housed in the Madison, Wisconsin state capitol building, a new facility was completed on the University of Wisconsin campus in 1900, just a few years before the capitol was completely destroyed in a fire.²⁶ Subsequently, at Thwaites' urging to provide better security for government records, the state legislature passed the Wisconsin Archive Act in 1907, which facilitated the transfer of all non-active records of historic or continuing legal value to the society's campus facility for long-term stewardship.²⁷ The SHSW retained a close working relationship with the university and provided the main reading room and storage space for the university library's collections over the next five decades. However, due to inconsistent funding and sporadic collections growth through extended periods corresponding to World War I, the Great Depression, and World War II, the ability of the SHSW to adequately manage the influx of historic materials and growing raft of programs was increasingly compromised by space, storage, and staffing issues.²⁸ With the completed construction and occupation of the new university library in 1953, the SHSW regained some breathing room as collections were rehoused and new acquisitions in space saving formats like microfilm became more common.²⁹

²⁴ Solon J. Buck, "Recent Activities of the Wisconsin Historical Society," *Minnesota History Bulletin* 1, no. 3 (1915): 94-98.

²⁵ Richard A. Erney, "Wisconsin's Area Research Centers," *American Archivist* 29, no. 1 (1966): 13-15.

²⁶ John Zimm, *The Wisconsin Historical Society: Collecting, Preserving, and Sharing Stories Since 1846*, (Madison: Wisconsin Historical Society Press, 2015), 28-31.

²⁷ Zimm, *The Wisconsin Historical Society*, 33.

²⁸ Zimm, *The Wisconsin Historical Society*, 38-50.

²⁹ Zimm, *The Wisconsin Historical Society*, 51, 58.

The local history auxiliary program also allowed the SHSW to offload some collecting responsibility to its growing network of affiliate programs, who were in turn able to retain greater control over the historical materials originating within or most relevant to their specific localities. Beginning in the mid-1940s, the SHSW started planning Area Research Centers as a continued joint venture with University of Wisconsin-Madison and the Wisconsin State Teachers Colleges, which would later be incorporated into the statewide University of Wisconsin System.³⁰ The 1947 Public Records Act further consolidated governmental records activity under the auspices of the SHSW and created the Committee on Public Records to review state agencies' requests for records disposal.³¹ In the next four years, the legislature authorized counties, cities, towns, school districts, courts, and other public bodies to transfer records to the SHSW for further archival consideration, with specific instruction in a 1951 legislative update to establish regional depositories at partner locations dedicated to the preservation and access of materials from that corresponding area.³² Between 1953-1956, sizable quantities of records and archival materials were transferred out to several newly opened Area Research Centers on different campuses across the emerging University of Wisconsin System, which helped solidify the necessary infrastructure to circulate collections from center to center based on researcher requests.³³

The SHSW's move toward greater local facilitation was largely aimed at solving recurrent space problems, but it also dovetailed with a more general discussion on the importance of local history to the society's continued public relevance.³⁴ Under Director Clifford

³⁰ Erney, "Wisconsin's Area Research Centers," 12-13.

³¹ Erney, "Wisconsin's Area Research Centers," 11.

³² Erney, "Wisconsin's Area Research Centers," 11-12.

³³ Erney, "Wisconsin's Area Research Centers," 13.

³⁴ Richard A. Erney and F. Gerald Ham, "Wisconsin's Area Research Centers," *American Libraries* 3, no. 2 (1972): 135-137.

L. Lord, the SHSW sought to reach wider audiences that went beyond the traditional scholarly and professional cohorts, which could in turn help determine the best uses of the society's resources and enlist support for its expanding operations.³⁵ According to John Zimm, Lord sought to recast the SHSW as an organization that could help address contemporary issues for individuals of all backgrounds; for Lord, "the critical studies of the realities of modern life served as a tonic against the dangers of the totalitarian ideologies that Americans had fought against," in World War II and the Cold War.³⁶ Local history provided a distinctive connection between the SHSW and the people of Wisconsin—as well as between individuals and institutions within their communities—and Lord viewed the promotion and study of local history as an invaluable component of citizenship and civic responsibility.³⁷ Unsurprisingly, Lord's emphasis on local history precipitated significant activity in the local affiliate program.

In a December 1952 report, Lord expressed his belief that Wisconsin was "on the eve of a new era in the field of local history."³⁸ The report detailed a meeting held the previous month that served as a brain-storming session for local historical society representatives to discuss a wide range of operational matters and potential modifications to the affiliate program. According to the report, a subject of universal importance to participants was the purpose of the county and local historical society, though there were differing opinions on what that purpose entailed and how it contributed to any organization's success. One participant felt that historical societies fulfilled an instinctive need to know about one's past, while another believed that they were

³⁵ Zimm, *The Wisconsin Historical Society*, 52-53.

³⁶ Zimm, *The Wisconsin Historical Society*, 52.

³⁷ Zimm, *The Wisconsin Historical Society*, 53.

³⁸ "A Report to the County and Local Historical Societies," Dec. 8, 1952, 4, box 13, folder 8, State Historical Society of Wisconsin: Board of Curators Committee Records, 1940-2010, Series 1910. Wisconsin Historical Society, Division of Library, Archives, and Museum Collections, (hereafter cited as A Report to the County).

meant to cultivate a sense of continuity among its members and community. Some played up the educational aspect of historical societies and stressed the need to actively involve young people, while others felt that an institution's activities should range widely in the local cultural field. One local society president insisted that "no historical society had any right to the name unless its chief function was strictly research and writing in the field of county and local history."³⁹ Attendees explored a variety of topics related to programs, membership, collection policies, community engagement, and institutional sustainability, but what is most notable about the meeting is that it helped initiate a formal planning process at the SHSW to solidify its relationship with the statewide local historical society network.

Concurrent with this planning process, the SHSW expanded its influence and accessibility through the creation of junior historian chapters at middle and high schools, the publication of a new history magazine aimed at a popular audience, the deployment of a Historymobile exhibit that traveled around the state, and the formal adoption of historical sites that served both to preserve endangered historical treasures and capitalize on Wisconsin's growing tourism industry.⁴⁰ The SHSW also began broadcasting various programs via television and radio, the latter of which was frequently used to disseminate expertise from the Madison headquarters to personnel at local historical societies.⁴¹ Notes from a September 1953 Committee on the Relationship Between State and Local Societies meeting indicated that more such guidance and coordination with the SHSW was needed to "prevent dissipation of effort among the local groups," but committee members differed on whether rigid standards should be applied

³⁹ "A Report to the County and Local Historical Societies," 2.

⁴⁰ Zimm, *The Wisconsin Historical Society*, 51-66.

⁴¹ Zimm, *The Wisconsin Historical Society*, 67.

to affiliates and how state oversight might conflict with institutional autonomy.⁴² Even so, meeting attendees reached a “general concurrence that this committee should have the objective of establishing in clear, concise language the requisites of a model local society,” that would include standards, program suggestions, and advice on best practices that would help affiliates come to “a better understanding of the functions of a historical society.”⁴³

The following year, the committee released a report outlining minimum requirements for local historical society affiliates, insisting that “it should be the objective of all people interested in history to work and cooperate on both local and state levels,” with local society members actively seeking assistance and aiding state efforts, and the SHSW exercising “discretion in its collecting activities so as not to encroach upon the proper functions of the local society.”⁴⁴ The standards local societies were expected to meet included: hosting organized monthly activities; retaining memberships of at least 1% of county population and at least 20 active members; providing a facility for historical materials, museum exhibits, and meetings; collecting historical records and artifacts; having an active research and publications program; marking historic sites; ensuring local libraries have good local history sections; promoting the teaching of local history in local schools; endorsing and encouraging local chapters of the junior historian program; commemorating and observing important historical events; securing appropriations from local

⁴² Frank N. Elliott, “Minutes of the Meeting of the Committee on the Relationship Between State and Local Societies,” Sept. 20, 1953, 3, box 13, folder 8, State Historical Society of Wisconsin: Board of Curators Committee Records, 1940-2010, Series 1910. Wisconsin Historical Society, Division of Library, Archives, and Museum Collections, (hereafter cited as Committee on the Relationship Between State and Local Societies Meeting Minutes).

⁴³ Committee on the Relationship Between State and Local Societies Meeting Minutes, 2-3.

⁴⁴ Anthony Wise, Committee on the Relationship Between State and Local Societies Report, June 26, 1954, 1, box 13, folder 8, State Historical Society of Wisconsin: Board of Curators Committee Records, 1940-2010, Series 1910. Wisconsin Historical Society, Division of Library, Archives, and Museum Collections, (hereafter cited as Committee on the Relationship Between State and Local Societies Report).

and county governments for local historical projects; and cooperating with other local societies and the SHSW on regional and state projects.⁴⁵ Committee members believed that such standards might convince local societies to adopt “a broader concept of history than just dates, names and places,” and enable historical activity that considers the “whys” on equal footing with the “whats” toward greater understanding of “how we got the way we are.”⁴⁶

In 1961 the SHSW Board of Curators created the Wisconsin Council for Local History, which served as a semi-independent association for all affiliate societies. As the primary body for member organizations to coordinate activity within the group network, and as the primary channel to recruit and support new affiliate members, the SHSW would later acknowledge the council as “the largest factor in the preservation of the history and artifacts of the state.” Indeed, the number of local society affiliates increased so rapidly in the following years that the SHSW began to question whether such growth was sustainable. A major sticking point was the relationship between newer and proliferating local societies with the network of county societies that predated most municipal and specialty organizations and remained the SHSW’s most active partners. In a series of memos and reports from the mid-1960s, Director Leslie H. Fishel and other SHSW personnel expressed concern about whether the continuing the trend of local society affiliation might alienate the county societies, many of which were then functioning at a high level due their long-standing relationship with the state society.⁴⁷ In addition, they worried about competition between affiliate societies in a proximate geographic area whose resources and

⁴⁵ Committee on the Relationship Between State and Local Societies Report, 1-2.

⁴⁶ Committee on the Relationship Between State and Local Societies Meeting Minutes, 2.

⁴⁷ Leslie H. Fishel, “The Relationship Between Local and County Societies,” Jan. 3, 1966, box 9, folder 13, State Historical Society of Wisconsin: Board of Curators Committee Records, 1940-2010, Series 1910. Wisconsin Historical Society, Division of Library, Archives, and Museum Collections (hereafter cited as Fishel Local and County Societies Report).

activities might crowd out those of other affiliates.⁴⁸ Fishel recommended the Board of Curators adopt a more selective process for affiliation and certification for both county and local societies, and develop a policy that urged formal or informal federation amongst geographically-linked affiliates.⁴⁹

Fishel also suggested several procedural changes to the affiliation process that would require early contact and vetting for prospective affiliates, establish an extended probationary period for newly accepted members, and enumerate minimum performance standards to be included in affiliate bylaws.⁵⁰ The standards mostly pushed affiliates to meet formal legal requirements for non-profit incorporation but also stipulated that societies should produce historic bibliographies and site surveys for their geographical area and enter whatever cooperative alliance existed in their county. Based on these recommendations, by 1968 the SHSW's Local History Policy Committee revamped and adopted new articles of incorporation and bylaw documents to govern the membership of all new affiliate organizations. The Required Provisions section outlined elements like corporate structure, reporting, and association in the Wisconsin Council for Local history, but the Prescribed Activities section dug into the everyday operations of affiliate organizations with specific lists of duties related to facilitating research, managing museums and historic sites, and providing public services like landmarking and classroom instruction.⁵¹ Furthermore, the new system imposed a four-year probationary period

⁴⁸ "Notes on the Meeting of the Ad Hoc Committee on the relationships between affiliated county and local historical societies," Mar. 12, 1966, box 9, folder 13, State Historical Society of Wisconsin: Board of Curators Committee Records, 1940-2010, Series 1910, Wisconsin Historical Society, Division of Library, Archives, and Museum Collections (hereafter cited as Ad Hoc Committee Meeting Notes).

⁴⁹ Leslie H. Fishel correspondence with Clifford D. Swanson, July 16, 27, 1966, box 9, folder 13, State Historical Society of Wisconsin: Board of Curators Committee Records, 1940-2010, Series 1910. Wisconsin Historical Society, Division of Library, Archives, and Museum Collections.

⁵⁰ Fishel Local and County Societies Report, 3-4.

⁵¹ Clifford D. Swanson, "Report of Local History Policy Committee," June 1968, 1-2, box 1, folder 33, State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Division of Historic Sites: Division Administrator Subject Files,

for new affiliates to reach compliance with minimum performance standards, which would carry affiliates beyond the initial “burst of enthusiasm that brings a new society into being” and allow time for stabilization.⁵²

Previously expressed concerns from SHSW leadership about imposing a more formal approach to standards and affiliation were mostly unfounded, or, perhaps more accurately, the perceived benefits of affiliation outweighed any perceived burdens in the calculations of prospective members.⁵³ There is no indication of turf wars or bad blood between affiliate organizations once the new process was formally inaugurated with incoming applicants. Within the next decade, the Wisconsin Council on Local History reported concerns of an “atrophying relationship” with the SHSW and called for yet another affiliate program review.⁵⁴ However, this mostly had to do with the outmoded reporting structure of the council, which was increasingly unable to effectively advocate on behalf of its affiliate members. The council identified a “greater need for communication and technical services in a host of areas,” since the level of service at the SHSW had “not grown significantly, commensurate with the growth of local history activity.”⁵⁵ Indeed, the total number of affiliates had grown by nearly 60% and overall membership in local societies swelled after the new system was implemented in the years corresponding to the build-up and celebration of America’s 200th anniversary.⁵⁶

1954-2011, Series 2894, Wisconsin Historical Society, Division of Library, Archives, and Museum Collections (hereafter cited as Local History Policy Committee Report)

⁵² Local History Policy Committee Report, 6-9.

⁵³ Ad Hoc Committee Meeting Notes, 2.

⁵⁴ Wisconsin Council for Local History Report and Fact Sheet, 1979, 1, box 1, folder 17, State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Division of Historic Sites: Division Administrator Subject Files, 1954-2011, Series 2894, Wisconsin Historical Society, Division of Library, Archives, and Museum Collections, (hereafter cited as Wisconsin Council for Local History Report).

⁵⁵ Wisconsin Council for Local History Report, 2.

⁵⁶ Wisconsin Council for Local History Report, 5.

The Bicentennial Celebration in Milwaukee

Preparations for the 1976 American Revolution Bicentennial celebration officially commenced a decade earlier with President Lyndon B. Johnson's 1966 letter to the U.S. Congress requesting the establishment of a commission that would plan for national events, support public and private commemoration efforts, and increase knowledge and appreciation of the American Revolution through "our schools and universities and our historians and scholars."⁵⁷ In Johnson's vision, the American Revolution Bicentennial Commission would be "composed of members of Congress and the Executive Branch, and distinguished and outstanding Americans appointed by the President," who would help the Federal government "share its knowledge and resources with states, local communities, historical societies, and others across the Nation."⁵⁸ The historic preservation movement and recent commemorations around the U.S. Civil War centennial provided the headwinds for a renewed national interest in history, but the Bicentennial held special relevance for many citizens for a variety of different reasons related to patriotism and national identity.⁵⁹ A 1973 letter sent to Congress upon establishing the American Revolution Bicentennial Administration (ARBA) captures this sentiment, with President Richard M. Nixon insisting that the anniversary "will have the greatest significance of any celebration of this type that this country has ever had."⁶⁰

⁵⁷ Lyndon B. Johnson, "Letter to the President of the Senate and to the Speaker of the House Proposing the Establishment of an American Bicentennial Commission, March 10, 1966," in *Public Papers of the Presidents*, (Washington DC: Office of the Federal Register, 1967), 302-303, accessed November 4, 2022, <https://archive.org/details/4731549.1966.001.umich.edu/page/302/mode/2up>.

⁵⁸ Letter to the President of the Senate, 302.

⁵⁹ Simon Hall, "'Guerilla Theater... in the Guise of Red, White, and Blue Bunting': The People's Bicentennial Commission and the Politics of (Un)Americanism," *Journal of American Studies* 52, no. 1 (2018): 114-136, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S002187581600195X>.

⁶⁰ Richard M. Nixon, "Remarks on Signing a Bill Establishing the American Revolution Bicentennial Administration, December 11, 1973," in *Public Papers of the Presidents* (Washington DC: Office of the Federal Register, National Archives and Records Service, General Services Administration, 1975), 1008-1009, accessed November 6, 2022, <https://archive.org/details/4731942.1973.001.umich.edu/page/1009/mode/2up>.

No doubt this milestone held such potential, but the creation of ARBA was largely a response to widespread criticism of the initial commission's alleged cronyism and overt commercialization of the Bicentennial, which prompted a congressional review of its activities.⁶¹ The American public perception of the government's historic role in domestic and world affairs was far from unified and made more complicated by the contemporary economic malaise, civil unrest, and deteriorating situation in Vietnam. By the time of America's embarrassing withdrawal from Saigon and Nixon's exit from office in the wake of the Watergate scandal, many Americans were ready to embrace "the appeal of myth and the restorative nostalgia manifested... in a reconstruction of the monuments of the past," while actively seeking tangible connections within their communities that might help ameliorate a pervading sense of identity loss as a nation.⁶²

President Gerald R. Ford's official proclamation establishing 1976 as The Bicentennial Year indicated this more individuated and localized direction for the commemoration, calling on all Americans to "celebrate the diversity of tradition, culture and heritage that reflects our people and our patrimony," and to undertake "actions which bespeak a continuing commitment to a heritage of individual initiative, creativity, and liberty."⁶³ According to David Ryan, any overall successes of the Bicentennial celebration can largely be attributed to ARBA's "emphasis on low-key events and the participation of local and state initiatives without the imposition of a

⁶¹ Comptroller General of the United States, *Organization and Operations of the American Revolution Bicentennial Commission*, (Washington DC: United States General Accounting Office, 1972), 46-50, accessed December 13, 2022, <https://www.gao.gov/assets/b-166850.pdf>.

⁶² David Ryan, "Re-Enacting Independence Through Nostalgia—The 1976 US Bicentennial After the Vietnam War," *Forum for Inter-American Research* 5, no. 3 (2012), accessed December 14, 2022, <http://interamericaonline.org/volume-5-3/ryan/>.

⁶³ Gerald R. Ford, "Proclamation 4411, The Bicentennial Year, December 31, 1975," The American Presidency Project, accessed December 20, 2022, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/proclamation-4411-the-bicentennial-year>.

dominant theme.”⁶⁴ In addition to coordinating the federal financial and logistic role, ARBA defined three official program areas around which local Bicentennial committees and groups could structure their observances: Heritage ‘76 “to take pride in our origins, values, and the meaning of America... in order to take pride in our country”; Festival ‘76 “to share the traditions, culture and hospitality of the American people”; and Horizons ‘76 “to concentrate on building a direction and future of America.”⁶⁵

The Milwaukee American Revolution Bicentennial Committee (MARBC) and the Milwaukee County Bicentennial Committee co-coordinated the official celebration activity and marketing citywide, often distributing branded promotional material under the tagline “The Bicentennial Belongs to All of Us,” paired with a logo featuring a multi-racial group of school-aged residents.⁶⁶ Although Heritage ‘76 elements were implicitly part of the Bicentennial proceedings, the celebration coordinators decided to explicitly endorse the Festival and Horizon program areas to play up the Milwaukee metro area’s strengths. As one report noted, “With its mosaic of ethnic cultures, Milwaukee stands as a living story of America’s development,” and much of the official programming emphasized Milwaukee’s international qualities as a destination for a variety of immigrant groups and as a traditional hub for global manufacturing and trade.⁶⁷ Already home to several distinct ethnic festivals, the coordinators sponsored the annual Holiday Folk Fair and International Week in downtown Milwaukee in 1975 and 1976, while other activities revolved around promoting tourism and taking advantage of existing attractions like famous buildings and landmarks, the Lake Michigan shoreline, and the annual

⁶⁴ Ryan, “Re-Enacting Independence,” para 2.

⁶⁵ “Milwaukee Bicentennial Report,” 1974, 5, box 9, folder 14, Records of Mayor Henry W. Maier Administration, Milwaukee, Wisconsin 1957-1989, Milwaukee Series 44, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, Archives Department (hereafter cited as Milwaukee Bicentennial Report).

⁶⁶ Milwaukee Bicentennial Report, 1-2.

⁶⁷ Milwaukee Bicentennial Report, 5-6.

Summerfest concert series to engage area residents and visitors.⁶⁸

Even as the theme of forward-looking internationalism overlaid the Bicentennial proceedings around Milwaukee, the coordinators made ready use of the history and heritage institutional networks typically preoccupied with emphasizing Milwaukee's past. For example, the coordinators distributed "neighborhood kits" that offered further guidance on creating localized committees to carry out officially sanctioned or independent celebration initiatives, all categorized along the Heritage, Festival, and Horizons scheme.⁶⁹ Similarly, the Milwaukee County Historical Society published and distributed a series of fliers listing various activities that different groups and individuals could take on to support the celebration and become better acquainted with their community and its history.⁷⁰ They suggested young people visit historical museums, research their family histories, and participate in Bicentennial-themed school programs. For senior citizens, they encouraged recording oral histories, donating archives and artifacts to local historical societies, and participating in public discussions about their community's heritage. For libraries, they recommended facilitating multimedia local history resource access, displaying information about the history of the libraries, and sponsoring tours of historic sites and landmarks in their home neighborhoods.

This official encouragement of well-organized grassroots celebration around the American Bicentennial coincided with, if not directly produced, a significant rise in institutional activity in the years leading up to and immediately after The Bicentennial Year. Prior developments in the SHSW Local History Affiliate Program provided a clearly defined

⁶⁸ Milwaukee Bicentennial Report, 7-8.

⁶⁹ "Milwaukee American Revolution Bicentennial Commission Neighborhood Kit," 1976, box 4, folder 68, Frederick I. Olson Papers, 1894-2003, Mss-1013, Milwaukee County Historical Society, Research Library Manuscript Collections.

⁷⁰ MCHS Bicentennial Fliers, 1976, box 4, folder 1, Milwaukee County Bicentennial Commission, 1971-1976, Mss-2120, Milwaukee County Historical Society, Research Library Manuscript Collections.

procedural path for interested citizens to formally organize and incorporate. Direct access to the resources and expertise of the SHSW surely supplied enough incentive for some new affiliates, but in the Milwaukee metro area the prospect of being part of a growing local network must have been attractive as well. Indeed, of the twenty-seven institutional members listed in the current affiliate directory from Milwaukee County in the metro area, seventeen incorporated between 1964 and 1984, with the majority of those founded between 1970-1980 (See Appendix A: Milwaukee County History Agencies on pages 200-203). This concentration of new organizations mostly took the form of local historical societies linked to suburban municipalities around Milwaukee. The organizational missions of this cohort invariably include the gathering, preservation, and display of historic items, information provision, and publicly celebrating the associated community's history, which is unsurprising given the requirements for affiliation. But it is worth noting that local history organizations founded in the Bicentennial-era tended more toward public history functions like hosting museums and supporting school curricula, while moving away from more traditional historical society functions like publishing edited historical documents and serious research.

In a 1998 interview, retired UW-Milwaukee History Professor Fredrick I. Olson discussed the proliferation of historical societies around the Milwaukee area during the 1970s and 1980s, insisting on the crucial role they had come to play in their communities: "They serve as social networks. They are a place for elementary schools to learn history. What would the schools do without local museums? Something would have to be created. Each historical society has a unique face."⁷¹ Olson, who frequently used local historical societies to research

⁷¹ Daniel O'Keefe, "Professor Fred Olson shares thoughts on city," *Historic Milwaukee* 2, no. 5 (December 1998): 5, Historic Milwaukee, Inc. Records, 1970-2009, UWM Mss. 113, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Libraries, Archives Department.

Milwaukee's social history, political development, and built environment, was involved in nearly every major Milwaukee-area historic preservation initiative throughout his career.⁷² In addition to his faculty responsibilities, Olson was a prolific volunteer and served on the SHSW's Board of Curators, the Milwaukee County Historical Society board of directors, and the Milwaukee City and County Landmarks Commission. In a 1981 oral history interview, Olson discussed how his work in the Milwaukee area historical preservation movement and local Bicentennial planning helped inform the creation of a historical society and city landmarks committee in Wauwatosa, Wisconsin, just two of several institutional results that he deemed "a projection of what we were doing elsewhere."⁷³ This comment speaks to the reciprocal interplay of historical consciousness and the historical enterprise within a community, and it describes a common scenario that was enacted all over the country with different permutations in the wake of the Bicentennial.

The Milwaukee Humanities Program

Olson continued to play a significant role in Milwaukee's local history and historic preservation community until his retirement in the 1990s, but in the late 1970s his focus shifted briefly to the Milwaukee Humanities Program (MHP), a multi-institutional effort to explore, define, and assess the cultural life of the city and its people.⁷⁴ Olson advised on the initial planning phase of the project and later became the program director, during which time he worked with John Gurda, a fellow Milwaukee native who would become, arguably, the most

⁷² General Correspondence from Local Historical Societies, 1955-1981, box 4, folder 4, Frederick I. Olson Papers, 1894-2003, Mss-1013, Milwaukee County Historical Society, Research Library Manuscript Collections.

⁷³ Frederick I. Olson, interview by Frank Cassell, June 19, 1981, digital ID UWMAC0016_a19-a21, audio recording, UW-Milwaukee Oral History Project, <https://collections.lib.uwm.edu/digital/collection/uwmoh/id/78/>.

⁷⁴ F. Xavier Baron, The Milwaukee Humanities Program Project Grant Application, 1977, box 1, folder 36, Milwaukee Humanities Program Records, 1977-1986, UWM Mss. 67, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Libraries, Archives Department (hereafter cited as MHP Project Grant Application).

famous and authoritative chronicler of Milwaukee history in the following decades.⁷⁵ The MHP sought to take advantage of the post-Bicentennial mood, characterized by wide public interest in historical and cultural affairs, to elucidate “in human terms what it means to live here,” through a series of multimedia products meant to appeal to a wide, everyday audience.⁷⁶ It is perhaps no surprise, then, that much of what the MHP produced in only a few years regularly highlighted Milwaukee’s distinctive neighborhoods and local historical narratives.

The MHP was based on “the firm conviction that the humanities are for everyone and that there are other ways to share their richness and importance besides teaching in the classroom and writing for scholarly publications.”⁷⁷ MHP planning began in 1976 with a series of meetings between representatives from UW-Milwaukee, Marquette University, the Milwaukee Public Library, and the Wisconsin Humanities Committee and officials from the National Endowment for Humanities (NEH) Public Programs Division.⁷⁸ The NEH had identified Milwaukee as one of six American cities to develop a comprehensive urban-based program that could serve as models for future public humanities initiatives.⁷⁹ Later that year, the MHP steering committee successfully applied for a NEH planning grant and in early 1977 appointed UW-Milwaukee English Department Professor F. Xavier Baron as MHP executive director.⁸⁰ The planning grant engaged dozens of Milwaukee area humanities experts and education leaders to determine available institutional resources, identify existing humanities projects, and assess the potential

⁷⁵ Carolyn Kott Washburn, “The Making of a Historian: John Gurda Makes Milwaukee’s Past Come Alive. Here’s His Story,” *Milwaukee Magazine*, May 24, 2019, <https://www.milwaukeeemag.com/the-making-of-a-historian-john-gurda-milwaukees-past-comes-alive-heres-his-story/>.

⁷⁶ MHP Project Grant Application, 2.

⁷⁷ MHP Project Grant Application, 1.

⁷⁸ MHP Project Grant Application, 2.

⁷⁹ MHP Project Grant Application, 3.

⁸⁰ Anthony P. Carideo, “Here’s Looking at You, Milwaukee,” *The Milwaukee Journal*, June 10, 1979, box 10, folder 2, Milwaukee Humanities Program Records, 1977-1986, UWM Mss. 67, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Libraries, Archives Department.

impact of enhanced humanities programming within the community. The planning committee found a preponderance of humanities activity throughout the city, especially programs aimed at adult populations in academic settings, but also determined that “efforts to reach the Milwaukee public and deepen general awareness of the enrichment of experience which accrues from a better understanding of one’s personal and cultural heritage and value have been minimal.”⁸¹ From this assessment the committee formalized the main goals that became the basis for the larger NEH grant application: to build on and promote existing successful cultural programs at local institutions, and to stimulate other humanities efforts “with broader and more varied objectives and new techniques” toward wider public access.⁸²

Aside from the net benefit of enhanced cultural programming, MHP planners also felt that elevated cultural awareness could inform Milwaukee’s “wise development and growth,” and was worthy of consideration alongside political and economic factors in addressing the many issues facing the city.⁸³ For the MHP’s planners and champions, the city’s contemporaneous attempts to reconcile with its historical legacy contributed to its overall allure and suitability for the NEH grant:

Milwaukee is perhaps the perfect city for this venture. It has an interesting and diverse one-hundred-and-fifty-year history. Its ethnic diversity adds a depth of charm and multifaceted identity, which probably only six or so other American cities enjoy. It has a most unique civic pride, almost stubborn in its dimensions, not only uninterested in being compared but comfortably proud of its character and idiosyncrasies. Most importantly,

⁸¹ MHP Project Grant Application, 4.

⁸² MHP Project Grant Application, 5.

⁸³ MHP Project Grant Application, 7.

Milwaukee is clearly becoming more aware of itself as a city that is unique and losing its interest in the required and futile definition of its character according to statistics and numbers about its size, income, industrial output and so on. Milwaukee is also rapidly coming alive culturally and is more interested than ever in defining itself for present and future generations of natives and visitors. It is this developing self-consciousness that makes the late 1970s a superb time to push comprehensive and broad-based public humanities programming in the city. But this new interest in what it is and what it means to live here has also created a deep need.⁸⁴

The MHP grant proposal resembled an extended pilot study in that much of the work was stimulatory and experimental, encouraging innovative approaches from its contributors with minimal focus on delivering well-defined end products. The grant application listed two main deliverables to fulfill the grant requirements and MHP's primary objective of raising public awareness using novel ideas and techniques in cultural and humanities programming: the creation of the Milwaukee Humanities Information Service to sponsor a citywide humanities directory and newsletter, and hosting a Milwaukee Humanities Conference featuring "discussions of national prominence about the important role of public humanities in American urban life, with the Milwaukee cultural experience as a focal point."⁸⁵ These traditional outputs would be complemented by a series of multimedia and interactive sub-pilot projects including: Cultural Milwaukee, which would create text, photography, exhibit, film, radio, and video resources "to clarify the meaning of life in Milwaukee and to define how the past has shaped the

⁸⁴ MHP Project Grant Application, 5.

⁸⁵ F. Xavier Baron, The Milwaukee Humanities Program statement draft, January 5, 1978, box 1, folder 35, Milwaukee Humanities Program Records, 1977-1986, UWM Mss. 67, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Libraries, Archives Department.

present”; Milwaukee Women, which would produce “experimental video, radio and prose journals and assessments of the women of Milwaukee’s past, present, and future”; Humanities and Retirement, which would use discussions, journals, and video and radio diaries “to encourage self-expression and self-reflection among retired Milwaukeeans”; Milwaukee Citizens’ Forum, “a series of extensive discussion, with media coverage, about the quality of life in Milwaukee”; and the creation of a Milwaukee Humanities and Cultural Commission, “to arrange for the direct involvement of humanists in the decisions that shape life in Milwaukee.”⁸⁶

In late 1977, MHP was funded at \$400,000, which was the largest sum awarded among all of the cities selected for this NEH grant program, likely due to the ambitious scope and wide institutional buy-in reflected in the Milwaukee proposal.⁸⁷ The UW-Milwaukee Graduate School served as the fiscal agent and the College of Letters and Science provided administrative support and office space on campus for over twenty program staff, project directors, and creative personnel.⁸⁸ The initial phase of MHP operations was set for eighteen months beginning in January 1978, with plans for subsequent funding renewals and program expansion based on the development of innovative approaches to public humanities that eventually could be parlayed into an independent and self-sustaining cross-institutional enterprise.⁸⁹ However, the likelihood of MHP efforts taking permanent institutional form was hampered from the beginning with the removal of the proposed Milwaukee Humanities and Cultural Commission from the final NEH award package. The pilot project areas solidified around the remaining four themes (Humanities

⁸⁶ MHP Project Grant Application, 22.

⁸⁷ John Gurda letter to Roger Grier, March 9, 1978, box 1, folder 37, Milwaukee Humanities Program Records, 1977-1986, UWM Mss. 67, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Libraries, Archives Department.

⁸⁸ Frederick I. Olson, “Final Narrative Report of Accomplishment,” June 30, 1980, 2-3, box 1, folder 36, Milwaukee Humanities Program Records, 1977-1986, UWM Mss. 67, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Libraries, Archives Department (hereafter cited as Final Narrative Report).

⁸⁹ MHP Project Grant Application, 7.

and Retirement became Retirement and Long-Living), but underwent substantial modifications as work on them proceeded, resulting in the creation of products and resources much more aligned with standard print and visual media delivery.

During the execution of the MHP's first phase, there were recurrent problems in keeping the project areas on schedule and within allocated budgets.⁹⁰ Additionally, the MHS project areas seemed to lack a cohesive identity, which mirrored the loose organizational structure of MHS staff bureaucracy and work culture. John Gurda, who served as the MHS's publications director in charge of the Cultural Milwaukee pilot, expressed a series of concerns related to MHP organization, communication, and goals in a letter to Baron, writing, "I continue to feel that we need to pay more attention to what you might call architecture: matters relating to scale, perspective, balance, harmony, and relation to surroundings. Individual projects are doing very well, but I can't help but feel that we don't hang together as a unit, with a common general goal and agreed-upon methods for achieving it."⁹¹ Gurda insisted on the need to consider a more unified approach to help ensure continued funding beyond the initial grant period, arguing that the "lack of a conceptual center makes us look like a highly sophisticated employment program."⁹² But even in the absence of a clear long-term plan or vision, the MHP produced an impressive volume of content including widely distributed newsletters and pamphlets, a feature-length documentary, dozens of oral histories, a 26-episode television show, and multiple public exhibitions of community generated creative work. By the end of the first phase, MHP projects

⁹⁰ C. G. Screven and John Schiek, "Evaluation Report: Milwaukee Humanities Project," August 9, 1979, box 1, folder 35, Milwaukee Humanities Program Records, 1977-1986, UWM Mss. 67, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Libraries, Archives Department.

⁹¹ John Gurda letter to F. Xavier Baron, August 1, 1978, 1, box 1, folder 37, Milwaukee Humanities Program Records, 1977-1986, UWM Mss. 67, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Libraries, Archives Department (hereafter cited as Gurda letter to Baron).

⁹² Gurda letter to Baron, 2.

reached a general audience of 650,000 and a regular audience of 85,000.⁹³

Regardless of the MHP's accomplishments, the subsequent application to the NEH for \$300,000 in second phase funding was rejected and Baron left the MHP in the summer of 1979 to resume his full-time faculty role at UW-Milwaukee.⁹⁴ In a letter to MHP staff and community advisory board members, Baron expressed a mix of frustration and fulfillment, wondering if "there was too little discrimination between what might be popular and quickly appealing" and what should have been given more time for the public to absorb: "Perhaps we tried too much and I was unrealistic about what we could accomplish in eighteen months. Perhaps we ignored or gave too little attention to the breadth and comprehensiveness of the humanities and consequently developed too narrow a focus on Milwaukee culture alone."⁹⁵ Certainly, the Cultural Milwaukee project headed by Gurda emerged as the most significant program area, encompassing more individual project components than the other pilots focused on Milwaukee women, retirees, and citizen forums.⁹⁶ In addition to exhibits, media outreach, and filmed pieces, Cultural Milwaukee generated a series of mass market booklets that documented the historical background and contemporary characteristics of selected Milwaukee neighborhoods. The most popular of all these booklets was *Bay View, Wis.*, written by John Gurda.

⁹³ F. Xavier Baron, The Milwaukee Humanities Program First Stage Report, 1979, box 1, folder 35, Milwaukee Humanities Program Records, 1977-1986, UWM Mss. 67, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Libraries, Archives Department.

⁹⁴ William F. Halloran, "Present Status of the Milwaukee Humanities Programs" Memorandum, October 1, 1979, box 1, folder 35, Milwaukee Humanities Program Records, 1977-1986, UWM Mss. 67, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Libraries, Archives Department (hereafter cited as Halloran Memorandum).

⁹⁵ F. Xavier Baron, "Some Reflections, A Report, and An Expression of Thanks to the Staff and Board Members of the Milwaukee Humanities Program," 1980, 8, box 1, folder 35, Milwaukee Humanities Program Records, 1977-1986, UWM Mss. 67, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Libraries, Archives Department.

⁹⁶ F. Xavier Baron, "The Milwaukee Humanities Program 'A Closer Look,'" 1978, box 1, folder 35, Milwaukee Humanities Program Records, 1977-1986, UWM Mss. 67, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Libraries, Archives Department.

Emphasizing Milwaukee neighborhood history, especially to the degree that it reflected the range of cultural and ethnic heritage around the city, was a priority for MHP projects from the beginning. In particular, the books produced in the Cultural Milwaukee pilot sought to show how Milwaukee's ethnic diversity had changed in the post-World War II era, but that even if the "the old neighborhoods are not unified by common ethnic origins any more, Milwaukeeans scattered throughout the city do nurture and assert their different ethnic identities as they maintain traditional customs and enjoy traditional cultural festivals, food and celebrations."⁹⁷ Cultural Milwaukee's resulting publications were meant to demonstrate that Milwaukee's past is intertwined with its neighborhoods, since these "function as an extension of the family and the church congregation and served as one of the important urban social structures."⁹⁸ The *Bay View, Wis.* study closely followed this original vision by contrasting the past with the present, including how institutions, official policies, the built environment, and geographical realities factor into community identity, and how this is perceived and valued by the people who live there.

With the overarching goal of bolstering "the community's sense of identity in a time of pervasive change," Gurda spent months researching and conducting interviews in Bay View with an eye toward producing a work grounded in scholarship that could at once be useful for policymakers and accessible to residents of all backgrounds. But more specifically, Gurda wanted the booklet "to reach 'old' Bay Viewites (of all ages) who ignore the recent changes or are traumatized by them, and 'new' Bay Viewites who may identify with the community to some extent but lack the native's depth of understanding."⁹⁹ Gurda tied identity to heritage,

⁹⁷ MHP Project Grant Application, 20.

⁹⁸ MHP Project Grant Application, 20.

⁹⁹ John Gurda, *Bay View, Wis.* Correspondence, 1978-1979, box 1, folder 37, Milwaukee Humanities Program Records, 1977-1986, UWM Mss. 67, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Libraries, Archives Department (hereafter cited as Gurda Correspondence).

environment, and aspirations, and believed a strong community identity “can provide residents with a context, a sense of stability, a sense of belonging—and can motivate newcomers to make an emotional investment.”¹⁰⁰ Gurda structured *Bay View, Wis.* to acquaint readers with the formative aspects of the neighborhood’s past, describe the major changes and how these have impacted community identity, and provide a realistic contemporary account of the area to begin contemplating what issues would emerge in the future. Gurda hoped that “reading the booklet would make residents more aware, more conscious, more concerned, and more willing to get involved.”¹⁰¹

Bay View, Wis. was published in early 1979 and quickly sold out its initial printing run of 4000 copies, qualifying it as a local best-seller and prompting a second printing run.¹⁰² Critical response was positive as well, with one reviewer praising the study’s discussion of larger themes, events, and forces “that produced a distinctive community,” while also providing enough historic detail “to make older Bay Viewites nostalgic.”¹⁰³ Another reviewer noted Gurda’s thorough resident-based research approach that gave the narrative a folksy quality, “like an old-timer chatting about his hometown.”¹⁰⁴ Gurda became a regular fixture at libraries, civic organizations, and local history conferences presenting on the *Bay View, Wis.* project, and an entire episode of the MHP-produced television show *Milwaukee, Milwaukee* featured Gurda discussing Bay View

¹⁰⁰ Gurda Correspondence, 3.

¹⁰¹ Gurda Correspondence, 3.

¹⁰² Beatrice Goldberg letter to Kathleen Ryan, December 22, 1980, box 2, folder 70, Milwaukee Humanities Program Records, 1977-1986, UWM Mss. 67, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Libraries, Archives Department.

¹⁰³ Hannah W. Swart, “Review of *Bay View, Wis.*,” *Wisconsin Academy Review* 47 (1980), box 1, folder 9, Milwaukee Humanities Program Records, 1977-1986, UWM Mss. 67, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Libraries, Archives Department.

¹⁰⁴ Irene Hanson, “Review of *Bay View, Wis.*,” *Lore* 29 no. 4 (1979), box 1, folder 9, Milwaukee Humanities Program Records, 1977-1986, UWM Mss. 67, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Libraries, Archives Department.

history.¹⁰⁵ The MHP's final report to the NEH included similar plaudits for the project:

John Gurda's *Bay View, Wis.* combined a popular version of the history of a Milwaukee neighborhood, which celebrated its centennial as a village in 1979 (it was consolidated with Milwaukee in 1887), and contemporary social analysis based upon personal interviews. Gurda had extensive experience with neighborhood analysis and neighborhood and ethnic publications in Milwaukee, and Bay View perhaps the best example of an intact Milwaukee neighborhood.¹⁰⁶ The result was not surprising: an excellent popular history, widely purchased in Bay View from community outlets and perhaps the high point in the community's centennial celebration and its concurrent reflection upon its past and future.¹⁰⁷

In October 1979, Frederick Olson was appointed MHP project director and was tasked with winding down the program and determining if any of its operational elements might be carried forward into other institutional settings.¹⁰⁸ Besides overseeing the publication of another Gurda neighborhood study on Milwaukee's West End in December 1980, the MHP was mostly inactive and phased out completely by the spring of 1981.¹⁰⁹ The records of the MHP office were

¹⁰⁵ *Milwaukee, Milwaukee* Television Guide, 1979, box 1, folder 9, Milwaukee Humanities Program Records, 1977-1986, UWM Mss. 67, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Libraries, Archives Department.

¹⁰⁶ Gurda's research on Milwaukee's ethnic neighborhoods preceded his involvement with the MHP. See John Gurda and Byron Anderson's "The Near South Side: A Delicate Balance," and Gurda's "The Latin Community on Milwaukee's Near South Side," *The Milwaukee Urban Conservatory*, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 1976, Archival Resources on Hispanics in Wisconsin, 1930-1979, Micro 856, Wisconsin Historical Society, Division of Library, Archives, and Museum Collections.

¹⁰⁷ Final Narrative Report, 7-8.

¹⁰⁸ Halloran Memorandum, 1.

¹⁰⁹ Final Narrative Report, 8. An MHP-sponsored book about Milwaukee's River West neighborhood was approximately 80% complete at the time of the final report and would not be published until 1984.

eventually transferred to the UW-Milwaukee University Archives, but other physical and programmatic remnants all but disappeared. The booklets produced by the Cultural Milwaukee project, however, are currently available all over the city in libraries, archives, museums, historic preservation offices, and the homes of many history-minded residents. For the Bay View neighborhood, the MHP represents a tangible, and arguably decisive, factor in the initial development of the BVHS organization. It provided a summative text that tied current attitudes and conditions in the neighborhood to its historical and cultural legacy. It solidified the relationship between a historically conscious community and an individual who would become one of its most vocal champions. On a more practical note, Gurda played a significant role in the planning and execution of the Bay View Centennial Celebration, participated in the initial organizational meetings to gauge interest in creating a formal historical society, and served on the first BVHS executive board as a charter member. It seems that the goal to carry forward the MHP in some institutional form was partially realized by the BVHS.

Chapter 3: A Successful Beginning, 1979-1986

Within the country's late-1970s environment of elevated historical consciousness, the Milwaukee metro area experienced an upswing in the creation of formal historical institutions across various communities.¹ Like other organizations founded in the area during this time, the BVHS's creation would not have been possible without some spark of initiative from directly within the Bay View neighborhood. The Bay View Centennial Celebration in 1979 provided an immediate commemorative context and organizational impetus for history-minded individuals to coalesce around, but, as with most any creative effort, it required committed people to assume responsibility and put ideas into action. As its leadership attempted to marshal the talents, resources, connections, and interests of its members into a cohesive approach to documenting, preserving, and sharing neighborhood history, the BVHS gained public recognition as an authority on that history. This chapter looks at the first phase of the BVHS's development from 1979-1986, a period characterized by the organization's rapid growth and involvement within the neighborhood. Even as the BVHS struggled to quickly establish a permanent physical presence, the immediate community enthusiastically supported its efforts, and it received recognition from peer societies for the range and quality of its activities.

BVHS Origins and the Bay View Centennial Celebration

The narrative embraced and shared by the BVHS in the years after its founding traces the group's humble beginnings to a conversation between two neighborhood residents that occurred within the wider field of history and memory-oriented activity at the time. The story—regularly

¹ "History at the Local Level," *Milwaukee County Historical Society Newsletter*, Milwaukee County Historical Society, June-July 1980, 2, box 1-2, Ray Bethke Papers, 1979-1994, Bay View Historical Society, Beulah Brinton House Maritime Room (hereafter referred to as Bethke Papers).

recounted in press coverage, BVHS publications, and member oral history interviews—is relatively straightforward, even if the details vary from version to version. The broad strokes involve the following: one day around 1978 or 1979, neighbors Audrey Quinsey and R. Paul Kohlbeck had a discussion about the rich history of Bay View and how there should be some kind of an organization created to preserve and celebrate that history. From there, Quinsey and Kohlbeck recruited other like-minded residents and organized a series of increasingly well-attended meetings, out of which emerged a core group that took the necessary steps to officially incorporate the BVHS as a state historical society affiliate member. A version of this story is included in the State Historical Society of Wisconsin (SHSW) incorporation filing and it is further canonized by John Gurda in the first issue of the group’s newsletter, the *Bay View Historian*.² Some versions specifically include Quinsey and Kohlbeck, while other versions mention some of their fellow charter members, and still others reference conversations between non-specific “persons” or “interested citizens.”³ In all versions where any specific people are mentioned, Quinsey and Kohlbeck are included.

At first glance, the BVHS origin story might seem rather uneventful and the details unimportant, but it is significant for a few reasons. It was Kohlbeck and Quinsey who organized and led the initial meetings and outreach efforts around the neighborhood after their discussions. They also guided the official organizational processes for the nascent group, including staffing the steering committee, formulating bylaws, electing officers, and serving in leadership positions. Both were signatories on the incorporation documents, and both remained active in the BVHS for the remainder of their able-bodied lives. But their stories also reflect early BVHS

² John Gurda, “The Bay View Historical Society - One of a Kind,” *Bay View Historian* January 1980, 3.

³ BVHS Articles of Incorporation Application, 1979, Bethke Papers; W. H. Oleson, BVHS Membership Letters, 2001, BVHS Subject Files, 1976-2018, Bay View Historical Society, Beulah Brinton House Maritime Room (hereafter referred to as BVHS Subject Files).

messaging around attracting wide participation. For example, in acknowledging the organization's accomplishments in its first year, Kohlbeck wrote, "Most importantly, our society has provided the opportunity for us to renew old acquaintances as well as make many new friends. The cooperation among the 'oldtimers', 'younger generation', and 'new-comers' has been great!"⁴ To this point, some versions of the origin story highlighted Kohlbeck's background as a fourth generation Bay Viewite and long-time educator at the neighborhood's Fernwood Elementary School.⁵ In contrast, Quinsey was often identified as a recent transplant who moved into Bay View and led efforts to preserve unique historic fixtures in her adopted neighborhood, including the restoration of the Pryor Avenue Iron Well.⁶

Quinsey and her husband owned a semi-restored historic property at 2590 South Superior Street that was built in 1872 by Warren and Beulah Brinton.⁷ Warren was the superintendent at the Milwaukee Iron Works rolling mill, which was owned by Beulah's cousin, Eber Brock Ward, a wealthy industrialist who gifted the lot the house was built on.⁸ Within a few years after Bay View's founding as a company town in the 1860s, the rolling mill was one of the largest employers in Milwaukee and one of the largest mills of its kind in the United States.⁹ In the next several decades Brinton would emerge as one of the most prominent Milwaukee citizens, initially due to the educational and social programs that she ran out of her home for millworker's wives and children, many of whom were newly arrived immigrants.¹⁰ Brinton's work predated

⁴ R. Paul Kohlbeck, "President's Message," *Bay View Historian*, 1981, 3.

⁵ "Historical Society Sets First Meeting," *The Bay Viewer* October 24, 1979, BVHS Subject Files (hereafter all references deriving from this publication are cited by individual article and/or issue).

⁶ Sandra Koehler, "BV Forming Historical Group," *Southeast Post* May 16, 1979, BVHS Subject Files, (hereafter all references deriving from this publication are cited by individual article and/or issue).

⁷ Gregory McElwain, "This is For Your Scrapbook, Audrey," *Milwaukee Journal*, June 2, 1983, BVHS Subject Files.

⁸ Bay View Historical Society Application for Landmark Status, 1983, 1, BVHS Subject Files.

⁹ Bay View Historical Society Application for Landmark Status, 5.

¹⁰ Bay View Historical Society Application for Landmark Status, 10.

other more well-known settlement houses found in Chicago and elsewhere throughout the United States in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and her impact on the subsequent development of public recreation and social services in Milwaukee is similarly substantial.¹¹

In Bay View, there continues to be a deep reverence for Beulah Brinton, but for the BVHS her legacy is an essential component of their organizational mission and identity. Indeed, Beulah Brinton—with her familial connection to the rolling mill, her work in the immigrant labor community, and her legacy of neighborly welcoming—and the schools in Bay View represent the two most consistent themes that exerted the greatest influence on the BVHS’s activity following its initial founding and early development. Both of these themes find a referent in the stories told about Quinsey and Kohlbeck through their connections to the changes, continuities, and physical spaces that embody neighborhood history and shape the community’s collective memories. The BVHS’s emphasis on and collaborations with neighborhood schools would begin shortly after incorporation, and its initial archival holdings consisted largely of historic items from Bay View High School donated by former students and personnel. Likewise, the BVHS’s first official landmarking effort targeted the Brinton House, which it would eventually purchase to serve as its headquarters, soon thereafter formalizing its collecting scope and mission to align with the contours of Brinton’s life, times, and legacy. The group’s trajectory likely would have been quite different if not for Quinsey’s and Kohlbeck’s influence.

But despite what some versions of the origin story repeatedly suggest, Quinsey and Kohlbeck did not single-handedly create the BVHS. Their initial inquiries with the SHSW corresponded to and overlapped with the planning and deliberations of the Bay View centennial celebration in the spring and summer of 1979. The centennial committee included John Gurda,

¹¹ Walter F. Koelbl, “Beulah Brinton, Traditional Community Center in Bay View,” *Bay View Observer*, December 4, 1984. BVHS Subject Files.

whose work the previous year making connections and conducting research interviews in the neighborhood for *Bay View, Wis.*, prompted an invitation to serve on the centennial committee and join BVHS leadership.¹² Several other history and historic preservation projects that predated the efforts to officially organize—along with the people coordinating these projects—would be folded into the BVHS’s operational purview, adding other areas of interest that would become durable features of organizational activity like the neighborhood history walks, landmark designations, and community documentation.¹³ Early on the BVHS sought to take advantage of the strong civic culture in Bay View and to use existing community-wide events as a means to draw public interest and support. The centennial celebration was ready made for such a purpose as it prolonged the focus on city and neighborhood history while the BVHS organizers took the necessary steps toward official recognition.¹⁴

The first documented traces of the BVHS are from correspondence between Kohlbeck and the SHSW in the early months of 1979 discussing incorporation requirements and soliciting information for Kohlbeck to connect with other newly formed organizations in the Milwaukee area.¹⁵ In March of that year, a small group led by Kohlbeck met for the first time at the Llewellyn Library, the neighborhood’s branch facility of the Milwaukee Public Library system. Although not well attended, this meeting raised the prospect of the historic neighborhood walking tour as an organizational activity, forwarded by charter members Ray Bethke and John Utzat, who had independently developed the walks based on their own research (See Appendix

¹² John Gurda, interview by Kevin Petejan, Bay View Historical Society 40th Anniversary, 2019, BVHS Oral History Collection 1978-2019, Bay View Historical Society, Beulah Brinton House Maritime Room (hereafter referred to BVHS Oral Histories).

¹³ John Utzat interview by Kevin Petejan, 2019, BVHS Oral Histories.

¹⁴ Sandra Koehler, “BV Society Application Signed,” *Southeast Post*, May 25, 1979. In this article Audrey Quinsey is quoted saying “The Centennial is our (BVHS’s) best publicity.”

¹⁵ Kohlbeck letter to SHSW, January 25, 1979, Bethke Papers.

B: BVHS Walking Tour Map on page 204). The next group meeting at Llewellyn in April drew 35 individuals and received coverage in the local press, with Kohlbeck expressing optimism that the group would seek official status with the SHSW.¹⁶ At the meeting the attendees listened to a member of the city landmarks commission discuss designating a section of Bay View as a historical district, and the group resolved to set up the walking tour to coincide with the centennial celebration, create a historical map or booklet for distribution during centennial events, and enter a float in the South Shore Water Frolics parade.¹⁷

May 27, 1979, marked the official anniversary of Bay View's original incorporation, but most of the activities planned by the centennial committee were scheduled for later that summer to coincide with the Water Frolics, an annual Bay View festival sponsored by the neighborhood business community. Besides Gurda, there were no other overlapping personnel between the BVHS and the centennial committee, but deliberations over the BVHS's role and contribution were at the forefront of committee planning.¹⁸ In addition to financially supporting the walking tour, parade float, and pamphlets, the committee agreed to allow the BVHS to staff a sales and fundraising booth at the Water Frolics carnival.¹⁹ The committee also discussed possible affiliation with the BVHS, but nothing was decided on this account since the BVHS was mostly dormant while it awaited a decision from the SHSW on its incorporation and affiliation status.²⁰ By mid-May, prospective members of the BVHS had met and voted to submit the paperwork to pursue affiliation with the SHSW, and in June several representatives went before the SHSW Board of Curators Policy and Certification Committee to discuss the application and complete

¹⁶ Koehler, "BV Forming Historical Group."

¹⁷ Koehler, "BV Forming Historical Group."

¹⁸ Centennial Committee meeting notes, May 22, 1979.

¹⁹ Centennial Committee meeting notes, May 22, 1979.

²⁰ Memo from Milwaukee Public Library, August 9, 1979.

other procedural steps to obtain tax-exempt, non-profit status.²¹

In addition to Quinsey and Kohlbeck, Robert Fennig signed the incorporation papers, which indicated that the purposes of the BVHS would be “exclusively educational and specifically to collect and preserve records and physical objects relating to the history of the community of Bay View, Milwaukee County, Wisconsin.” To this end the BVHS was also empowered to “establish and operate a local history museum, a local history library, and one or more historic sites either on its own or in cooperation with any other organization, agency, or municipality, or it may otherwise preserve, advance, and disseminate knowledge of the aforesaid locale” in accordance with its own bylaws.²² The bylaws covered standard provisions related to elections, meetings, membership, and governance but also included special verbiage requiring financial support for delegate attendance at the annual regional affiliate convention, funding a scholarship for history students at Bay View High School, and granting honorary membership status to all elected officials representing the neighborhood.²³

In late June, Gurda’s *Bay View, Wis.* was published and distributed for sale around the neighborhood. The centennial celebrations commenced with a community gathering at Humboldt Park on July 8, featuring a neighborhood artists show, a performance from the Milwaukee Symphony Orchestra, and a fireworks display.²⁴ A memo from the Llewellyn Library circulated in early August indicated that “community spirit is at an all-time high,” citing as evidence patron inquiries about local history and the frequent requests it received for information on where to

²¹ Board Meeting minutes, 1979.

²² Bay View Historical Society incorporation document, June 23, 1979, Bethke Papers.

²³ Bylaws of the Bay View Historical Society, Inc., 1980, Bethke Papers.

²⁴ Bay View Centennial Committee meeting minutes, May 22, 1979, BVHS Subject Files.

purchase a copy of Gurda's book.²⁵ On July 14, the BVHS sponsored a float in the historical unit of the South Shore Water Frolics parade and August 18 was designated as Bay View Night at the Brewers home game, during which the city closed down the Hoan Bridge for people to park on and observe the fireworks show coming from Milwaukee County Stadium after the game.²⁶ The festivities culminated on August 25 with "A Night in Old Bay View," a ticketed event at the South Shore Park Pavilion arranged by the centennial committee. Instead of coinciding with the Water Frolics as originally planned, the BVHS held the neighborhood walking tour as the lead-in to the gala and over 200 people participated in the two-mile trek.²⁷ The gala featured a beer garden and refreshments, music from the International Folk Band, the dedication of a centennial memorial plaque, and a slide presentation from Gurda on historic Bay View. In line with other celebration events, the gala concluded with yet another fireworks display.

The BVHS Takes Shape in the Community

By October, the BVHS's application for SHSW affiliation was approved and the group elected its first board of directors as part of the incorporation process. This included Kohlbeck, Quinsey, and Fennig, along with Gurda, Lois Rehberg, Sheryl Pendzich, and Ray Bethke, who served as the group's first president (1979-1980). On October 29, the first official meeting of the BVHS was held at the Humboldt Park Pavilion and, according to Gurda, "more than 200 people attended, one of the largest turn-outs for a community meeting in Bay View's recent history."²⁸

The meeting featured a presentation from representatives of the Cudahy Historical Society who

²⁵ Constance Crooks, June-July Monthly Report-Llewellyn, August 9, 1979, Milwaukee Public Library Administrative Subject Files. Milwaukee Public Library, Frank P. Zeidler Room (hereafter referred to as MPL Subject Files).

²⁶ Llewellyn Library staff meeting minutes, August 15, 1979, MPL Subject Files. Historical note: the Brewers broke a seven-game winning streak that night, losing 3-7 to the Texas Rangers.

²⁷ Walk Through Historic Bay View program, 1979, Bethke Papers.

²⁸ Gurda, "The Bay View Historical Society - One of a Kind."

highlighted the restoration of the Chicago and North Western Train Depot as its museum and headquarters.²⁹ By the end of 1979, all paperwork and official processes were complete and the BVHS entered the four year affiliate probationary period as a distinctive enterprise within the SHSW network.³⁰ Still, even riding high on the BVHS's achievements, Bethke sought to temper expectations about the organization's plans: "We're not at all sure about our destination. We do know that we don't want to be competitive with established museums like the Milwaukee County Historical Museum. Some sort of building of our own wouldn't be out of the question, but that is not in the immediate goal. First, we would have to find sources of operating funds, and a strong group of volunteers."³¹

The BVHS's early fiscal situation is difficult to analyze because corresponding records documenting assets, expenses, contributions, and other financial information were not consistently kept. Although it was given a small bequest shortly after incorporation, the BVHS was completely reliant on membership fees, fundraising sales, and charitable donations for its operating expenses. The fee structure offered distinct levels of membership at staggered pricing: \$5.00 for individuals, \$15.00 for sustaining, and \$50.00 for corporate. The costs of the group's activities in the early years were mostly covered by whatever fundraising it could manage, but this rarely exceeded \$10,000 annually. Everything was on the table for BVHS fundraising: t-shirts, buttons, spice mixes, raffles, yard sales, and whatever else could be accomplished within the society's means and that might draw awareness to the BVHS's mission. For example, an early group fundraiser involved the sale of stationery featuring a local artist's designs inspired by

²⁹ BVHS Board meeting minutes, October 29, 1979, Bethke Papers.

³⁰ Handwritten note, November 20, 1979, Bethke Papers. The note indicates that the articles of incorporation were approved by the SHSW and sent to the register of deeds in Milwaukee around November 10 and that all IRS tax exempt filings would be made by the end of the calendar year.

³¹ "History Society Makes Progress," *The Bay Viewer*, January 31, 1980.

themes, locations, and people from Bay View's history.³² Other items like printed maps of early Bay View and copies of *South Side in the SUN*, co-written by BVHS member John Utzat, generated revenue and increased visibility for the society, although this type of revenue source was occasional and supplementary.³³

Despite any financial uncertainty, the BVHS's overall agenda and priorities remained consistent throughout the probationary period. In the first post-incorporation meeting the board discussed courting corporate members and financial support through the development of literature that articulated the goals and projects the society intended to undertake. They also considered what the BVHS might offer in return to corporate partners for their support. The group's experience with the South Shore Water Frolics demonstrated the value of utilizing Bay View's existing institutional infrastructure to raise funds and public visibility, and they resolved to find creative ways to work with other organizations and businesses.³⁴ As Bethke indicated, financial and personnel resources were the main factor in moving the BVHS forward, but the board immediately committed to finding a permanent home and appealed to the membership for help in identifying prospective properties with owners who might be receptive to gifting the BVHS space.³⁵ The board also resolved to be vocal and use their connections to influence policy and actions that related to the organization's interests.³⁶ For example, the BVHS organized a petition and direct appeal to Bay View aldermen expressing "strong sentiments" that the city name a newly constructed community center in the neighborhood after Beulah Brinton.³⁷

³² BVHS Board meeting minutes, March 3, 1980, Bethke Papers.

³³ "South Side History for Sale," *Bay View Historian*, January 1983, 3; "Maps Available," *Bay View Historian*, August 1984, 4.

³⁴ R. Paul Kohlbeck, "President's Message," *Bay View Historian*, August 1982, 4.

³⁵ Howard Madaus, "Museum Committee," *Bay View Historian*, May 1980, 4.

³⁶ BVHS Board meeting minutes, February 11, 1980, Bethke Papers.

³⁷ Clifford A. Draeger letter to BVHS Board, January 14, 1980, Bethke Papers.

But mainly the BVHS was concerned with fulfilling its core objective “to gather, preserve, and disseminate artifacts and information relating to the Bay View area,” while creating an administrative system that would help advance preservation, research, and service activity with wide public appeal.³⁸ Certainly there was enthusiasm across the community in the first year, with the BVHS membership growing to 230 and its committees sponsoring a variety of programs that would become regular events like the annual neighborhood history walks and staffing booths at community events. The BVHS also helped the city landmarks commission demarcate a portion of the neighborhood for historic district designation, which reinforced the group’s desire for more influence over local landmarking and preservation.³⁹ The pet projects and research interests of individual board members seemed at first sufficient to attract participation and engage the wider membership while the organization found its footing.⁴⁰ It quickly became clear, however, that a more cohesive and comprehensive vision was required to sustain motivation over the long term. Looking to build on its initial accomplishments, the BVHS formalized their operational strategy around five functional areas:

Informal educational programs to encourage a community-wide sense of history, offered at Society meetings, in local schools, and at community organization meetings; collection of Bay View’s memories and memorabilia (oral histories, print materials, photographs, and artifacts), and providing access to the collection for both professional and non-paid historians; preservation and promotion of the community’s significant buildings and landmarks, to protect the physical legacy of the past for future generations; research into

³⁸ Ray Bethke, “President’s Message,” *Bay View Historian*, January 1980, 1.

³⁹ “A Year of Progress,” *Bay View Historian*, October 1980, 1.

⁴⁰ Ray Bethke, “President’s Message,” *Bay View Historian*, October 1980, 2.

elements of Bay View's history that are not treated thoroughly in existing studies; social interaction for neighborhood residents who share an interest in local history.⁴¹

The BVHS created a variety of standing and ad hoc committees to conduct these functions, but the Archives Committee was among the first and it touched on all strategic areas. In its first report, chair Sheryl Pendzich articulated the committee's charge "to search out various historical materials of Bay View" to include "newspapers, articles, letters, photos, artifacts, books and any other form of historical data... These materials will be made available in both the original form and reproductions, to people interested in the history of Bay View."⁴² However, given the lack of a facility to accomplish this, the board pursued a partnership with the Llewellyn Library to house and make accessible their collections. At that time, the holdings consisted mostly of Bay View High School yearbooks and theater program records and several boxes documenting local politician and newspaper owner Irwin Zillman, which were donated by his recently-deceased daughter Carol Zillman, who also funded the BVHS's first endowment.⁴³ The library agreed to store, catalog, and display the BVHS's holdings, with head librarian Kit Robillard expressing the library's desire to provide "locally relevant study materials... for students of the Bay View area in conjunction with the historical society."⁴⁴ Pendzich noted how important Llewellyn had been as an institution in Bay View since it was built in the 1910s and how "it seems a perfect home for historical materials about the neighborhood."⁴⁵ The formal agreement stipulated that at the library the collection was only open to "Society members and

⁴¹ "Why We're Here," *Bay View Historian*, October 1981, 5.

⁴² Sheryl Pendzich, "Archive Committee," *Bay View Historian*, January 1980, 5.

⁴³ "History Society Makes Progress," *The Bay Viewer*, January 31, 1980.

⁴⁴ Llewellyn Library Monthly Report, October 1980, MPL Subject Files.

⁴⁵ Sheryl Pendzich, "Archive Committee," *Bay View Historian*, 1982, 5.

qualified researchers,” and Llewellyn staff was apparently granted wide discretion in enforcing the terms of access.⁴⁶

Robillard and successive Llewellyn staff members continued to serve on the Archives Committee and in other capacities for the BVHS, further solidifying the institutional connection.⁴⁷ As the BVHS sought to proactively document the community through direct donor solicitation, the Archives Committee attempted to approach archival and museum work from a position of professional best practices. Pendzich held a master’s degree in history and worked as an archivist at Temple University prior to moving to Bay View. Her background enabled the committee to create a collection policy, produce deed of gift forms, and instruct other committee members on basic archival procedures.⁴⁸ The BVHS joined the American Association for State and Local History and Pendzich eventually was nominated to serve on the SHSW Board of Curators.⁴⁹ The Museum Committee was similarly led by an individual with specialized expertise; Michael Madaus, a curator at the Milwaukee Public Museum, was charged with locating an affordable and accessible site for housing the artifact collections not suitable for storage at Llewellyn. Although working toward a permanent solution, Madaus’ shorter-term goal was to “create and disseminate to appropriate agencies throughout the community temporary traveling exhibits,” which would help promote BVHS membership, fundraising, and further collection acquisitions.⁵⁰

Aside from the omnipresent themes of Bay View schools and Beulah Brinton, the BVHS collection development focused on records and objects related to the rolling mill, Lake Michigan

⁴⁶ BVHS and Llewellyn Library agreement, June 1980, MPL Subject Files.

⁴⁷ Llewellyn Library Monthly Report, June 1981, MPL Subject Files.

⁴⁸ Sheryl Pendzich, “Archives,” *Bay View Historian*, April 1981, 4.

⁴⁹ Robert Fennig, “From the President,” *Bay View Historian*, March 1985, 3.

⁵⁰ Howard Madaus, “Museum Committee,” *Bay View Historian*, May 1980, 4.

maritime history, pioneer families, religious communities, immigrant groups, and legacy businesses and industries in Bay View. Most of the collections housed at Llewellyn were books, manuscripts, and printed items like photographs, but other artwork, maps, artifacts, and large format items designated for donation mostly resided in members' home closets and attics.⁵¹ The BVHS engaged in active documentation projects, including the compilation of a newspaper clipping file where Archive Committee volunteers would extract, arrange, and catalog any article mentioning Bay View printed in all Milwaukee area news publications, a project that continues to the present day.⁵² The BVHS initiated other documentation projects featuring community created artifacts and content, such as the construction of a neighborhood quilt and an oral history project that gathered at least 25 interviews from some of Bay View's oldest residents.⁵³ Archives Committee member John Steiner was an avid collector and documentarian of Bay View history. His photographs of the rolling mill just prior to its demolition in the late 1920s were among the society's earliest acquisitions.⁵⁴

Steiner's previous experience as the owner and producer for a Chicago-based jazz label, as well as his personal collections documenting the Chicago jazz scene more generally, were reflected in the Archives Committee's acquisitions strategy that sought to both capture and share neighborhood history in various formats and media.⁵⁵ Early on in BVHS's partnership with Milwaukee Public Library (MPL) via the Llewellyn branch, Steiner met with Paul Woehrman of the main library's Local History Room to discuss microfilming the society's primary research materials to make it more widely available through the MPL system. Steiner believed that

⁵¹ Sheryl Pendzich, "Archives Committee Report," *Bay View Historian*, October 1980, 6.

⁵² Mary Becker, "Bay View Memories Safe in New Home," *The Bay Viewer*, January 29, 2004.

⁵³ "Community Quilt," *Bay View Historian*, April 1983, 2.

⁵⁴ Anna Passante, "Three Generations of the Parkes Family Lived in This Puddler's Cottage," *Bay View Historian*, Spring 2023, 1.

⁵⁵ Passante, "Three Generations of the Parkes Family," 5.

enhanced availability of collection material would encourage more residents of Bay View and Milwaukee to donate items of historic interest to the society.⁵⁶ Although no agreement was immediately reached, library leadership conceded that “it is important to the library’s future acquisition of material and the preservation of documents that a cooperative dialogue be established with people like Mr. Steiner.”⁵⁷ The library helped advance this goal by dedicating staff to index the BHVS holdings in a project assigned to employee Kathleen VandenBoom, who completed the project as part of the requirements for her Master of Library Science degree at UW-Milwaukee.⁵⁸

The collections storage, access, and exhibition arrangement between BVHS and Llewellyn continued in some form until well after a new Bay View Library was built and open for business in the early 1990s. It was, for the most part, a mutually beneficial and amicable relationship, where the library held a standing seat on the Archive Committee as a “logical extension of our role of custodian of their collection,” thus providing a consistent professionally-informed perspective on collections management areas like processing, cataloging, and preservation for BVHS materials not at the library.⁵⁹ However, the arrangement was not without some problems. For example, in late 1986 the board adopted a new policy for examining BVHS artifacts and documents by BVHS members, wherein “any material of the society being examined by a member of the society would be done in the presence of another member of the society. The fact that we have had five instances of removal of material never returned prompted this action”⁶⁰ Although unmentioned in BVHS messaging, Llewellyn internal memos indicate

⁵⁶ Llewellyn Library Monthly Report, June 30, 1981. MPL Subject Files.

⁵⁷ Llewellyn Library Monthly Report, June 30, 1981.

⁵⁸ Llewellyn Library Monthly Report, May 1983, MPL Subject Files.

⁵⁹ Community Committees memo, July 26, 1984, MPL Subject Files.

⁶⁰ Robert B. Fennig, “President’s Message,” *Bay View Historian*, August 1985, 1.

BVHS taking issue with measures used by the library to secure the collections housed there, primarily library staff forgetting to properly secure the BVHS's materials and being unclear on conditions of access, which, it is suggested, may have resulted in the items going missing. In response, a Llewellyn staff memo from this time states that "if the Bay View Historical File requires the Society's permission for the staff to provide information from the files, we need to correct this situation"⁶¹

It is unclear how the BVHS and Llewellyn staff addressed this administrative quibbling, but this incident brings up the broader notions of ownership and stewardship, both from an administrative standpoint and as a general feeling about unique and original materials. The BVHS was acutely aware that the ability to control the collections—how these were kept, curated, and presented—was ultimately linked to finding a permanent home for the organization. Until then, they were at least partially subject to theft, damage, misplacement, and other risks that sometimes impact valuable items displayed or kept in public spaces. An early offer to acquire a historic structure was rejected because it would have required purchasing an empty lot and moving the building onto it at great expense to the society.⁶² Other long term purchase or rental opportunities were deemed too costly for the fledgling organization, so the BVHS adopted a largely transient mode for its operations.⁶³ Initially, all collections work, meetings, and other board activities were held at members' homes.⁶⁴ But due to large meeting turnouts and continued interest in Bay View history—coinciding with more publications on the topic in the early 1980s—the BVHS entered into flexible agreements with several civic, religious, and business organizations including the Beulah Brinton Community Center, Travis AmVets Post, Marian

⁶¹ Verona McKinney letter to Mike Kinney, July 9, 1986, MPL Subject Files.

⁶² R. Paul Kohlbeck, "President's Message," *Bay View Historian*, April 1981, 3.

⁶³ Kohlbeck, "President's Message," *Bay View Historian*, April 1981, 3.

⁶⁴ BVHS Board meeting minutes, February 11, 1980, Bethke Papers.

Center, South Shore Yacht Club, Avalon Theater, and various neighborhood churches to host meetings and programs.⁶⁵

Assuming Authority and Building Narratives

Board and membership meetings invariably featured official BVHS business, but they also usually contained a Bay View history component, either as an update on a specific society initiative or in the form of a lecture/presentation about the organization hosting the meeting. Overall, group gatherings were an effective tool for recruitment and engagement, especially the membership meeting and fundraiser at the South Shore Yacht Club, an annual event that the BVHS inaugurated with the help of former Milwaukee mayor Frank Zeidler.⁶⁶ However, an equally effective method of keeping the membership informed, enthusiastic, and growing was the quarterly publication and distribution of the *Bay View Historian* newsletter. From the first issue, the newsletter set the tone for topical writing that incorporated firsthand accounts discussing some aspect of personal, family, or community history, or otherwise detailing historic events and memories. In this way the newsletter was not only recounting history, it was also recording it. In discussing how the newsletter might inform historical understanding of Bay View, Ray Bethke cautioned against holding too narrow of a view: “This suggests the basic premise that history and the recording of it is nothing but perspective, how you see a happening as it occurs and how you will recall it later. We do well to remember that premise as we press on with the work of the Bay View Historical Society.”⁶⁷

⁶⁵ “Korn’s Bay View History Available Soon,” *Milwaukee County Historical Society Newsletter*, Milwaukee County Historical Society, (November 1980): 1-2., Bethke Papers; The January 1983 issue of the *Bay View Historian* mentions the book *Southside in the SUN* by BVHS’s John Utzat and Milwaukee Public Library’s Ruth Ruege, which was a collection of South Side and Bay View historical articles originally printed in the *South Side Urban News*.

⁶⁶ Remarks, F. P. Zeidler, Bay View Historical Society, October 11, 1981, MPL Subject Files.

⁶⁷ Ray Bethke, “President’s Message,” *Bay View Historian*, May 1980, 3.

The newsletter effectively conveyed the wide array of BHVS's activities, while it also sought to accurately communicate historical information that may not have been known by most readers. For example, the January 1982 issue featured a message from the president acknowledging work accomplished on the Pryor Avenue Iron Well restoration project and it included a feature article with a historical timeline and other details about the well's history which had not been previously compiled.⁶⁸ The Pryor Avenue Well—which was part of a citywide system of wells that provided a source of free artesian water for area homes and pedestrians since the late nineteenth century—was the last of its kind in Milwaukee. It was a widely recognized symbol of the neighborhood's past and the facts around its creation had been mostly forgotten and were not uncovered until the BVHS restoration project. In this instance, and many others to follow, the BVHS assumed the role of historical authority through its commemorative and preservation activities. The newsletter allowed for the production and dissemination of a new narrative based on this newly uncovered information. Thus, the BVHS positioned itself to influence public perceptions about the historical circumstances surrounding this structure, further reinforcing its factual and symbolic meaning. In addition, the article revealed that Bay View residents considered this unique and revered neighborhood fixture troublesome and controversial when it was created (mostly because of the construction and maintenance costs), demonstrating Bethke's point about how perspectives can change.⁶⁹

The newsletter's historical features sometimes utilized repurposed content from existing publications, but most of it was original and frequently included excerpts from presentations and

⁶⁸ "Pryor Avenue Well," *Bay View Historian*, January 1982, 3.

⁶⁹ "Pryor Avenue Iron Well," *Bay View Historian*, January 1982, 3.

talks given at BVHS gatherings.⁷⁰ This practice served to both inform members who were not able to attend all society events and to further the cause of capturing historical narratives from personal sources that otherwise would not be recorded. The newsletter regularly included a Communication From Members section, which printed brief notes from members sharing their memories, recommending research topics, and asking questions about historical events or people.⁷¹ Significantly, many of these communications were from current members who no longer lived in Bay View or Milwaukee, which demonstrates how connected many former residents felt to the neighborhood and how much the BVHS served as a conduit between the neighborhood's history and its extended community. Community was a major theme in other newsletter content, with space frequently dedicated to promoting historical programs and interests of other Milwaukee area historical agencies, and regular appeals for members to support various neighborhood social services and quality of life initiatives that similarly depended on charitable giving and volunteerism.⁷²

In a brief 1984 piece about historic maps of Bay View printed by the BVHS and for sale at society meetings, the article praised the work done by “our cartographer” and “our stationery conservator.”⁷³ This, of course, is reported ironically, since even the most well-heeled local historical societies likely would not be able to easily secure such specialized professional

⁷⁰ Matt Schauer, “Horseshoes, Domers, and Slag,” *Bay View Historian*, January 1983, 1. This article, for example, was developed from an interview conducted during John Gurda’s research for the *Bay View, Wis.*, booklet.

⁷¹ “Communications From Members,” *Bay View Historian*, May 1985, 4. This edition included questions and comments from members within the Bay View neighborhood and city of Milwaukee, as well as members in Florida, Nebraska, Arizona, and Massachusetts.

⁷² “Bay View Community Center Needs Your Help,” *Bay View Historian*, October 1982, 3. The Bay View Community Center was a family social services office located in the neighborhood, not to be confused with the Beulah Brinton Community Center, which was part of the Milwaukee Public Schools Recreation Department.

⁷³ “Maps Available,” *Bay View Historian*, August 1984, 6.

services. But this type of communication demonstrates two things: one, it shows the group's ongoing preoccupation with place and the meticulous tracking of geographic changes in the neighborhood; and two, it shows that the group was serious about BVHS branding and marketing, even if they could have fun with it. Branding and engagement further converged in the creation of the BHVS logo, which was structured as a contest and solicited entries from the membership, with the winning entry submitted by Karen Oleson, a teacher at Bay View High School.⁷⁴ The logo description gives a solid indication of how the BVHS board viewed the organization's role within the larger context of Bay View history, and thus the image or brand it wanted to communicate outward:

After lengthy discussion, the Board of Directors has chosen a logo, a graphic design that we'll be using as the Society's symbol. The gear represents industry, both the rolling mill that gave Bay View its start and the factories that line our northern and western borders today. The ship's wheel, of course, represents Bay View's association with Lake Michigan. The lake is our neighborhood's dominant physical feature, as well as the origin of its name. The logo captures Bay View's reason for being—industry on the lake, but it also highlights two forces that are very much with us today.⁷⁵

Building on this brand and securing a wide community support network were crucial to the BVHS's early preservation, commemoration, and landmarking projects, both in terms of granting the organization credibility and authority to take on such projects, and successfully

⁷⁴ "A New Year, A New Logo," *Bay View Historian*, April 1982, 4.

⁷⁵ "A New Year, A New Logo," 4.

bringing them to completion. The major projects in the early years were closely tied to the overall theme of Bay View's lakeside industrial history, but they initially started small with the Pryor Avenue Iron Well restoration and a dedication ceremony for the new Beulah Brinton Community Center. The well restoration depended on donations of reclaimed neighborhood-specific street bricks and beautification materials sourced from members, and it gave BVHS leadership valuable experience in navigating the excessive red tape involved with modifying city-owned structures.⁷⁶ The dedication followed BVHS advocacy to secure the name and was given by Beulah Brinton's granddaughter and BVHS charter member, Daisy Estes Tucker.⁷⁷ By actively associating the organization with these locations and their historical legacies, the BVHS assumed responsibility for their upkeep, both in a memorial and practical sense.⁷⁸

Beulah Brinton's legacy was most recognized in the Superior Street home owned by Audrey and Bob Quinsey, which was chosen in early 1983 as the first official historic structure designation project from the BVHS Landmarks Committee.⁷⁹ The house was chosen from several options throughout the neighborhood identified by the committee, following criteria established by the City of Milwaukee's Historic Preservation Committee that considered architectural significance, identification with notable persons, and representativeness of a style, location, or time period.⁸⁰ The Brinton House ultimately won out because of its age, its location within the historic area designated by the National Register of Historic Places, and in recognition of Brinton's work in the neighborhood.⁸¹ Besides receiving a plaque identifying the house as a

⁷⁶ "Bricks! Bricks! Bricks!" *Bay View Historian*, April 1981, 3; "Pryor Avenue Well," *Bay View Historian*, October 1981, 6.

⁷⁷ Daisy Estes Tucker, "Beulah Brinton," *Bay View Historian*, October 1981, 1.

⁷⁸ R. Paul Kohlbeck, "President's Message," *Bay View Historian*, April 1982, 3.

⁷⁹ "Landmark Designations Begin," *Bay View Historian*, January 1983, 3.

⁸⁰ "Landmark Designations Begin," 3.

⁸¹ McElwain, "This is For Your Scrapbook, Audrey."

“Bay View Historic Landmark,” there were no other incentives or requirements associated with the designation. But the associated ceremony became a “celebration for the community and an opportunity for reunion for many people,” with a performance by the Bay View High School band and keynote speech from state Congressman James Moody at the Beulah Brinton Community Center.⁸² Quinsey used interest in the house as an opportunity to raise funds for the BVHS by charging \$5.00 for people who would randomly show up asking for a tour.⁸³

While the Brinton House dedication project was underway, the BVHS board began investigating other commemoration and landmarking projects, including the construction of a sizable marker for the Bay View community near the original location of the rolling mill and the designation of a structure connected to the millworkers who lived in the neighborhood.⁸⁴ After securing the proper permits from the Milwaukee City Engineer’s office, the construction and installation of a large brick marker began in the Spring of 1985, led mostly by BVHS member John Ebersol and sourced from the brick collection previously used in the Pryor Avenue Iron Well restoration project.⁸⁵ The memorial was located at the corner of South Superior Street and East Russell Avenue, “designating the area in Bay View where the Milwaukee Iron Company rolling mill stood, the first heavy industry in the region and an important producer of iron and steel for the midwest.”⁸⁶

This project was noteworthy for a few reasons. It was the BVHS’s first explicit acknowledgement of the 1886 labor strike and march that resulted in the local militia firing into the crowd and killing seven millworkers, commonly known as the Bay View Tragedy.⁸⁷

⁸² Sheryl Pendzich, “From the President,” *Bay View Historian*, August 1983, 2.

⁸³ McElwain, “This is For Your Scrapbook, Audrey.”

⁸⁴ “Landmark Designations Begin,” 3.

⁸⁵ Betty Pum, “President’s Message,” *Bay View Historian*, May 1985, 3.

⁸⁶ “Historical Marker Dedication, June 2nd,” *Bay View Historian*, May 1985, 1.

⁸⁷ “Historical Marker Dedication, June 2nd,” 1.

Although BVHS historical programs and writing related to the mill did not appear to emphasize this violent confrontation, the incident was featured on the marker and the following year the BVHS participated in the inaugural event commemorating the 100-year anniversary of the shootings in conjunction with the Wisconsin Labor Historical Society. According to BVHS member Ken Germanson, who helped organize the first and subsequent commemorations, there was some disagreement on what to call the event, with some in favor of the Bay View Massacre and others the Bay View Tragedy. The latter was chosen because “massacre” was considered too strong and there was concern within the BVHS about over-emphasizing negative aspects of Bay View’s history.⁸⁸ Additionally, the project marked the first collaboration between the BVHS and the State of Wisconsin, as the memorial was considered both an official state and local landmark.⁸⁹ The dedication ceremony was well attended by society members, people from the community, and elected officials, and a film of the proceedings was made, which was shown at that year’s membership meeting.⁹⁰ Furthermore, the BVHS was notified that legislation they supported had passed to fund local landmarking projects and the \$3,452.84 cost it incurred for the memorial was fully reimbursed.⁹¹

Setting a High Bar for Success

Feeling that “in view of our uniquely large membership, there’s more to do to make the Society a more vital group in this community,” the BVHS board resolved “to step up its efforts to broaden the base of committees to encourage increased membership participation and further stimulate activities of the Society.” The following year, the board demonstrated this all-hands-

⁸⁸ Ken Germanson interview by Kevin Petejan, Bay View Historical Society 40th Anniversary, 2019, BVHS Oral History Collection.

⁸⁹ BVHS Board meeting minutes, October 14, 1985, Bethke Papers.

⁹⁰ BVHS Board meeting minutes, October 14, 1985, Bethke Papers.

⁹¹ BVHS Board meeting minutes, October 14, 1985.

on-deck approach with its second historic landmark designation for the Old Puddler's Hall on St. Clair Street. The dedication ceremony featured the Milwaukee City Band dressed as 1860s firefighters and playing music from the late 1800s using vintage brass instruments.⁹² Ray Bethke gave a presentation dressed as a puddler and nearly every board member was involved from conducting historical research for the dedication and speeches, to arranging the event's refreshments, exhibits, publicity, and documentation.⁹³ Perhaps more than this, the event allowed the BVHS to showcase its activity to representatives from the SHSW who were in attendance, and shortly thereafter it was announced that the BVHS would host the following year's Metropolitan Regional affiliate convention.⁹⁴

A December 1985 report on BVHS attendance at that year's Wisconsin Council on Local History Metropolitan Regional Convention noted that there were 194 affiliated societies with over 36,000 members.⁹⁵ Bethke attributed this impressive level of involvement, exemplified by the BVHS's growth, to the immediacy and personal nature of local history:

The collecting, preservation, interpretation, and display of artifacts and data helps the development of our present society by enabling one to pose questions and seek answers to those questions free of the limitations of the dry pages of history books or the preconceived ideas digested from them. Involvement in a local history society brings one face to face with history in a way that enhances one's ability to understand and interpret past events and their relationship to the present and future.⁹⁶

⁹² Betty Pum letter to BVHS membership, *Bay View Historian*, June 1986, 3.

⁹³ "Puddler's Hall Dedication Address, *Bay View Historian*, June 1986, 5.

⁹⁴ Betty Pum letter to BVHS membership, 3.

⁹⁵ Ray Bethke, "Convention Report," *Bay View Historian*, December 1985, 4.

⁹⁶ Ray Bethke, "Convention Report," 4.

By the mid-1980s, the BVHS claimed to have the largest membership of any local historical society in the State of Wisconsin.⁹⁷ Active BVHS leaders like Membership Committee chair Wally Oleson kept meticulous records to ensure the retention of existing members, while developing methods to collect new information on prospective members, such as sending unsolicited letters to new Bay View residents to invite their participation in the society.⁹⁸ In a special acknowledgement for Oleson, president Sheryl Pendzich (1983-1984) noted that, “Wally has taken care of the many details of membership for the Society since its inception. His hard work is one of the contributing factors to the success of our vital and active society.”⁹⁹ Indeed, for the first two decades of the BVHS’s existence, Oleson served as the committee chair and would communicate regularly with the members through annual membership renewal letters and special reminders to members whose dues were in arrears.

These communiques were often humorous but light-hearted admonitions giving members reasons to stay up-to-date and active with the BVHS. They also functioned as a sort of time capsule with Oleson frequently referencing contemporary events and trying to tie them to the value of membership and supporting local history efforts in Bay View. Perhaps most noteworthy is that nearly all of these letters began with the salutation “Dear Historian,” as if membership and association with the society alone merited such an honorific.¹⁰⁰ Although it is difficult to determine what, if any, effect this had on individual members, it is emblematic of the BVHS’s attempt to involve as many people as possible in its mission and to take its members’ contributions seriously. However, if the growth in membership numbers is any indication, it

⁹⁷ Sheryl Pendzich, “President’s Message,” *Bay View Historian*, February 1984, 2.

⁹⁸ Sheryl Pendzich, “Membership Committee,” *Bay View Historian*, February 1984, 3.

⁹⁹ Pendzich, “Membership Committee,” 3.

¹⁰⁰ Wallace H. Oleson, membership letter, 1981, BVHS Subject Files.

seems clear that recruitment and retention efforts were a rousing success in the early years (see Appendix D: BVHS Annual Membership Information on pages 207-209).

Certainly, BVHS earned recognition for its efforts from peer organizations in short order. For instance, BVHS delegates at the 1981 Wisconsin Council on Local History regional convention reported that “the other members of the Metropolitan Region were much impressed our large membership and active organization,” adding that “the consensus by all of us was that we have a society of which we can be proud.”¹⁰¹ As the BVHS completed the SHSW probationary period and emerged as a full-fledged affiliate, further validation of its work was made official when the BVHS was awarded the SHSW Board of Curators Reuben Gold Thwaites Trophy in 1986.¹⁰² The award is the highest institutional honor for SHSW affiliates and it acknowledges the quality of an organization’s programs and meetings, how it serves its community, and its ability to maintain high standards over time.¹⁰³

A report in a SHSW publication describing the award ceremony represented the occasion itself as something of milestone:

With the awarding of the Trophy to the Bay View Historical Society, the Saturday program came full circle and the local history movement returned, in a sense, to its inspirational roots in the work of Reuben Gold Thwaites. In its efforts to preserve neighborhood history, the Bay View Historical Society carries on the process of democratizing history that follows in the tradition of Thwaites. From walking tours which feature 1898 working class cottages to landmark dedications that attract the entire

¹⁰¹ R. Paul Kohlbeck, “President’s Message,” *Bay View Historian*, 1981, 4.

¹⁰² H. Nicholas Muller III letter to Elizabeth Pum, September 16, 1986, BVHS Subject Files.

¹⁰³ H. Nicholas Muller III letter to Elizabeth Pum, September 16, 1986.

neighborhood, the Bay View Historical Society seeks to reach out, collect and preserve the history of everyday citizens in the area.¹⁰⁴

The report included a quote from Thwaites, which BVHS president Betty Pum (1986-1987) shared with her fellow members in reflecting on the accomplishment: “Let us not remain satisfied with the ceremonies of today. We are but on the threshold of our possibilities.”¹⁰⁵

Seven years after BVHS began with the neighborhood’s centennial celebration in 1979, it was preparing for the 100-year anniversary of Bay View’s annexation to Milwaukee. This milestone and the award presented an opportunity for the BVHS to think and plan beyond its initial growth and achievements, with Pum issuing a challenge for members “to reaffirm our responsibility for the future of Bay View’s history,” and “insure that the next generations will receive the fruits of our labor.”¹⁰⁶ In the next phase of BVHS’s development, the group attempted to fulfill this responsibility by acquiring a permanent home and extending its presence in the neighborhood’s civic and cultural life. However, it continued to face limitations in finances, recruitment, and other key operational areas necessary for small institutions to become self-sustaining and remain essential to future generations.

¹⁰⁴ “Record Attendance at WCLH Annual Convention,” *Exchange* 2, no. 1 (1986): 8, BVHS Subject Files.

¹⁰⁵ Elizabeth Pum, “From the President,” *Bay View Historian*, February 1987, 3.

¹⁰⁶ Pum, “From the President,” 3.

Chapter 4: A Place in the Community, 1987-2005

During the BVHS's next development phase, it continued to receive accolades for its activities and contributions in the Bay View community. It successfully hosted the Metropolitan Council on Local History Convention at the Avalon Theater, with 150 delegates attending.¹ Individual members were recruited to serve on the SHSW Board of Curators and specific programs and milestones received awards and recognition from the Milwaukee County Historical Society, the City of Milwaukee, and the Wisconsin Senate.² Communications with the membership, mostly through the newsletter, frequently cautioned against the group resting on its laurels, emphasizing how precarious this progress was and the amount of work required to maintain it. This chapter looks at the period from 1987 through 2005, an extended era of both peaks and valleys for the BVHS that culminated in obtaining a permanent home and renewing its organizational mission. BVHS activity during this time coincided with a lingering sense of decline and uncertainty within the neighborhood, and its primary initiatives aimed at strengthening its position in the community, especially in advancing partnerships with venerable institutions like the Llewellyn Library. The BVHS also contributed to a larger conversation on the quality of life in Bay View, one that tied the neighborhood's revitalization to embracing difficult change.

Expanding Roles and Partnerships

For all its emphasis on Bay View's past, the BVHS was eager to embrace new program areas and expanded partnerships. In addition to the Bay View Business Association, the BVHS

¹ BVHS Board meeting minutes, September 8, 1987, Bethke Papers.

² BVHS Board meeting minutes, September 30, 1988, and November 12, 1991, Bethke Papers.

was an institutional member and had regular representation on the Bay View Inter-Organization Council, the Bay View Neighborhood Association, and various other community-spanning organizations that increased their presence and widened and deepened the pool for potential leadership and member recruitment.³ These growing connections helped embed the BVHS in several signature community events like the Water Frolics, the Fourth of July Parade, and the South Shore Park Farmers Market, while also raising the organization's profile through formal partnerships, engagement with community stakeholders, and regular press coverage.⁴ The elevated community profiles of individual BVHS members were similarly parlayed for the group's benefit, especially John Gurda, who through the 1990s would solidify his status as Milwaukee's historian with a growing list of award-winning publications and multimedia projects. The BVHS regularly celebrated Gurda—a Milwaukee South Side native and Bay View transplant—and featured his work in its community-wide programs and events, including the Bay View High School all-class reunion at South Shore Park Pavilion on July 16, 2000.⁵

The reunion coincided with that year's South Shore Water Frolics and the pavilion was filled with memorabilia, annuals, message boards, and Gurda's presentation on his most recent book, *The Making of Milwaukee*.⁶ Other history-related activities sometimes stretched beyond the neighborhood, with BVHS scheduling its annual walking tours in different parts of the city, including the South Side's Forest Home Cemetery, and sponsoring charter bus trips to historic

³ Betty Pum, "President's Message," *Bay View Historian*, June 1987, 1; Inter-Organization Council of Bay View, Inc., annual banquet program, February 2, 1994, Bethke Papers.

⁴ BVHS Board meeting minutes, July 10, 1995, Bethke Papers; Kim Poehlman, "Bay View Historical Society has forged a rich history of its own in 20 years," *The Bay Viewer*, April 14, 1999, BVHS Subject File; Kathy Mulvey, "Farmers' Market at South Shore Park," *Bay View Historian*, October 1999, 3.

⁵ BVHS Membership Committee meeting minutes, December 5, 1995, Bethke Papers.

⁶ "Bay View Historical Society Millennium Reunion News for Bay View High School," *Bay View Historian*, April 2000, 4.

attractions around Wisconsin.⁷ Seemingly always aware of the neighborhood's connection to larger events and themes, BVHS-hosted programming covered a wide range of local and global topics, and frequently featured guests from historical societies in nearby communities like St. Francis, Cudahy, South Milwaukee, and others within the Metropolitan Regional affiliate network.⁸ But mostly, the BVHS leveraged its neighborhood partners and history for conducting group business, acquiring and caring for collections, delivering collection-based programs, and meeting its financial objectives. Often these activities occurred in historic structures which might variously house a traveling exhibit, host a BVHS membership or board meeting, provide a point of sale for BVHS fundraising merchandise, or feature in the BVHS newsletter.⁹

Bay View's built and natural environment factored into the BVHS's approach to historic preservation from the beginning, and official landmarking projects continued while the group sought to highlight the neighborhood's history and aesthetic qualities in other ways. For example, the BVHS frequently issued commendations or otherwise supported organizations that reached significant milestones, as in the case of Trowbridge Elementary School's 100-year anniversary, where BVHS board members served on a citizens task force to design a large history-themed mural on the playground retaining wall.¹⁰ Similarly, BVHS leaders were engaged on matters that they felt would negatively impact Bay View's distinctive historical integrity and

⁷ "BVHS Spring Tour," *Bay View Historian*, June 1988, 3; BVHS Board meeting minutes, January 13, and May 11, 1992, Bethke Papers.

⁸ BVHS Board meeting minutes, February 3, 1989, and September 14, 1992, Bethke Papers. An example of this local to global awareness is landmark certificate recognition of the Garibaldi Society and Garibaldi Club as part of the 500th anniversary of Christopher Columbus's arrival in the Americas.

⁹ "Notice," *Bay View Historian*, February 1989, 4; BVHS Board meeting minutes, April 12, and June 14, 1992, Bethke Papers. These sources discuss an exhibit at the Milwaukee County Historical Society put together by John Steiner and Bea Lisiecki, arrangements with the Travis AmVets Post and Grace Presbyterian Church for meeting and program space, and the sale of historic Bay View maps at the Bay View United Methodist Church.

¹⁰ BVHS Board meeting minutes, September 10 and 13, 1990, April 13, 1992, Bethke Papers.

they pushed back against city and county efforts to rename South Shore Park, make changes to the lakeside sewer system, and enable unrestrained commercial and residential development.¹¹ Maintaining Bay View's look and feel was essential to its historic charm and desirability, and the BVHS served as a clearinghouse for information on area homes and as a source of education for homeowners in conducting preservation-related historical research.¹² From the time of its first official landmark designation in 1983, the BVHS continued this activity at a pace of about one property per year, but this slowed considerably between 1992 and 2005, with only two designations approved during that time (See Appendix C: BVHS Landmark Designation Timeline on pages 205-206). Periodic efforts to revive the landmarking function were mostly put on hold due to other operational priorities related to finances and membership.¹³

As always, the BVHS utilized a variety of methods to raise funds both for day-to-day operational costs and for long-term financial objectives. To this end, in 1990 the BVHS produced a book expressly meant to generate revenue for the organization. *A City Park for the South Side, 1889-1936*, written by board member Mel Graffenius, presented an early history of Bay View's Humboldt Park and it incorporated sources from the BVHS's holdings. Several other books and publications utilized BVHS collections before and after Graffenius's work, but this is noteworthy because it was the only time that the organization served as the publisher of record for a commercial work of history, and it was solely responsible for production costs, distribution, marketing, and sales. All proceeds from the book's sales were donated to the BVHS and people could purchase them at various businesses around the city or order directly from the

¹¹ Ray Bethke, "President's Message," *Bay View Historian*, April 1988, 1; BVHS Board meeting minutes, December 9, 1997, Bethke Papers.

¹² Cindy Krebbin, "A Historical View," *City Lifestyle*, July 2002, 46; "Historical Society presentation will help guests trace their homes' family trees," *The Bay Viewer*, March 2, 2002, BVHS Subject Files.

¹³ BVHS Board meeting minutes, December 19, 1997, Bethke Papers.

organization.¹⁴ According to BVHS board reports, book sales were “slow to take off” and remained sluggish over the next few years, thus not producing the desired windfall that might have made subsequent book publishing ventures possible.¹⁵ Indeed, the overall financial picture during this time was less than robust due to the organization’s limited capacity to offset expenses with revenues. Board minutes indicate that at one point “additional dollars had to be borrowed from other existing investment funds to cover operating expenses such as printing of the *Historian* and the cost of ordering collector mugs and calendars.”¹⁶

The BVHS’s membership situation also reflected a mixed bag of opportunities and vulnerabilities to the organization’s viability. On the one hand, membership numbers peaked during this era at a high count of 555 in 1991, but this did not necessarily translate to increased income or a proliferation in member involvement to keep the organization running (see Appendix D: BVHS Annual Membership Information on pages 207-209). The prolonged effort to find a permanent headquarters during this period coincided with workload and logistic issues brought to the fore by an aging membership and limited core of volunteers. Certain functions like member, donor, and stakeholder outreach often had a grim aspect tied to its members’ and audiences’ advanced age range. For example, the Sunshine Committee was tasked with sending congratulations to people in the community for accomplishments and keeping in contact with elected officials, but it also tracked news of illness, deaths, and related items of potential interest to the membership.¹⁷ Additionally, the Archives Committee acquired and distributed “donor stickers” for members to label historic objects or materials in their homes that would be conveyed to the BVHS upon their death, the implication being that such a tragic event could

¹⁴ BVHS Board Meeting Minutes, August 14, 1991, Bethke Papers.

¹⁵ BVHS Board Meeting Minutes, April 8, 1991, Bethke Papers.

¹⁶ BVHS Board Meeting Minutes, September 9, 1991, Bethke Papers.

¹⁷ Betty Pum, “President’s Message,” *Bay View Historian*, April 1987, 2.

occur with very little notice.¹⁸ This era also saw the first individuals from the initial group of leaders passing away, an inevitable reality that significantly factored into the BVHS's fate as an organization.¹⁹

Race and Perceptions of Decline in a Changing Neighborhood

BVHS membership noticeably dropped in the years after its peak, but it remained at a sustainable level through subsequent challenging times characterized by greater financial precarity and operational uncertainty.²⁰ As the BVHS surpassed various milestones, it could claim its unique place in Bay View's civic and cultural life with increasing confidence. In an entry for the 10-year anniversary, president Carl Prott (1989-1993) wrote that, "today we are recognized as a force in the community, a place where older residents can meet with young settlers in a neighborly fashion."²¹ However, the BVHS's growth and achievements in its early years contrast with what many residents considered to be a low point in the neighborhood's history. Prevailing attitudes about decline accompanied deep-rooted sentiments about who belonged where in the city and how any changes to that arrangement might disrupt everyday life. But it was also a reflection of economic and social pressures that exerted influence over communities like Bay View no matter how insular or isolated they were or aspired to be. Such conditions did not always result in neighborly interactions, especially with newcomers.

According to one account, well into the 1980s Bay View was "fighting both a physical and psychological battle against a perception of blight and deterioration in both the residential

¹⁸ BVHS Board meeting minutes, June 8, 1992.

¹⁹ This included the following from the first BVHS Board: Cheryl Pendzich (d. 1994), Ray Bethke (d. 1995), John Steiner (d. 2000), and Audrey Quinsey (d. 2001).

²⁰ BVHS Board meeting minutes, January 8, 1996, Bethke Papers. The minutes indicate that the BVHS experienced a significant drop in membership with 160 non-renewals from the previous year.

²¹ Carol Prott, "President's Message," *Bay View Historian*, October 1989 1.

and commercial sectors. The presence of business board-ups, vacant buildings, litter and trash, and increasing crime all led to depressed property values and a negative business climate. Without a thriving business community, area residents and their needs were not being serviced, and neighborhood jobs were scarce.”²² Going back to the 1960s, Milwaukee’s population was declining, aging, and diversifying at a steady pace and Bay View lost approximately 15.2% of its population in the following decades.²³ Bay View, however, did not mirror the citywide increase in Black residency and by 1985 Black people made up less than 2% of the neighborhood’s population despite composing more than 23% of the city’s residents.²⁴ Additionally, the over-65 population in Bay View was nearly 2% higher than that of the rest of the city, the median household income was over \$2,000 greater, and the neighborhood had 13% fewer renters and far less high density housing and small properties available for sale or rent.²⁵

Bay View was an outlier in Milwaukee because of its stable and relatively affordable historic housing stock, anchored by a high rate of multigenerational home ownership, but this was faltering somewhat by the 1990s.²⁶ Crucially, the Bay View home—in both a literal and metaphorical sense—was at the center of BVHS’s collecting, research, narrative building, and public programming, which often highlighted heirlooms, antiques, prized possessions, and other items that connected the local domestic sphere with neighborhood historical accounts and

²² James Gilmore letter to Edith Brown, March 24, 1988, box 1, folder 12, Mary Anne McNulty Aldermanic Records, 1980-1992, City of Milwaukee Archival Collection 47, Milwaukee Public Library, Frank P. Zeidler Room (hereafter referred to as McNulty Records).

²³ Summary of General Population and Housing Characteristics, 1970-1980, MPL Subject Files.

²⁴ Mark F. Pfaller, Llewellyn Neighborhood Library Facility Replacement Study, Milwaukee Public Library, August 1987, MPL Subject Files; Llewellyn Neighborhood Library Profile: A Supplement on Bay View, Milwaukee Public Library, 1987, MPL Subject Files.

²⁵ Supplement, 1987, MPL Subject Files.

²⁶ Supplement, 1987; Bob Veierstahler, “Bay View Properties Often Stay Within Families,” *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, July 12, 1998, MPL Subject Files.

collective memories.²⁷ As such, an era of real and perceived decline, associated with changing demographics and a protective nostalgia, perhaps provided the ideal setting for the BVHS to emerge and flourish. Such a scenario also offers a parallel and complementary explanation for the BVHS's creation as a triumphant byproduct of elevated historical consciousness in a history-minded community. The theme of "home" infused the BVHS's search for a permanent location to house objects often sourced from other homes. For example, a 1994 article about an upcoming show-and-tell program indicates how closely BVHS collecting was tied to personal, home-based materials:

Maps, old spoons, Victrola with thick records, copper boiler used exclusively during prohibition era, bible and prayer books, dated old letters, photos (identified, preferably), butter churns, cream whippers, kitchen utensils, clothing, old hats—especially women's, etc... Here's where to look. Almost every room in the house could prove to be a gold mine. Try the kitchen. Here is where stuff accumulates from one generation to the next. How about a knickknack shelf—that memento you brought back from the 1893 World's Fair would be most appropriate. The book shelf. Those old Bay View Oracles, especially from 1914-1920, would be very interesting. Any annuals from St. Mary's Academy or Pio Nono High School would be worth a peek. A trip to the basement or up to the attic would be worth the time, provided you didn't get too involved. Commemorative dishes are always interesting.²⁸

The BVHS's struggles as an organization dovetailed with the city's and neighborhood's often contentious attempts at reconciliation around race, education, and housing. Persistent

²⁷ "Drag and Brag Reveals Best-Kept Treasures," *The Bay Viewer*, June 17, 2004.

²⁸ Gilbert LaVesser, "At Our Next Meeting," *Bay View Historian*, June 1994, 1.

threats—real and perceived—to houses and homeowners influenced public opinion in Bay View about the neighborhood’s state of decline going back to the mid-1970s, a period corresponding to an increased minority presence in the neighborhood that accompanied Bay View High School’s desegregation and busing programs.²⁹ An article in the *Milwaukee Sentinel* detailed ongoing problems in Bay View with vandalism, harassment, property damage, and generally bad behavior by “young toughs” and other youths.³⁰ It indicated that the problem had accelerated in the previous several years and was only resolved when residents put pressure on city officials through a petition drive and repeated inquiries to create new parking and loitering policies and increase police monitoring in the neighborhood.³¹ Although neither race or neighborhood background is expressly mentioned in this article, it reflects a trend identified by John Gurda around this time in a *Milwaukee Journal* op-ed, decrying the coded racism that he believed was prevalent in news coverage of Milwaukee neighborhoods.³² Gurda previously called out the overt bigotry toward Black people that he encountered while conducting research in the neighborhood for *Bay View, Wis.*, and in the op-ed he implored the press to stop contributing to the anxiety and division he attributed to changing demographics around the city.³³

The threats and sense of decline extended to Bay View businesses and neighborhood institutions, with students from Bay View High School often implicated as the root of the problem. One news report described efforts between the Bay View Business Association, Bay View High School, and Milwaukee Police Department to address problems with teenagers

²⁹ “White Students Fleeing White Schools, Black Students Forced to White Schools,” Organization of Organizations Report, 1978 and “Whites Increase Flight from Milwaukee Public Schools,” Organization of Organizations Report, 1979, MPL Subject Files.

³⁰ Tim Kelley, “Menacing Youth No Match for Angry Residents,” *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, August 19, 1985, BVHS Subject Files.

³¹ Kelley, “Menacing Youth.”

³² John Gurda, “Op-ed,” *Milwaukee Journal*, October 20, 1981, BVHS Subject Files.

³³ Gurda, *Bay View, Wis.*, 67-68.

allegedly causing trouble in local businesses.³⁴ As with the residential areas, the official response involved increasing police visibility, while also encouraging public vigilance and setting up patrols in the school's vicinity. This article exemplified Gurda's criticism as it made a point to remind readers that a quarter of the students were Black, and that some Black and "problem" students were placed at Bay View High School because they could not be placed in other schools around the city.³⁵ Another report by Llewellyn Library personnel seemed to further delineate who was considered a resident versus an outsider, indicating that they "discussed initiating some dialogue between community leaders and parents in Bay View and community leaders and parents in the Black community, whose children attend Bay View High School."³⁶

Llewellyn Library's close proximity to Bay View High School made it a popular place for young people to frequent during lunch breaks and after school, and it also reported problems with student loitering, theft, vandalism, and troublemaking.³⁷ A monthly management report explicitly identified the racial dynamics at play:

Bay View High School is having far more problems this year than last year. Relations between white and black students are tense, as are the relations between the school and the neighborhood residents. Since we are right next door, these problems do overflow into the library. The Llewellyn staff continues to be extremely strict about discipline during the lunch hours. All staff participate in maintaining a consistent standard of acceptable behavior. However, it remains a constant frustration to see staff time wasted on keeping loiterers out of the doorway, food out of the books, and dealing with

³⁴ "Student Problems on the Wane," *Bay Viewer*, April 29, 1982, 1, MPL Subject Files.

³⁵ "Student Problems on the Wane," *Bay Viewer*, April 29, 1982, 1, MPL Subject Files.

³⁶ Llewellyn Library Monthly Report, Milwaukee Public Library, December 1982, MPL Subject Files.

³⁷ "Who's to Blame for Vandalism?" *Bay Viewer*, February 1981, MPL Subject Files.

disruptive young people who are here only to get out of the cold. School officials continue to be cooperative, but I get the impression that they are being overwhelmed by the student problems this year.³⁸

For some, the obligation to be neighborly to all Bay View residents and visitors seemed primarily driven by respectability politics, even if there was a sincere desire to be inclusive and welcoming. A 1990 letter from the Beulah Brinton Community Center building director to the Milwaukee Public Schools Superintendent describing a series of incidents with Black student-aged youths at the center basketball courts illustrates this tension. According to the director: “Because of the proximity of Bay View high school we daily get 15-30 black youths playing basketball during the time periods they should be in the classroom. Other black youths, not interested in basketball, sit on the equipment in the adjacent tot-lot and socialize.”³⁹ As a result, “neighborhood parents feel intimidated and have stopped bringing their small children to the tot-lot,” and “the boys playing basketball use foul language and have been abusive to other patrons.”⁴⁰ The director claims that “the police have been called a number of times to disperse them. When that happens the boys reassemble to play more basketball... Then, at three o’clock they return to Bay View to take the school bus home.”⁴¹ On the day of the letter, the director wrote that “second and third grade children and their PE teacher were harassed and threatened by the basketball players because the instructor told them please curb their language.”⁴² This appeared to be the final straw for the director, prompting the letter, on which he concluded:

³⁸ Llewellyn Library Monthly Report, Milwaukee Public Library, October 1982, MPL Subject Files.

³⁹ Ronald L. Englehart letter to Robert Peterkin, May 11, 1990, box 1, folder 14, McNulty Records.

⁴⁰ Englehart letter to Robert Peterkin, May 11, 1990.

⁴¹ Englehart letter to Robert Peterkin, May 11, 1990.

⁴² Englehart letter to Robert Peterkin, May 11, 1990.

From a professional standpoint I am disappointed that these youths are not in their classrooms. From a human standpoint I am saddened to think of what kind of image these young people represent. They are very visible in a predominately (sic) white community. The neighborhood people do not see the studious young blacks in the classroom, whereas they can't help but notice all the less responsible ones. This gives the neighborhood the wrong idea of what black youth is all about. It makes it quite difficult for the fires of prejudice to die out. Multiply this times the number of other locations that similar things happen and you have a problem that should be addressed.⁴³

It cannot be determined with any certainty how any individual BVHS member felt about the tense racial situation in Bay View; the issue of race, school desegregation, and neighborhood problems very infrequently surfaced in official group communications or publications in its first few decades. However, the responses to a 1989 community organization survey suggests that the BVHS respondents' views were in fairly rigid alignment with those who saw a diversifying Bay View as problematic. There were three respondents listed on the survey instrument serving as the BVHS representatives, and the questions mostly gathered general information about the BVHS's operations.⁴⁴ The survey records that the BVHS met at a variety of local sites and drew all of its revenue from membership dues and fundraisers. In addition to walking tours, the respondents listed artifact collection, landmark designation, monument preservation, history-themed programs, and the Bay View High School historic essay scholarship as the group's primary

⁴³ Englehart letter to Robert Peterkin, May 11, 1990.

⁴⁴ Guide for Interviewing Neighborhood Groups, Bay View Historical Society survey instrument, June 27, 1989, box 1, folder 12, McNulty Records.

community service activities. The survey also mentioned the BVHS's search for a building to display and preserve its collections.

In reporting group demographics, the respondents indicated that BVHS membership was 100% white, middle class, and longtime city residents, with 75% in the elderly range.⁴⁵ They said that the BVHS's intent was to spread appreciation for neighborhood history and instill a sense of local pride, and in a follow up question about what they believe attracts new residents Bay View, they wrote "White flight—whites who do not want to reside where minorities live" and "proximity to downtown, less costly than East Side."⁴⁶ Such a claim seems to suggest that Bay View's appeal was at least partially its racial exclusivity and they listed "safety (virtually no crime)," "stability," and "best view of downtown Milwaukee" as positive neighborhood characteristics.⁴⁷ The respondents claimed the neighborhood's most serious problems were the "influx of drugs" and that "busing of students has caused problems—races going together to school has not changed attitudes and integration efforts have broken down community schools that used to be a stability factor."⁴⁸ They further indicated that these problems lead to more instability and resulted from "race," "busing," and "lack of jobs."⁴⁹

It is impossible to determine how pervasive these attitudes might have been among the BVHS membership at this or any other time, or whether it truly reflected the values and internal thought processes of the respondents, since a second party recorded the survey responses.⁵⁰ It is

⁴⁵ Guide for Interviewing Neighborhood Groups, June 27, 1989.

⁴⁶ Guide for Interviewing Neighborhood Groups, June 27, 1989.

⁴⁷ Guide for Interviewing Neighborhood Groups, June 27, 1989.

⁴⁸ Guide for Interviewing Neighborhood Groups, June 27, 1989.

⁴⁹ Guide for Interviewing Neighborhood Groups, June 27, 1989.

⁵⁰ Martha Brown letter to Maryanne McNulty, October 25, 1989, McNulty Records. This letter indicates that the surveys were conducted in-person by a single Bay View Business Association staff member as part of a two-tiered Bay View Neighborhood Survey program that gathered information from organizations and community leaders to help inform economic revitalization efforts.

tempting to attribute this to run-of-the-mill generational differences and bigotries common to that time, place, and demographic, but that would excuse the unknown harm that these attitudes invariably produced, especially in light of the BVHS's collaborations with community institutions like the Milwaukee Public Schools system. At the very least, the survey responses reveal the potential hypocrisy of some people in a group that claimed to preserve and celebrate *all* of the neighborhood's history, whether or not such attitudes influenced the BVHS's approach to its community in any way. Interestingly, the same survey was completed on behalf of the Bay View Community Center—a long-time BVHS partner organization—and the respondent listed “division of upper class and lower class” and “racism” as the neighborhood's most serious problems.⁵¹ It further indicated that this negatively affected the neighborhood by generating “distrust of anything new or different” and that such classist and racist attitudes were caused by the “narrow focus that [the] neighborhood has always had.”⁵²

Staking a Role in Neighborhood Revival

For all this survey might suggest about the presence of regressive viewpoints within the BVHS, there is no doubt that the organization sought to contribute to the quality of life in the neighborhood in ways best suited to its member's interests, abilities, and resources. If anything, this demonstrates that severely divergent attitudes can coexist within a community's civic and cultural mix, and the BVHS's involvement in such initiatives was part of its growing recognition within Bay View as an influential actor in community affairs. For instance, Alderwoman Maryanne McNulty included the BVHS on her list of organizations she hoped to cultivate relationships with for “the purpose of networking, input, and support,” toward improving and

⁵¹ Guide for Interviewing Neighborhood Groups, Bay View Community Center survey instrument, June 22, 1989, box 1, folder 10, McNulty Records.

⁵² Guide for Interviewing Neighborhood Groups, June 22, 1989.

revitalizing the neighborhood.⁵³ Other institutions like the Bay View Business Association recognized the value of promoting the neighborhood’s historic and cultural resources “to work on attitudes, develop a positive climate for improvements,” and that in the big picture, “the community as a whole needs every area for support and long-term success.”⁵⁴

Civic and business leaders believed the Kinnickinnic Avenue commercial corridor was central to the neighborhood’s revival and this hinged significantly on plans to build a new library along this stretch of road.⁵⁵ But first, the city needed to decide on the future of the Llewellyn Library, which had served the community since 1914. At the time of its construction, Llewellyn was considered a state-of-the-art facility and it underwent a major expansion in the 1950s.⁵⁶ By the mid-1960s, the Milwaukee Public Library system undertook a comprehensive neighborhood branch construction and development project, which eventually resulted in Llewellyn being the smallest and oldest of all the branches.⁵⁷ By the early 1980s there were stirrings about closing Llewellyn during a particularly rough period for city finances, but this was met with tremendous opposition from Bay View residents and elected officials.⁵⁸ In one news report from the time, 14th District Alderman Daniel Ziolkowski is quoted as saying, “If anyone is thinking of closing Llewellyn Library, they will find themselves in a great big fight on the Common Council floor.... How can you equate the loss to the community in terms of the educational and cultural loss caused by closing the library with the few thousands of dollars to be saved in the budget?”⁵⁹

⁵³ Maryanne McNulty, “Bay View Community Development Project: Year 14 Project Activity Report Narrative,” 1988, 1, McNulty Records.

⁵⁴ James Gilmore letter to Edith Brown, March 24, 1988, McNulty Records.

⁵⁵ Pfaller, Replacement Study, 1987, 2, MPL Subject Files.

⁵⁶ Ron Winkler, “The Library in Bay View,” *Bay View Historian*, June 2003, 4.

⁵⁷ Milwaukee Public Library System, Proposed Development of Neighborhood Libraries, 1957, MPL Subject Files.

⁵⁸ “Llewellyn closing considered,” *The Bay Viewer*, June 11, 1981, 1, MPL Subject Files.

⁵⁹ “Llewellyn closing considered,” 1.

Llewellyn library was indeed considered “an integral part of the community it serves... truly a neighborhood library and it enjoys the community’s full support.”⁶⁰ But within a few years the decision was made and plans were underway to construct a new library that was larger, offered better parking options, and strategically located in the heart of Bay View’s business district along the Kinnickinnic Avenue corridor.⁶¹ The Llewellyn branch remained open while the new library was built and the structure later became Red Cat Academy as part of Bay View High School’s vocational education program. Like Llewellyn, it was expected that the new library would have “an enormous community impact” and, perhaps more importantly, it would help the neighborhood capitalize on signals that suggested revitalization was imminent.⁶² According to a library replacement study, in the 1980s Bay View housing units increased, which indicated “a confidence in the area despite a declining population, and a belief by both landlords and the lending institutions that people are indeed returning to the city. An improvement in city services, including the neighborhood library, can only help encourage this trend.”⁶³

Library planners hoped to preserve and extend the community’s historic connection with the Llewellyn Library onto the new structure and immediately enlisted the BVHS and other neighborhood organizations to help raise funds, consult on logistic matters, and generally make the public case for the new library.⁶⁴ Construction of the new building and grounds required the removal of several historic homes and library planners were quick to engage the local preservation community, with BVHS members Carl Prott, Mel Graffenius, and John Gurda selected to serve on the Bay View Library Community Steering Committee.⁶⁵ Of course, the

⁶⁰ Llewellyn Neighborhood Library Profile, Milwaukee Public Library, 1987, MPL Subject Files.

⁶¹ Ron Winkler, “The Library in Bay View,” *Bay View Historian*, June 2003, 4.

⁶² James Gilmore letter to Edith Brown, March 24, 1988, MPL Subject Files.

⁶³ Pfaller, Replacement Study, 1987, 3, MPL Subject Files.

⁶⁴ Karen Bolton, “Most Property Owners Happy About Library,” *The Bay Viewer*, August 15, 1991.

⁶⁵ Ron Winkler, “The Library in Bay View,” *Bay View Historian*, June 2003, 5.

BVHS had a formal relationship with the library since shortly after its founding in 1979, and Llewellyn factored significantly into many BVHS members' personal experiences growing up in Bay View. Indeed, previous unsuccessful attempts to create a neighborhood historical society and museum in 1915 and 1929 were based on Llewellyn Library serving as the primary facility and headquarters.⁶⁶ Even before library planners announced the final site selection, the BVHS board voted to request dedicated meeting and collections storage space in the new facility that would replace Llewellyn.⁶⁷

Llewellyn already housed much of the BVHS's archival material, but the growing collection of multi-format objects and artifacts stored at members' homes required the organization to consider whatever housing options materialized.⁶⁸ A 1990 article discussing BVHS fundraising noted that a majority of the society's membership was "in favor of buying a building or establishing a museum for the memorabilia," but the organization first needed to accrue sufficient funds to maintain any such acquisition over the long-term.⁶⁹ In April 1990, Prott reported that "two buildings in the area have been mentioned and seen as possible acquisitions—but an initial payment on either one would deplete our financial resources. Fund raising is a must. An increase in dues was also mentioned as a means to achieve our goal of acquiring a property or for renting space in an existing building. We have the membership so let us fulfill the objectives mentioned so many times."⁷⁰ BVHS leadership pursued neither building option any further and later that year the Archives Committee reported that it was looking into storage at the Beulah Brinton Community Center, which had already offered meeting space to

⁶⁶ "How Bay View Historical Society Began," *Bay View Historian*, February 2014, 6.

⁶⁷ BVHS Board meeting minutes, September 20, 1988, Bethke Papers.

⁶⁸ Lynn Hemingson, "Historic Book Sales to Help Fund Building," *The Bay Viewer*, February 17, 1990.

⁶⁹ Hemingson, "Historic Book Sales to Help Fund Building."

⁷⁰ Carl Prott, "A Review of a President's Message," *Bay View Historian*, April 1990, 3.

the BVHS at no charge.⁷¹

By mid-1991, the new library site was selected at the corner of Otjen Street and Kinnickinnic Avenue and the design commenced on a thoroughly modern structure that was nicknamed “The Lantern on the Hill.”⁷² Prior to construction, the BVHS supplied the architects with historic maps and the Archives Committee began a comprehensive inventory of its holdings across the various locations where materials were held in anticipation of the possibility of continued participation in the design stages.⁷³ The board considered renting commercial space to safely store materials while it worked on an arrangement with the Milwaukee Public Library to carve out space at the new location.⁷⁴ Library planners held the groundbreaking ceremony on April 2, 1992 and shortly thereafter the library foundation embarked on a fundraising campaign to secure \$60,000 for new and updated collections including books, videotapes, music tapes, feature films, and audiobooks.⁷⁵ Initially the BVHS board voted to donate \$200 to this effort on the society’s behalf, but also contemplated a larger investment that ensured the BVHS adequate storage, permanent display space, a reading and research area, and collection preservation on microfilm.⁷⁶ The board voted to inquire with the Milwaukee Public Library leadership if a significant donation from the BVHS memorial fund could make this happen.

Llewellyn Library internal correspondence from this time offers some insight into its response to the BVHS’s inquiry. The library discouraged the notion of permanent display space, noting that “Library requirements and the kind and presentation of their artifacts could conflict

⁷¹ BVHS Board meeting minutes, September 10, 1990, Bethke Papers.

⁷² Ron Winkler, “The New Bay View Library,” *Bay View Historian*, August 2003, 2.

⁷³ BVHS Board meeting minutes, March 16, 1992, and November 9, 1992, Bethke Papers.

⁷⁴ BVHS Board meeting minutes, February 10, 1992, and September 14, 1992, Bethke Papers.

⁷⁵ Ron Winkler, “The New Bay View Library,” *Bay View Historian*, August 2003, 2.

⁷⁶ BVHS Board meeting minutes, October 12, 1992, Bethke Minutes.

and it would be better if we did not develop projects that limit our flexibility.”⁷⁷ The memo also indicated that the new building was “now too far along to consider other arrangements which... would have eventually required more storage space, collection or artifact maintenance and other kinds of support that we would not be able to provide.”⁷⁸ The memo further states that the BVHS offer to donate its “current financial reserves of \$6000-\$8000 to the fundraising drive,” would be referred to upper management “to determine under what circumstances such a gift should be received.”⁷⁹ The board ultimately opted not to deplete its reserves with a large donation and instead pleaded with individual BVHS members to pledge ongoing financial support under the auspices of the organization “to help ensure the Society’s inclusion in the physical plans for the new Library,” thereby securing “a permanent area in the new building where anyone interested in doing research on Bay View and its history would be able to do so.”⁸⁰

Library communications with the BVHS during this time emphasized the direction of the new library, which would “permit us to increase the size of the book collection; provide access to computers for public use; offer special collections and services for people seeking jobs or improving their education skills; and offer study space for all patrons,” as well as provide a meeting room for up to 100 people.⁸¹ The library was “willing to retain the Bay View Historical Society files which are now stored at the present library building,” but it also recommended “where possible, taking measures to handle these documents in a manner that will preserve them for future generations,” and mentioned setting up a meeting to discuss preservation options with staff from the central library who had specific expertise in historical documents.⁸² As with its

⁷⁷ Venora McKinney memoranda to Michael Kinney, October 13, 1992, MPL Subject Files.

⁷⁸ Venora McKinney memoranda to Michael Kinney, October 13, 1992.

⁷⁹ Venora McKinney memoranda to Michael Kinney, October 13, 1992.

⁸⁰ “Library News,” *Bay View Historian*, December 1992.

⁸¹ Kathleen Huston letter to Carl Prott, March 5, 1993, MPL Subject Files.

⁸² Kathleen Huston letter to Carl Prott, March 5, 1993.

preservation and storage requests, the BVHS leadership lobbying efforts to keep the Llewellyn name for the new library met with limited success. Instead, the library was named simply the Bay View Library and its main meeting space was named the Llewellyn Room in an attempt to “closely identify the library with the Bay View community.”⁸³ Perhaps as a show of good will for its support, Milwaukee city librarian Kathleen Huston asked the BVHS to select photographs from the society’s collection to be framed and hung in the room and resolved to further discuss the BVHS archival microfilming project, writing that the new library looked forward “to an ongoing and mutually beneficial relationship.”⁸⁴

The Bay View Library opened in October 1993 and a Llewellyn facility post-occupancy report indicated that the BVHS collections were conveyed to the local history holdings in the new building, but it was unclear how these would be stored and managed.⁸⁵ As the BVHS angled to strengthen its position in the new library, it continued to explore the possibility of acquiring the Llewellyn building either as the sole occupant or as part of a joint tenant agreement with the public school system or other neighborhood organizations.⁸⁶ Analysis by the BVHS board determined that maintenance alone would likely exceed \$10,000 per year, a prohibitive cost for the organization on its own.⁸⁷ Over the next several months the Bay View High School Red Cat Program settled into the Llewellyn building and by the fall of 1994 the BVHS board reported that it was “nearing completion of an agreement for use of an area in the old Llewellyn Library

⁸³ Suzanne M. Breier letter to BVHS Board, February 15, 1993, MPL Subject Files; BVHS Board meeting minutes, March 8, 1993, Bethke Papers; Kathleen Huston letter to Carl Prott, March 20, 1993, MPL Subject Files.

⁸⁴ Kathleen Huston letter to Carl Prott, March 20, 1993.

⁸⁵ Milwaukee Public Library, Post Occupancy Evaluation Survey, 1993, MPL Subject Files.

⁸⁶ BVHS Board meeting minutes, March 16, 1992, June 8, 1992, October 12, 1992, and September 13, 1993, Bethke Papers.

⁸⁷ BVHS Board meeting minutes, December 2, 1991, Bethke Papers.

building for use as a local history, archives, and meeting room.”⁸⁸ The move never occurred and any urgency in this matter did not appear until the following summer when the BVHS’s long-standing agreement with Travis AmVets post to hold meetings was no longer viable since that building was changing ownership. According to board meeting minutes, “this development, along with our continuing need for a permanent home for our archives has heightened the interest within the Society to find a place of our own.”⁸⁹

Establishing a Permanent Presence

Discussions about moving into Llewellyn continued into the next year, but mostly as a side issue after the BVHS was offered free space in the Beulah Brinton Community Center.⁹⁰ The BVHS held its annual meeting at the center in late 1995 and prepared to take up residence over the next several months, using this time to identify material needs, acquire supplies, and determine responsibilities for inventorying, retrieving, and maintaining the collection once onsite.⁹¹ By the end of 1996, the final arrangements were made and the BVHS looked to a new era in the organization’s history, in particular for its collection and dissemination mission: “As soon as we move into this new home, we will be able to accept any donations members wish to give to the society. This not only means that we will have our archives in one place, but they will now be more accessible to anyone wishing to use the archives for research.”⁹² The BVHS completed the move in early 1997, but that was only the beginning of the work required to make the facility functional for its purposes:

⁸⁸ Eric Western letter to Joe Koczan, September 19, 1994, Bethke Papers; Kathleen Huston letter to Eric Western, September 27, 1994, MPL Subject Files; Eric Western, “President’s Message,” *Bay View Historian*, October 1994, 1.

⁸⁹ Eric Western, “President’s Message,” *Bay View Historian*, June 1995, 1.

⁹⁰ BVHS Board meeting minutes, November 13, 1995, and January 8, 1996, Bethke Papers.

⁹¹ BVHS Board meeting minutes, November 13, 1995, Bethke Papers.

⁹² “Archives, Good News!” *Bay View Historian*, December 1996.

Now that we have moved to Beulah Brinton Community Center's 'attic,' that is exactly what they are. Moved. Next, we can use shelving, cabinets or a table and some folding chairs so we can work up there. If you have any of these things to donate we will be happy to take them. Also, we will need members to occupy those chairs to help with the organizing. Some of these simple tasks will be to put photos in albums, separate clothing items from books, arrange our collection of Oracles, etc.⁹³

Over the next several years, a dedicated core of BVHS volunteers worked through various committees to sort donations and organize collection materials in regular shifts from the Brinton Center's second floor.⁹⁴ The Archives Committee solicited and cataloged historical items from members and the public, welcoming "any donations to the collection that you may have been saving for us until we could put them all in one place," and providing "an acceptance form you can fill out describing the item, who it belonged to, your name as contributor and other pertinent facts relating to its history."⁹⁵ However, the new arrangement's limitations quickly became apparent. For instance, the BVHS did not have a key to the building, its access was confined to the center's operating hours, board members were required to accompany general members when onsite, and all visitors needed pre-approval to access the space.⁹⁶ Although these measures were ostensibly implemented for security purposes, other measures like visitor

⁹³ "Archives," *Bay View Historian*, April 1997, 2; Kim Poehlman, "Historical Society has Moved Collection to Beulah Brinton," *The Bay Viewer*, April 3, 1997.

⁹⁴ "Archives," *Bay View Historian*, August 1997, 1; Mary Becker, "Bay View Historians Dream of Having Their Own Space Some Day," *The Bay Viewer*, January 8, 1998.

⁹⁵ "Archives Update," *Bay View Historian*, October 1997.

⁹⁶ BVHS Board meeting minutes, December 9, 1997, Bethke Papers; "Archives," *Bay View Historian*, April 1997, 2.

registries meant to protect the collections were not categorically successful.⁹⁷ In one instance, the Archives Committee reported that the videotapes from all BVHS landmarking ceremonies went missing and could not be located.⁹⁸

Other pitfalls like the inability to publicly display the collections limited the types of donations the BVHS received, while other collections presented management issues because of their volume. For instance, a preponderance of certain years from the Bay View High School *Oracles* yearbook in its holdings prompted the BVHS to offer duplicate copies for sale to reduce the hassle of moving and managing them.⁹⁹ Furthermore, the space allotted to the BVHS was not climate controlled, which took a physical toll on the collections and meant “the seasons currently dictate when our diligent archives committee can meet and work—the attic of the Beulah Brinton Center can get quite cold and quite hot.”¹⁰⁰ Risk to the collections extended to the volunteers’ well-being: “There is considerable concern about continuing to store our archival materials in such a setting. Because the attic space is not accessible other than by climbing steep concrete steps, there is concern about safety for the Archive Committee members. Some of the members have not been able to continue their work on the committee because they can’t climb the steps.”¹⁰¹ Perhaps in consideration of membership’s advanced age range and in recognition that the arrangement with the Beulah Brinton Community Center was a mixed blessing, the BVHS applied for and received a strategic planning grant from the Milwaukee Non-Profit Center and the board began “developing a plan to hear from and work with the general membership so that we can get some long range goals to ensure the longevity of the Society, including working

⁹⁷ “Archives Update,” *Bay View Historian*, October 1997.

⁹⁸ “Archives,” *Bay View Historian*, October 1999, 3.

⁹⁹ “Archives,” *Bay View Historian*, June 1998, 1; “Antique Collection,” May 13, 1999, BVHS Subject Files.

¹⁰⁰ Pat Cavey, “A Message from the President,” *Bay View Historian*, February 2001, 1.

¹⁰¹ Pat Cavey, “President’s Message,” *Bay View Historian*, October 2003, 2.

toward a ‘place of our own.’”¹⁰²

But as the planning process commenced, the BVHS received news that irrevocably altered the organization’s direction and helped ensure its permanent presence in Bay View. Inez Poorman, a long-time Bay View resident and BVHS member, passed away in late 2000 and her estate bequeathed an unrestricted \$90,000 cash gift to the organization. It was the largest single gift the BVHS had received up to that point and the sum nearly tripled its total financial holdings.¹⁰³ According to BVHS president Pat Cavey (2001-2003), “Ms. Poorman obviously recognized what a unique and valuable organization we have, and she will help us keep it alive through the next millennium.”¹⁰⁴ The possibility of similar gifts in the future brought a silver lining to the reality of BVHS’s aging membership base, and the gift itself added urgency and weight to the leadership’s present and future decisions.¹⁰⁵ Cavey insisted that as the BVHS moved forward, “we will undoubtedly experience some growing pains. As we blend the old and the new, we will not always do things the way they’ve always been done. Hopefully, as we add things like a web page and revitalize *The Historian*, we will keep the strong sense of the Bay View Historical Society and maintain a level of interest for a Bay View Community that is becoming more diverse.”¹⁰⁶

In the next few years, charged by the cash injection and strategic guidance it received, the BVHS pursued a membership development push that included personal outreach and recruitment goals for existing members and paid advertisements in community event notices and other group publications. In 2002, the BVHS launched its first website that featured organization

¹⁰² Pat Cavey, “A Message from the President,” *Bay View Historian*, February 2001, 1.

¹⁰³ “Financial Report,” *Bay View Historian*, December 2000, 3; Pat Cavey, “A Message from the President,” *Bay View Historian*, February 2001, 1.

¹⁰⁴ Pat Cavey, “A Message from the President,” *Bay View Historian*, February 2001, 1.

¹⁰⁵ Pat Cavey, “From the President,” *Bay View Historian*, August 2001, 2.

¹⁰⁶ Patricia Cavey, “A Message From Our President,” *Bay View Historian*, December 2001, 1.

information, accounts of significant neighborhood events, photo and map images, and links to other historical societies and resources.¹⁰⁷ In 2003, the SHSW asked the BVHS to host the Metropolitan Region affiliate convention once again, with Cavey noting that, “the State Historical Society has been very impressed with our strategic planning efforts and felt that the information and our experiences... will be useful to other groups facing the same issues that we are, like aging members, volunteers with limited time and the need to create systems so that there is continuity and ease of transition as people come into or leave the organization.”¹⁰⁸ The funds and planning put the BVHS in a realistic position for the first time in its existence to enact long-term solutions to its unmet and evolving needs, a prospect further explored after it hosted the convention at Bay View’s Marian Center for NonProfits in the fall of 2003.¹⁰⁹

Concurrent with hosting the convention, the BVHS announced that it was in negotiations with the Marian Center to serve as the facility and headquarters in a lease arrangement made possible by the Poorman donation.¹¹⁰ The Marian Center was owned by the Sisters of Saint Francis of Assisi and it was created specifically to provide affordable office space for Milwaukee area nonprofit organizations.¹¹¹ BVHS leadership perceived several advantages to making such a financial commitment:

The space is big enough for us to conduct Board and committee meetings on site and to

¹⁰⁷ “Find Us On the Web,” *Bay View Historian*, February 2002. An early version of the website from 2002 can be found here:

<https://web.archive.org/web/20020628090629/https://bayviewhistoricalsociety.org/>.

¹⁰⁸ Pat Cavey, “President’s Message,” *Bay View Historian*, February 2003, 3.

¹⁰⁹ “Metropolitan Regional Convention of the Wisconsin Council for Local History,” *The Bay View Historian*, December 2003, 2.

¹¹⁰ Carrie O’Connor, “Historical Society Archives Might Find New Home at Marian Center,” *The Bay Viewer*, September 25, 2003.

¹¹¹ “Marian Center for Nonprofits to Close,” *Catholic Herald*, March 3, 2016, <https://catholicherald.org/local/marian-center-for-nonprofits-to-close/>.

finally store our archives in a more appropriate setting. This will allow us, for the first time, to regularly display our archives to the public. The rent will include utilities, parking, 24/7 access to the building and security. Renting this space will not foreclose options in the future if we acquire a building suitable for our use... Another significant factor in recommending the move is that we are not currently able to display our wonderful archive treasures to the community and have not been able to have ‘office hours’ for research. The board anticipates that we will continue to hold our general meetings at the Beulah Brinton Center to maintain our community presence. The Marian Center would, however, afford us a ‘backup’ in the event that the Brinton Center is unavailable to us for some reason.¹¹²

In early spring 2004, the BVHS finalized the agreement, moved into the Marian Center, and opened to the public after a community event in May.¹¹³ BVHS leadership viewed this development as the culmination of 25 years of efforts to meet its primary objective to collect and disseminate historical materials and information about Bay View. They opted to refer to the new headquarters as The Bay View Historical Society Center in recognition that “the ‘archives’ are no longer just archives—a collection of historical papers... it has become part museum, part archives, and part meeting and research room,” with the ‘Center’ designation clearly indicating the group’s physical presence in the neighborhood in a way it did not approach in previous arrangements with Llewellyn and the Brinton Center.¹¹⁴

Although on paper the BVHS held a strong financial position, other systematic changes

¹¹² Pat Cavey, “President’s Message,” *Bay View Historian*, October 2003, 2.

¹¹³ Mary Becker, “Bay View Memories Safe In New Home,” *The Bay Viewer*, January 29, 2004.

¹¹⁴ “New Archive Space Shaping Up,” *Bay View Historian*, April 2004, 3.

identified in its strategic planning process were made to ensure its reserves were not quickly depleted, including raising membership dues, structuring the annual dinner to draw more revenue, and hosting more fundraising events.¹¹⁵ In addition, the organization expanded the number of board positions to help with recruitment and fundraising, and successfully enlisted local merchants to participate in a discount program as a benefit for BVHS members.¹¹⁶ The BVHS board also began a more active program to cultivate estate gifts and other planned giving in the spirit of the Inez Poorman bequest.¹¹⁷ As the Bay View Historical Society Center arrangement advanced, the society experienced more growing pains mostly due to the elevated expenses, and actively sought to recruit committee members with grant writing experience to better leverage the organization's resources.¹¹⁸ Fiscal issues aside, BVHS leadership was optimistic because it appeared that a long-anticipated neighborhood revitalization was finally underway, with new residents buying houses, new business populating commercial districts, and new organizations taking hold, which presented the BVHS with the "sometimes conflicting challenges" of growth and preservation, while also offering the opportunity "to connect the new exciting Bay View with the old and exciting Bay View."¹¹⁹

Sealing the BVHS's Neighborhood Legacy

In mid-2005, the BVHS encountered the opportunity to make this connection in an unprecedented way. In June, the newsletter announced the death of Bob Quinsey and that the Quinsey estate had given several Beulah Brinton-related documents and artifacts to the BVHS

¹¹⁵ Pat Cavey, "President's Message," *Bay View Historian*, October 2003, 2.

¹¹⁶ "KK Merchants Offer Discounts to Members," *Bay View Historian*, April 2005, 2; Kathy Mulvey, "Society to Expand Board and Elect Seven New Members," *Bay View Historian*, October 2005, 3.

¹¹⁷ "New Archive Space Shaping Up," *Bay View Historian*, February 2004, 3.

¹¹⁸ Gloria Skwierawski, "President's Message," *Bay View Historian*, February 2005, 2.

¹¹⁹ "You Can Make History!" *Bay View Historian*, February 2005, 5.

archives, which were compiled by Audrey Quinsey, who died in 2001.¹²⁰ In August, the board announced that it made an offer on behalf of the BVHS to purchase the Brinton Home and the offer was accepted by the Quinsey family.¹²¹ The newsletter described the chain of events thusly:

During the month of July, former Society president and local attorney Pat Cavey requested to meet with the board to present a proposal for purchasing the house. Her idea for the proposal began while driving past the house with former board member Mark Nitka. They both decided to take a look at the home. On a walk-through led by Bob Quinsey, son of Audrey and Bob, they enthusiastically concluded that while it may be a slight financial stretch, the Beulah Brinton House presented a great opportunity for the Society. Details were quickly and carefully worked out and board members were convinced that a purchase was feasible. The membership was polled by mail and a large percentage of votes were returned on a very tight deadline. The vote was overwhelmingly in favor (184 yes, 23 no) of making this bold move of the Society and for the Bay View community.

The sale closed on August 19, 2005, at a purchase price of \$450,000. The BVHS applied the \$90,000 bequest from Inez Poorman and additional funds for a down payment of approximately \$100,000, putting the BVHS in the red by over \$350,000. BVHS leadership deemed the acquisition a worthy, and even necessary, expense because it saved the house from possible destruction and redevelopment.¹²² Within two months of the Brinton House purchase,

¹²⁰ "Bob Quinsey," *Bay View Historian*, June 2005, 2.

¹²¹ Gloria Skwierawski, "President's Message," *Bay View Historian*, August 2005, 2.

¹²² Michael Timm, "Historical Society Invested in Bay View," *Bay View Compass*, October 2005.

the Archive Committee moved the BVHS holdings from the Marian Center to the new headquarters and the moniker “Bay View Historical Society Center” seems to have quickly disappeared.¹²³ Dozens of members and people from within the neighborhood assisted in preparing the new space, relocating the collections, and, overall, were “extremely supportive in offering assistance to the Society in its new endeavor.”¹²⁴ The BVHS ended 2005 with a series of holiday events aimed at recruiting members and raising funds for work on the Brinton House. In addition to the recently raised membership dues, there was also a greater expectation placed on members to contribute at a significant level and they were informed by the leadership that they would receive a special appeal “outlining a number of things we ask that you consider to provide an income stream to support the costs of the mortgage and upkeep of the house.”¹²⁵

BVHS leadership had no illusions about the substantial work ahead, but they were also aware that the Brinton House acquisition ensured the historical society’s presence as a key participant in the neighborhood’s resurgence.¹²⁶ Multiple efforts to find a permanent place in the community informed the group’s perspective about what might or might not work depending on how its needs evolved, but the amount of responsibility assumed by this acquisition was at a completely different level. In several ways, the Brinton House purchase seemed like a destiny fulfilled because all of the components were in place at the right time: BVHS funding reserves bolstered by generous giving, a housing market receptive to historic preservation, and the Quinsey family connection—all of which needed to align with the right combination of BVHS leadership and organizational will. That the BVHS purchased the Brinton House also closed a

¹²³ “Congratulations! Society Purchases the Beulah Brinton House,” *Bay View Historian*, October 2005, 1.

¹²⁴ Gloria Skwierawski, “President’s Message,” *Bay View Historian*, October 2005, 2.

¹²⁵ Pat Cavey, “Brinton House Update,” *Bay View Historian*, February 2006, 2.

¹²⁶ Michael Timm, “Historical Society Invested in Bay View,” *Bay View Compass*, October 2005.

larger historical loop running through the institutional and cultural life of Bay View, most closely identified in the personage and legacy of Beulah Brinton, but also in the organization's ongoing efforts to integrate with the neighborhood libraries.

As with many other historical aspects of the early neighborhood, Beulah Brinton was at the center of the early library movement in Bay View. She served as secretary for the Bay View Library Association, which was created in 1870 to gather, manage, and make available books and other publications as a benefit to the employees of the Milwaukee Iron Works.¹²⁷ Brinton's community status allowed her to advocate, "very strongly the necessity of providing a library and reading room for the uses of the public," and she offered space in her own home for this purpose.¹²⁸ Other library reading rooms and collections were available in the neighborhood school, the rolling mill, and various businesses, but the official village library was consolidated under the Milwaukee Public Library system in 1887 as part of Bay View's annexation to the City of Milwaukee.¹²⁹ As the city's first official branch location, the Bay View Library periodically relocated operations as its collections expanded and program needs shifted, but eventually found long-term residence with the construction and opening of the Llewellyn Library in 1914.¹³⁰ The holdings at Llewellyn included many of the initial books purchased by Brinton and originally kept in her home as a lending library, symbolically linking her legacy of community service with the library's significant and ongoing role as a hub of Bay View neighborhood activity.

The BVHS's efforts to claim its place in the community and strengthen its association

¹²⁷ "Inklings by our Correspondent—Library Association—Puddler's Hall—New Store," *Milwaukee Sentinel*, December 25, 1870, MPL Subject Files.

¹²⁸ "Bay View Briefs," *Milwaukee Sentinel*, April 3, 1878, 8, MPL Subject Files.

¹²⁹ "Ordinances," *Milwaukee Sentinel*, October 20, 1886, 3, MPL Subject Files.

¹³⁰ "It Helps Education. Value of the Public Library to the Schools," *Milwaukee Sentinel*, February 17, 1894, 5, MPL Subject Files; "Bay View Library Scores with Public," *Milwaukee Journal*, August 23, 1914, 3, MPL Subject Files.

with Brinton's legacy motivated its relationship with the library because of this historical association, but its efforts met with limited success during the society's first two decades. Ultimately, any hope of obtaining a permanent partnership agreement granting the society something resembling co-equal status with the library was mostly one-sided. Although arrangements for programming and collection exhibits remained in effect, these collaborations became less frequent as the BVHS pursued opportunities with other community organizations.¹³¹ In a 2006 Bay View Branch Library management report, the BVHS was not mentioned either as a partner nor for its support in the planning and construction of the new library, which had proven to be wildly popular within the neighborhood since it opened thirteen years earlier.¹³² Most likely no slight toward the BVHS was intended by this omission, but it is worth noting because the report's jubilant narrative specifically emphasized its connections and collaborations with other home-grown neighborhood organizations. But by then, the BVHS had entirely shifted focus onto its new role as owners and custodians of the Brinton House, with plans to develop collecting, programming, and service functions best suited to its membership's capabilities and the realities of an increasingly diverse Bay View community.

¹³¹ "Drag and Brag Reveals Best-Kept Treasures," *The Bay Viewer*, June 17, 2004.

¹³² Christopher Gawronski, "Milwaukee Public Library: Bay View Library," May 2006, MPL Subject Files. The report highlights increases in circulation, visitor counts, and meeting space usage as evidence of the community's enthusiastic response, as well as the popularity of multimedia collections and technology enhancements like computers and wireless internet service.

Chapter 5: A Renewed Mission, 2006-2015

After over two-and-a-half decades the BVHS finally had a permanent home from which it could conduct its primary activities and pursue its overall mission. Soon after settling into the Brinton House, the BVHS experienced both the joys and pains of ownership, simultaneously relishing the autonomy and possibilities not previously available to it as a transient entity, while also facing the stark (and costly) realities of managing a historic structure—one that the society's efforts helped turn into a cherished neighborhood symbol and landmark. Although the Brinton House acquisition excited the BVHS membership and helped secure its place in the neighborhood's resurgence, the new financial obligations arrived on the heels of flagging membership, changing neighborhood characteristics, and other factors that impacted the organization's momentum. As in previous phases, the BVHS used this opportunity to embrace new ideas, methods, and partnerships that would enable it to become self-supporting and sustainable—in many ways punching way above its weight class as a local history organization. This chapter provides an overview of the years following the purchase of the Brinton House in late 2005 and leading into the society's 35th anniversary in 2015, a period largely characterized by gradual adoption of technological enhancements, a re-conception of its operational approach to account for its community's growing diversity, and the continuing struggle to stay fresh and relevant while looking to the past for inspiration.

Redefining the BVHS Community Role

The most immediate issue for the BVHS with the Brinton House was converting a historic residence into a multifunctional facility that could accommodate archival storage, preservation work, museum exhibits, public programs, research visits, and event hosting. The renovations moved forward with the intent of restoring portions of the Greek Revival structure

and adjacent grounds to something resembling its original state, including the area of the house that served as Bay View's first lending library.¹ Many of the cosmetic renovations like ceiling plaster repair and yard work were funded and undertaken by member volunteers, while more substantial projects like wood restoration were contracted out as resources allowed.² Everyday maintenance and cleaning depended on volunteers, and the society created a docent program to staff and conduct tours of the property during its open house hours on the third Saturday of every month.³ A coterie of retired men and women, some of them charter BVHS members, performed many of these tasks, including a group referred to as the "Coffee Guys" who would meet at each other's homes to drink coffee, tell stories about the neighborhood, and perform various tasks around the Brinton House.⁴ Other members continued the vital role they had played since the beginning in managing the archives, outreach, and hospitality functions.⁵

While the organization's elders provided a consistent source of labor and support for the BVHS, society leadership also sought to incorporate more youthful energy to maximize its impact, demonstrated by the society's renewed efforts to engage with local educational institutions. For instance, the Traveling Trunk exhibit program was developed with guidance from the Wisconsin Historical Society and functioned as "a portable history that can travel from classroom to classroom," utilizing historic items gathered from the BVHS collections and members' homes to provide a tactile, hands-on element to existing lesson plans.⁶ The exhibit explored Bay View's history as Milwaukee's first industrial suburb as part of a locally-focused

¹ Pat Cavey, "Brinton House Update: Pardon Our Dust, We're Making Progress," *Bay View Historian*, April 2006, 3.

² Cavey, "Brinton House Update: Pardon Our Dust, We're Making Progress," 3.

³ "Calling Volunteers to Action!" *Bay View Historian*, April 2006, 6.

⁴ Amy Mihelich, "President's Message," *Bay View Historian*, June 2006, 2.

⁵ Mark Nitka, "President's Message," *Bay View Historian*, February 2007, 2.

⁶ "The Traveling Trunk': Getting Local Children Excited About History," *Bay View Historian*, June 2006, 3.

interpretation of the Wisconsin History Timeline curriculum, with two thematic phases outlining “Settlement and Early Industry from 1848-1873” and “Early Industrialization and Urbanization from 1873-1893.”⁷

Program planners called for artifacts that were not “too heavy to lift, of high monetary value, or easily broken,” and suggested items like washboards, husking pegs, stereoscopes, school slates, atlases tintypes, and other items that likely would not be familiar to the students.⁸ The BVHS had some experience with traveling exhibits in the recent past, but not as an integrated component of classroom learning and pedagogy. The society’s Brinton House stewardship seemed to infuse its education efforts with a new legitimacy and projects like the Traveling Trunk enabled the BVHS “to establish linkages between settlement activities in Bay View and the ways in which Beulah Brinton helped to strengthen our community for its early residents.”⁹ Such initiatives also allowed the BVHS to “encourage children and families to become involved in local history,” and make new audiences aware of the society’s resources.¹⁰

Developing these resources and expanding the society’s audiences often included adopting technology-based enhancements and capabilities not previously within the BVHS’s wheelhouse. For example, virtual tours of the Brinton House, e-commerce features for donations and membership payment, and a virtual gift shop for purchasing various fundraising products were incorporated into the BVHS website.¹¹ Several board members also revived the BVHS oral history program to capture the stories of older members with long-standing roots in the

⁷ Gordon Mineau, “The ‘Traveling Trunk’: Coming to a School Near You,” *Bay View Historian*, October 2006, 2.

⁸ “‘The Traveling Trunk’: Getting Local Children Excited About History,” 3.

⁹ Mineau, “The ‘Traveling Trunk’: Coming to a School Near You,” 2.

¹⁰ Mineau, “The ‘Traveling Trunk’: Coming to a School Near You,” 2.

¹¹ Nicholas J. Hoffman, “Digital Access Adds Luster to Historical Society,” *Bay View Compass*, March 2007.

neighborhood, but utilizing digital video recordings that could be more easily managed than analog recording media and more readily distributed digitally in the web environment.¹² The Archives Committee created a Curator of Research Collections volunteer position to work with other collection personnel on all activities associated with cataloging the collection of books, articles, photos, artifacts, and other materials.¹³ As with previous moves, the Brinton House occupancy prompted yet another attempt to comprehensively account for the collections, and the Curator position was charged with developing a multiphase project that included documenting the entire collection, making it more widely available to the public, adding collection information and digital content to the website, and digitizing selected material to create a virtual research library.¹⁴

In addition to facilitating research through enhanced availability, the BVHS hoped to use the virtual library project to identify gaps in its holdings, provide a distinctive outreach and engagement tool for new and existing members, and recruit volunteers with experience or interest in working on digital initiatives.¹⁵ The BVHS's physical archives were only open to the public once a month, so creating and hosting online exhibits was viewed as a cost-effective way to raise the organization's profile while identifying collections gaps that might be filled by donors from within the Bay View community and beyond.¹⁶ Although the BVHS's holdings had grown considerably over the years, the collections mostly documented the neighborhood's notable citizens from Bay View sections east of Kinnickinnic Avenue and well-known public

¹² Kevin Petejan "Oral History Video Project Taking Shape," *Bay View Historian*, June 2006, 3.

¹³ Mark Nitka, "Leadership Development Creates New Society Position," *Bay View Historian*, April 2006, 2.

¹⁴ Mark Nitka, "Leadership Development Creates New Society Position," *Bay View Historian*, April 2006, 2.

¹⁵ Nicholas J. Hoffman, "Digital Access Adds Luster to Historical Society," *Bay View Compass*, March 2007.

¹⁶ Hoffman, "Digital Access Adds Luster to Historical Society."

institutions like Bay View High School. Less represented were records and information related to genealogy, family history, and everyday life for regular residents, especially the working-class and immigrant communities that lived around the neighborhood at different times. The digitization project enlisted graduate interns from the UW-Milwaukee School of Information Studies who selected items from the holdings for imaging and helped refine the BVHS's accessioning, cataloging, legal vetting, and provenance tracking procedures.¹⁷

As the BVHS endeavored to expand its community reach through its collections, the Brinton House became the hub of all group activity. Cavey referred to it as “The Home to the History of the Neighborhood” that was open to the community “in the same manner and spirit that was reminiscent of Beulah Brinton herself,” through a series of lectures, neighborhood activities, social events, art, music, conversation, performances, and other programs designed to bring the “old and new Bay View together.”¹⁸ Early on area residents scheduled the Brinton House for weddings and other private events, and it provided a picturesque setting for garden parties, wine-tastings, and other fair-weather gatherings hosted by the BVHS and outside groups.¹⁹ The location near South Shore Park made it an ideal staging ground for participation in the Water Frolics and Farmers Market. The BVHS also began collaborating with the *Bay View Compass* on a history-themed column in the monthly edition that featured new content written by BVHS members and articles previously published in the newsletter or other society outlets.²⁰ Regular gatherings like board and committee meetings were moved to the house, and other annual events like the rummage sale and neighborhood walking tours were now centered around

¹⁷ Hoffman, “Digital Access Adds Luster to Historical Society.”

¹⁸ Pat Cavey, “The Power of Giving: Beulah Brinton House Report,” *Bay View Historian*, August 2007, 4.

¹⁹ Pat Cavey, “Brinton House Update: Pardon Our Dust, We’re Making Progress,” *Bay View Historian*, June 2006, 4.

²⁰ “A Historic Collaboration,” *Bay View Historian*, June 2006, 6.

the property.²¹ The Brinton House was both the best tool the BVHS had for recruitment and fundraising, and the primary reason such activity was necessary.

By the end of its hectic first year as homeowners, the BVHS remained hopeful due to a series of developments that helped the organization stay on steady financial footing as it went all-in on the new headquarters. The City of Milwaukee granted the BVHS a property tax exemption, eliminating a significant potential annual cost for the group, even though the Brinton House was not yet an officially designated landmark with the city preservation office.²² The group also received a \$20,000 donation from Ralph Quinsey, the son of Bob and Audrey Quinsey, which covered the initial costs associated with relocation, settling into the new space, and preparing for more extensive restoration activities.²³ Furthermore, other fundraising efforts generated sufficient income to offset non-housing operational expenses, which provided some continuity with programs and collection development.²⁴ BVHS leadership was confident it could balance these various responsibilities now that the organization had surmounted the initial home ownership learning curve, which would in turn enable it to spend more time and energy on “improving annual events that continue to be fun and profitable.”²⁵

Moving Forward, Managing Threats

Over the course of 2007, the BVHS launched its first annual appeal to supplement usual revenue streams and create a financial buffer covering at least two years of operating expenses and mortgage payments.²⁶ With the ultimate goal to “hold onto our most prized asset, the historic

²¹ “Annual Benefit Rummage Sale,” “Bay View Historic District Tour,” *Bay View Historian*, June 2006, 7.

²² Pat Cavey, “Brinton House Update: Our First Year,” *Bay View Historian*, October 2006, 4.

²³ Pat Cavey, “The Power of Giving: Beulah Brinton House Report,” *Bay View Historian*, August 2007, 4.

²⁴ Pat Cavey, “Brinton House Update: Our First Year,” *Bay View Historian* October 2006, 4.

²⁵ Cavey, “Brinton House Update: Our First Year,” 4.

²⁶ Mark Nitka, “President’s Message,” *Bay View Historian*, June 2007, 6.

Beulah Brinton House,” the appeal was sent to members who were in a position to support the BVHS at a significant level and leadership actively courted estate gifts, annuities, and annual commitments for sustaining donations from non-members and corporate sponsors.²⁷ Keenly aware of a large gift’s impact, the solicitations emphasized that such extraordinary generosity was required to “sustain the pride and history of Bay View.”²⁸ Indeed, leadership believed that the annual appeal’s success represented “a litmus test that will enable us to determine the future direction of the Society,” now that its future was entirely anchored to the Brinton House.²⁹ In an article discussing the role of historic places in vibrant neighborhoods around Milwaukee, newsletter editor Jeremy Happel insisted that Brinton House “plays a similar role in an equally dynamic community,” and that preserving “our vernacular and cultural landscape can oftentimes provide us with a much deeper meaning of who we are, and where we come from.”³⁰ The Brinton House was the “physical embodiment of the social bedrock on which our neighborhood was founded,” and thus the fundraising and work required to keep it alive was an honor even if it was also burdensome.³¹

The BVHS strategy to spread responsibility for this burden involved increasing member participation by playing up the settlement house legacy of the Brinton property and drawing in events, programs, and uses from a wide array of community groups. In this model, individual members would “own” certain activities and be responsible for carrying these out, which would help relieve the workload placed on the small core of volunteers typically relied on for nearly

²⁷ Mark Nitka, “President’s Message,” *Bay View Historian*, December 2007, 5.

²⁸ Pat Cavey, “The Power of Giving: Beulah Brinton House Report,” *Bay View Historian*, August 2007, 4.

²⁹ Mark Nitka, “President’s Message,” *Bay View Historian*, December 2007, 5.

³⁰ Jeremy Happel, “A Beacon of Hope,” *Bay View Historian*, August 2007, 3.

³¹ Happel, “A Beacon of Hope,” 3.

every other aspect of group operations.³² Such a change would allow a greater frequency and diversity of activity, but it was also necessary because at the time the volunteer contingent was “transitioning from mostly retired folks to mostly working people,” which meant that members had “less time to devote to the Society and the time that is devoted occurs after work and family responsibilities.”³³ BVHS leadership acknowledged these limitations and adopted a more flexible approach to recruitment and volunteerism as crucial to the group’s succession planning, especially in lieu of having any paid staff.³⁴ They also remained open to whatever other assistance the community provided for the Brinton House, welcoming donations of landscape design services from a local nursery specializing in heirloom plants, and computer and office equipment from the *Bay View Compass* for the archives.³⁵

The BVHS archives and artifact collections were essential to its Brinton House-centric approach, not only as a resource available to “history buffs, students, researchers and other organizations interested in locating historic information and photos about Bay View’s past,” but also in providing a deeper understanding of Beulah Brinton’s legacy and her home’s importance to neighborhood history.³⁶ For example, the Archives Committee produced a “Guide for Guides,” which included “an array of information about Beulah Brinton and the Brinton House,” and was distributed to volunteers conducting tours, fulfilling information requests, or otherwise “anticipating and answering questions that visitors may post at Bay View Historical Society’s

³² Pat Cavey, “Brinton House Update: It’s A New Year and We’re Still Here,” *Bay View Historian*, February 2007, 3.

³³ Pat Cavey, “Thank You Volunteers! Beulah Brinton House Report,” *Bay View Historian*, February 2008, 2.

³⁴ Mark Nitka, “President’s Message,” *Bay View Historian*, December 2007, 2.

³⁵ Pat Cavey, “Thank You Volunteers! Beulah Brinton House Report,” *Bay View Historian*, February 2008, 2.

³⁶ Mark Nitka, “President’s Message,” *Bay View Historian*, June 2007, 2, 6.

many programs and events.”³⁷ The “countless hours” spent by BVHS volunteers in developing these historical resources and programs precipitated the Brinton House’s inclusion on the 2007 Historic Milwaukee, Inc., Spaces and Traces Tour, as well as its selection for that year’s Historic Milwaukee Preservation Award.³⁸ But perhaps more importantly, in the same way the BVHS’s creation altered what its members and the community thought about the neighborhood’s history, the focus on the Brinton House changed the BVHS’s identity as an organization, both physically and ideologically:

Our headquarters represent a physical manifestation of our presence in the community, while at the same time expressing an intangible connection to our past. The Beulah Brinton House also represents an enormous challenge and call to action. The courage it required to engage in our unprecedented change as an organization should also fuel a sense of civic engagement among our members. While it is true that ‘the best-laid plans of mice and men often go awry,’ we have already proven this does not have to be the case. By working to eliminate the disconnect between dialogue and action, we are paving the way for continued growth, success, and self-sufficiency as an organization.³⁹

But in 2008 the path to self-sufficiency was interrupted as tensions within the BVHS membership over the organization’s financial situation came to a head. The April newsletter reported that the BVHS “may be forced to sell the Beulah Brinton House in a year, unless it is able to raise thousands of dollars in the short term to achieve sustainability and pay off its

³⁷ Mark Nitka, “BVHS Members Are Getting Involved,” *Bay View Historian*, June 2007, 7.

³⁸ Mark Nitka, “President’s Message,” *Bay View Historian*, June 2007, 2, 6.

³⁹ Jeremy Happel, “Continuity and Change,” *Bay View Historian*, December 2007, 3.

\$350,000 mortgage in the long term.”⁴⁰ Earlier that year, 35 members petitioned the board to answer financial and house-related questions at a special meeting. Then president Mark Nitka (2007-2008) and several other leaders working on fundraising and house projects resigned after receiving the petition, creating a leadership crisis going into the special meeting.⁴¹ At the meeting, the petitioners expressed deep concern that the board was spending too much money and not designating enough for the house payments and other expenses, nor adequately addressing long term capital needs through fundraising and revenue generation.⁴² BVHS treasurer Jeff Myer pushed back on these claims, indicating that the critique did not take into account any possible new income and that retiring the debt was not as urgent as the petitioners suggested. Myer pointed to “renewed vigor in fundraising” since the house purchase and pointed out that “one or two events could significantly impact the society’s finances.”⁴³

Nevertheless, Myer also resigned after the meeting. But as unpleasant as this dispute might have been for the BVHS, it was not fatal; the lost board positions were filled shortly after the April meeting and the new leadership immediately began developing plans to strengthen the annual appeal by targeting members and residents with a vested interest in the neighborhood and its history.⁴⁴ They also sought to stave off any looming financial catastrophes by redoubling efforts to maximize smaller scale fundraisers like the annual dinner silent auction, rummage sales, and wine and beer tastings. At the special meeting John Gurda praised the BVHS’s long reliance on the “sweat equity” of its members, and he was optimistic about the group’s ability to rise to the challenge: “The amount to be raised is not, in the longer scheme of things, a back

⁴⁰ Michael Timm, “Historical Society Needs Funds to Keep House,” *Bay View Compass*, April 2008.

⁴¹ Timm, “Historical Society Needs Funds to Keep House.”

⁴² Timm, “Historical Society Needs Funds to Keep House.”

⁴³ Michael Timm, “Historical Society Needs Funds to Keep House,” *Bay View Compass*, April 2008.

⁴⁴ “2009 Combined Annual Appeal & Capital Campaign,” *Bay View Historian*, October 2009, 4.

breaker. There's a window here, but the prospects are good."⁴⁵ Still, some members felt the society was at a crossroads, where it "may choose to move forward on the same path, or return to what it was 10 years ago, or set off in a new and exciting direction. The current financial picture requires that a decision be made in the next few months whether there will be sufficient support to meet the house expenses or if the house should be sold."⁴⁶

There is no indication that the BVHS seriously considered selling the Brinton House at this (or any other) time. Instead, it pressed forward as it had often in previous instances of difficulty—with renewed commitment and planning. Administratively, the House Committee was redirected to focus on interior and exterior property maintenance and readying the house for restoration projects, a reduced charge for that committee which reallocated duties like program planning, house-specific fundraising, and event booking to other personnel.⁴⁷ In addition to the annual appeals, the Fundraising Committee was reconfigured to focus on new revenue generating events and activities that could bolster the BVHS's first ever multi-year capital campaign⁴⁸ Branded as "Celebrating Our Past, Forging Our Future: The Campaign for the Beulah Brinton House," the capital campaign launched at the annual beer and wine tasting event in June 2009.⁴⁹ The campaign was designed in three phases of one year each, with each phase consisting of an ambitious goal. The first phase aimed to retire the Beulah Brinton House mortgage balance of over \$350,000; the second phase would secure funds to support the Brinton House's total restoration "to return the house to its original use as a community gathering place,"

⁴⁵ Timm, "Historical Society Needs Funds to Keep House."

⁴⁶ Mark Nitka, Jeff Myer, and Pat Cavey, "Crossroads—The House Project: A Report to the Members," *Bay View Historian*, April 2008, 2-4.

⁴⁷ "2009 Combined Annual Appeal & Capital Campaign," *Bay View Historian*, October 2009, 4.

⁴⁸ "2009 Combined Annual Appeal & Capital Campaign," 4.

⁴⁹ Amy Mihelich, "A Message from Capital Campaign Chair Amy Mihelich," *Bay View Historian*, August 2009, 3.

but with enhanced functionality and accessibility; and the third phase would build an endowment fund to be used for future and ongoing house needs.⁵⁰

It is unclear whether BVHS leadership had an approximate amount in mind to fund the restoration and endowment in addition to the \$350,000 required to retire the mortgage. It seems that offering a hard figure at the outset of the campaign could have had a deflationary effect on the morale of members who were already in constant fundraising mode, and it was perhaps more effective to couch the organization's public appeal in Beulah Brinton's "spirit of hospitality, helpfulness and community" instead of overwhelming numbers.⁵¹ In any case, as then president Kathy Mulvey (2009-2010) wrote, "who we can become depends wholly on what we are willing to do," and the BVHS was more willing than ever to be out in the community demonstrating its value.⁵² Like many BVHS leaders before and since, Mulvey received accolades for her involvement across multiple organizations in the Bay View neighborhood, which was a complement to her hard work and dedication, but also something of an expectation for BVHS leadership.⁵³ BVHS advancement, especially in carrying out initiatives like the capital campaign, was predicated on leaders and members being active and engaged on multiple fronts around the community.

Modernizing for Impact and Inclusion

The BVHS felt it could only rely on its membership so much to meet the campaign's funding goals; the rest would need to come from outside sources, so this prompted a level of civic participation by group leaders that often surpassed efforts in previous years. An example of

⁵⁰ Mihelich, "A Message from Capital Campaign Chair Amy Mihelich," 3.

⁵¹ Kathy Mulvey, "President's Message," *Bay View Historian*, *Bay View Historian*, February 2009, 2.

⁵² Mulvey, "President's Message," 2.

⁵³ "BVHS President Kathy Mulvey Honored in Bay View and Beyond," *Bay View Historian*, February 2010, 3.

this from the time was the BVHS's sponsorship of the Bay View Bash in 2008 and 2009. The Bay View Bash was the largest neighborhood-based street festival in Milwaukee and because of the potential for organizations to raise funds and expand public awareness, the sponsors were selected through a competitive application process.⁵⁴ These instances became the largest single fundraisers in the group's long history of participating in these types of community events, and it put the BVHS in a venue with people from the neighborhood and all over the city who were likely unfamiliar with the organization or its collections, programs, and neighborhood involvement.⁵⁵ According to Mulvey, there was some trepidation among the BVHS membership about whether participation in this event suited its mission, but ultimately it was about "building community in Bay View," and people could hardly argue with the outcome.⁵⁶

In fact, the overall direction chosen by BVHS, exemplified by its participation in the Bay View Bash, seemed to be working well. By the end of 2009, Mulvey reported that membership numbers were back up to around 500, fundraising amassed a 12+ month cushion for operating expenses, collections use and visitors to the Brinton House were "increasing dramatically," and the group was in a better position than ever to help build community, "much as Beulah Brinton herself did over 100 years ago."⁵⁷ Even so, the BVHS had to make its monthly mortgage payment and it continued to face limitations in its volunteer force and leadership recruitment efforts. The BVHS needed "the vision and strategies and time and talents of ALL our members to do this job right," and in early 2010 leadership once again initiated a fresh round of strategic planning.⁵⁸ The planning began by updating the group's vision statement to read: "The Bay View

⁵⁴ Michael Timm, "Historical Society Shoulders Bash," *Bay View Compass*, August 2008.

⁵⁵ Kathy Mulvey, "Bay View Historical Society Puts Its Mark on the Bay View Bash," *Bay View Historian*, October 2009, 1.

⁵⁶ Mulvey, "Bay View Historical Society Puts Its Mark on the Bay View Bash," 1.

⁵⁷ Kathy Mulvey, "President's Message: A Full Future for BVHS," *Bay View Historian*, October 2009, 2.

⁵⁸ Mulvey, "President's Message: A Full Future for BVHS," 2.

Historical Society serves as the link between Bay View’s rich history and its promise for the future.”⁵⁹ Around this somewhat abstract vision, the planners determined more practical goal areas focused on strengthening the group’s governance and operational capacity, developing strategies and practices to support executive and committee leadership, computerizing all aspects of its archival functions, securing ownership of the Brinton House to fulfill its preservation and restoration duties, and making the headquarters a focal point of the Bay View community.⁶⁰

In support of the last two goals, the board adopted the recommendations from a Historic Structure Report on the Brinton House paid for with a grant from the National Trust for Historic Preservation and conducted by the UW-Milwaukee Historic Preservation Studio.⁶¹ The report was compiled by UW-Milwaukee architecture students working under their instructor, and it included measurements, drawings, photographs, and other documentation that would inform any future renovations or restoration at the Brinton House.⁶² The project was also submitted to the National Park Service’s Peterson Prize Competition, which garnered significant media coverage and resulted in the Brinton House’s inclusion on the 2010 Wisconsin State Preservation Office “10 To Save” listing as the oldest entrant.⁶³ The preservation list sought to “de-emphasize crisis in favor of planning and cooperative efforts” to save historic properties, a notion reflected in the BVHS’s overall operational strategy.⁶⁴

Inspiring a sense of cooperation became a persistent theme in the capital campaign and other fundraising efforts, with appeals for significant gifts featured in nearly all BVHS

⁵⁹ Kathy Mulvey, “BVHS Strategic Plan Takes Shape,” *Bay View Historian*, June 2010, 3.

⁶⁰ Mulvey, “BVHS Strategic Plan Takes Shape,” 3.

⁶¹ “Gifts and Grants,” *Bay View Historian*, October 2009, 4.

⁶² “Gifts and Grants,” 4.

⁶³ Bill O’Brien, “Beulah Brinton House Surveyed by UWM Preservation Studio,” *Bay View Historian*, December 2009, 1.

⁶⁴ *Bay View Historian*, April 2010.

communications.⁶⁵ This included instructions on how to write the BVHS into wills, information on tax implications of large gifts, and details on programs designed to keep older people from being penalized for charitable donations. There was also noticeably more emphasis on community ties, not only within Bay View, but amongst and within the Greater Milwaukee history community.⁶⁶ For example, the newsletter regularly shared information on other society events in a section of the newsletter called the “Historic Roundup,” which perhaps also reflected BVHS members’ tendency to hold memberships and affiliations with multiple peer organizations around the city.⁶⁷ Likewise, revived interest in labor activism and history in the wake of early 2010s union busting efforts by Wisconsin Governor Scott Walker helped create some of the largest crowds at the annual Bay View Tragedy commemoration co-hosted by the Wisconsin Labor History Society and the BVHS.⁶⁸

The BVHS’s complementary goals of cross-institutional collaboration, highlighting the Brinton House as a neighborhood gathering place, and facilitating more involvement from young people converged in the summer of 2010 with the Bay View Observatory program. From July to August the BVHS hosted an art installation created by the Milwaukee Discovery World Science and Technology Museum and students from Bay View High School as part of an academic

⁶⁵ Amy Mihelich, “A Message from Capital Campaign Chair Amy Mihelich,” *Bay View Historian*, August 2009, 3.

⁶⁶ Shemagne O’Keefe, “Why the Bay View Historical Society is in My Estate Plan,” *Bay View Historian*, June 2010, 4. O’Keefe wrote about the community ties that inspired her gift to the BVHS: “Although my history with Bay View is very recent, this community has become an integral part of me. I moved to Bay View six years ago, joined a neighborhood organization and soon met people who were passionate about this area. It didn’t take long for me to catch their fervor. Many people on my block have lived here most of their lives. Getting to know them and experiencing their strong support when a fire severely damaged my home immensely strengthened my ties and feel of connection here... The history of this area is fascinating, and I want to do my part to help assure that we can reflect back on what has happened here, capture it, and preserve it for those who will be here in future generations.”

⁶⁷ “Historic Roundup,” *Bay View Historian*, April 2010, 4.

⁶⁸ Katherine Keller, “Union Busting is Disgusting Protesters Say,” *Bay View Compass*, March 2011; “Bay View Tragedy Attracts Hundreds,” *Wisconsin Labor History Society Newsletter* 31, no. 1, (2013): 1, BVHS Subject Files.

program called “The Art of Archaeology and Me,” where “students learned concepts such as ancient art and archaeology, urban archaeology, genetics and genealogy, as well as skills such as interviewing and storytelling.”⁶⁹ Based on the idea of a compass, the installation included four 12-foot banners aligned at the cardinal directions and interspersed with historical markers across the Brinton House lawn. The banners contained student-created montages of historic photographs, quotes, maps, and artistic creations, while the historical markers featured images and information related to historically significant sites in Bay View, many of which corresponded to BVHS-designated landmarks.⁷⁰ The Bay View Observatory was open to the public and students conducted interviews with “residents young and old about their experiences in the neighborhood—from friendships they formed, business they started to memories of growing up in the area,” eventually gathering 38 accounts and dozens of digitized records that were added to the BVHS collections.⁷¹

According to Kathy Mulvey, the Bay View Observatory collaboration gave the BVHS and many Bay View residents “an opportunity to see that, although Bay View High School has changed from the days when many of our members attended, good things are going on there.”⁷² Indeed, the response demonstrated a clear contrast from earlier attitudes expressed by BVHS personnel around the neighborhood’s shifting demographics. Subsequently, the board made

⁶⁹ Sarah Biondich, “Bay View Observatory Points to a Brighter Future,” *Shepherd Express*, September 7, 2010, <https://shepherdexpress.com/culture/happening-now/bay-view-observatory-points-brighter-future/>.

⁷⁰ Julie Lawrence, “Bay View Observatory Uses Art and History to Define a Community,” *OnMilwaukee*, August 28, 2010, <https://onmilwaukee.com/articles/bayviewobserv/>. Some of the Bay View sites included were: “the Rolling Mill Site, the site of the Bay View Tragedy, the former Welsh Congregational Church, the Pryor Avenue Iron Well, Groppi’s, Puddler’s Hall, Three Brothers (which used to be a Schlitz tied tavern), the WWII Memorial Garden, Bay View High School, the former boathouse in Humboldt Park, Horace Chase’s log cabin, the Green Bay, Milwaukee & Chicago Rail Company, the Avalon Theater, the former Standard Brick Company, the site of the Little Red School House, Puddler’s cottages, the South Shore Yacht Club, a few shipwrecks near Bay View, and Spencer Tracy’s house.”

⁷¹ Sarah Biondich, “Bay View Observatory points to a brighter future,” *Shepherd Express*, September 7, 2010, <https://shepherdexpress.com/culture/happening-now/bay-view-observatory-points-brighter-future/>.

⁷² Kathy Mulvey, “Bay View Observatory a Smashing Success,” *Bay View Historian*, October 2010, 2.

changes to the organization's bylaws that signaled a more welcoming outlook. Specifically, the lead statement in the revised Purposes and Objectives section indicating the mission to "preserve, advance, and disseminate... knowledge of the history of Bay View," added the following clause: "It is the intent of the Bay View Historical Society to be non-discriminatory in compliance with state, federal and local laws."⁷³ This addition may seem minor on its face and simply an acknowledgement of legal compliance; however, it encoded a more inclusive approach for the BVHS that played out in successive efforts with area schools after the Bay View Observatory program, which the Brinton House hosted for three more years after 2010.

The board also used the bylaws modification process to eliminate several provisions to help cut costs and give the board more flexibility in making decisions.⁷⁴ It removed language requiring the BVHS to distribute publications to area press outlets, provide funding for member attendance at the state and local history conventions, and award scholarships to Bay View High School students. It also gave the board and committee members more leeway to determine membership categories, empower ad hoc sub-committees and working groups, and conduct meetings and financial transactions. This did not mean that sponsoring publication distribution, convention participation, and scholarships were eliminated, but that they became a matter of discretionary choice since financial priorities were increasingly driven by housing, programming, and collection needs. In late 2010, the BVHS received a \$3,000 grant from the Milwaukee-area Nonprofit Management Fund to continue digitizing the society's archives and artifacts.⁷⁵ The ongoing virtual library project was moving slowly and the grant was designed to expedite imaging and photographing selected items, and to ensure that all digitized materials were

⁷³ "Amendment of Bylaws," *Bay View Historian*, October 2011, 4.

⁷⁴ "Amendment of Bylaws," 4-7.

⁷⁵ Kathy Mulvey, "Archives Project Receives \$3000 Grant," *Bay View Historian*, December 2010, 4.

“tagged, cross-referenced and stored systematically” for quick retrieval.⁷⁶ But at that point the Brinton House still did not have internet service and though the Archives Committee had acquired computers and other equipment through donations and gifts, it was managing the digital collections within a closed and unconnected system.⁷⁷

In 2011, a board-led community visioning session on the organization’s future direction indicated that the BVHS aspired to be a multi-functional community service. Several major themes along this line emerged from the session: Community Events (Brinton house a gathering place for informed community dialogue for people of all ages), Cultural Programs (Brinton House utilized as a cultural center for the BVHS and other organizations), Educational Programs (history education for youth to understand the essence of Beulah Brinton’s work in way that is relevant to their lives), Neighborhood Community (BVHS as a clearinghouse for historical information on neighborhood homes and buildings), Physical Spaces and Resources (restoration and renovation with accessibility and sustainability in mind to facilitate educational programs), Tourism (the Brinton House serving as a tourist destination and the Bay View Visitor Center), History (creating a feeling of community for Bay View residents by highlighting history and roots), and Reputation (the BVHS as a leader and model for community historical societies everywhere).⁷⁸ The lack of any explicit mention here of historical collecting or digital collections access is noteworthy; however, these were an assumed component of the vision and what was articulated in these themes was more about reconciling community perceptions with how leadership wanted the BVHS to be perceived.⁷⁹

⁷⁶ Mulvey, “Archives Project Receives \$3000 Grant,” 4.

⁷⁷ Mulvey, “Archives Project Receives \$3000 Grant,” 4.

⁷⁸ “Visioning Session Targets Ideas for Historical Society’s Future,” *Bay View Historian*, December 2011, 5.

⁷⁹ “Visioning Session Targets Ideas for Historical Society’s Future,” 5.

In any case, by the end of the year the BVHS had at least two reasons to celebrate. First, the society's collections were heavily featured in a new neighborhood history written by a longtime member Ron Winkler. *Bay View* was published as part of Arcadia Publishing's Images of America Series—a mass market brand that specializes in image-heavy local histories. Winkler was (and remains) one of the most prolific BVHS volunteers and board members, serving as newsletter editor, historical columnist, and annual walking tour guide, and the book was the focus of several BVHS programs and promotional appearances throughout the city. The BVHS received a portion of the proceeds from all pre-order copies, and the book sold very well around the Milwaukee area into the next year. Second, the organization was once again awarded the Wisconsin Historical Society's Reuben Gold Thwaites Trophy, the only local history affiliate organization to hold the distinction of winning it twice.⁸⁰ The WHS praised the BVHS's efforts at using the past to produce positive outcomes for the community in the present, and specifically cited the elevated activity in the years since the Brinton House purchase as the decisive factor, particularly its participation in a diverse range of Bay View community events.⁸¹ Perhaps not surprisingly, the person responsible for the award nomination was Ron Winkler.

As Winkler's publication and the group's experiences with the Traveling Trunk and Bay View Observatory demonstrated, the BVHS collections were central to telling Bay View's story and bringing depth and context to Beulah Brinton's legacy. In late 2011, the society received a Wisconsin Humanities Council development grant to work with Fernwood Montessori School, Milwaukee Public Museum, and UW-Milwaukee "to create a stronger sense of belonging in the

⁸⁰ Ron Winkler, "Bay View Historical Society to Receive Wisconsin Historical Society's Highest Award," *Bay View Historian*, October 2011, 1.

⁸¹ Ron Winkler, "Bay View Historical Society Receives Wisconsin Historical Society's Highest Award," *Bay View Historian*, December 2011, 1.

Bay View community” through history and heritage-based activities.⁸² The BVHS aimed to bring every school child in the neighborhood to the Brinton House and in January 2012 it hosted a group of students from Fernwood Elementary. According to then president Nancy Tawney (2011-2013), “The Brinton House truly came alive with their presence. The archives and artifacts in the Brinton House are there to help us all learn more about our past and that day was a fantastic use of them.”⁸³ This visit was the first in what would become a multi-year outreach and education program between the BVHS and Bay View area schools that gave society members a much more substantial role as education partners than in previous collaborations.⁸⁴

Shortly after this initial visit, the BVHS launched “Community: A Place Where We All Belong,” an extended school-based initiative that used Beulah Brinton’s life story to encourage “a shift in thinking about community so we can develop an authentic sense of belonging.”⁸⁵ The first phase involved creating a sense of belonging by letting students experience being in a community: “the first and most pressing challenge is to transform people’s sense of isolation and self-interest into an experience of connectedness and caring for the whole. Creating that transformation requires a shift from seeing problems that need to be solved in the community to see the possibilities that can be realized.”⁸⁶ The second phase involved developing and implementing instructional activities at schools throughout the year. Participating classrooms worked with BVHS members to learn about Bay View history, visit the Brinton House, interact with historical artifacts, and research information related to some aspect of neighborhood history. The students were encouraged to ask questions about the past, discuss what has changed, and

⁸² Susan Ballje, “BVHS Awarded Grant,” *Bay View Historian*, February 2012, 1.

⁸³ Nancy Tawney, President’s Message,” *Bay View Historian*, April 2012, 2.

⁸⁴ Susan Ballje, “BVHS Education Committee teams with Bay View Students for Community: A Place Where We All Belong,” *Bay View Historian*, October 2012, 5.

⁸⁵ Ballje, “BVHS Education Committee teams with Bay View Students for Community,” 5.

⁸⁶ Ballje, “BVHS Education Committee teams with Bay View Students for Community,” 5.

think about their community's significance.⁸⁷ For the study's final phase, students were invited to write stories, create displays or drawings, and use photographs to share what they learned, and then contribute these works to exhibitions hosted at their schools and the Brinton House.⁸⁸

Subsequent collaborations with area schools enabled students to see how their lives fit within historical contexts at the local level and beyond. Increasingly, these included a social justice component. In 2014, for example, the BVHS hosted the "Risk Everything: A Freedom Summer" exhibit at the Brinton House as one of the stops on a rotating traveling schedule at area schools and cultural institutions.⁸⁹ Sponsored by the WHS, the exhibit detailed Black voter registration in the Deep South during the summer of 1964, focusing on the grassroots efforts of young people and their impact on the civil rights movement.⁹⁰ Similarly, the BVHS sponsored initiative "Our School, Our Community" challenged Bay View High School students to engage with the history of their school in relation to other historical events, people, and institutions in the neighborhood, while also learning about the school's student population and student life, teachers and employees, and the educational and extracurricular programs of the past.⁹¹ The BVHS was interested in understanding what current students believed made the school unique to the Bay View community, and, as with the Bay View Observatory program, they hoped to promote a welcoming atmosphere and offer community service opportunities through society activities for those inclined to contribute.⁹²

These engagement efforts aligned with a concurrent push by neighborhood parents and

⁸⁷ Ballje, "BVHS Education Committee teams with Bay View Students for Community," 5.

⁸⁸ Ballje, "BVHS Education Committee teams with Bay View Students for Community," 5.

⁸⁹ Susan Ballje, "Risk Everything: A Freedom Summer Exhibit for Young People," *Bay View Historian*, April 2014, 6.

⁹⁰ Ballje, "Risk Everything," 6.

⁹¹ "Bay View Historical Society Education Project Expands," *Bay View Historian*, March 2015, 5.

⁹² "Bay View Historical Society Education Project Expands," 5.

educators to revive Bay View High School and reverse decades of negative trends and perceptions that put the school on an unsustainable path. Community ambivalence toward the school dated to the late 1970s desegregation era, but other more recent factors like the proliferation of charter schools produced a situation where, by 2010, only 7.5% of the school's enrollment lived in the attendance area.⁹³ Over the decades, Bay View High School shifted from one of the city's premiere secondary academic institutions to one of the worst performing in the state of Wisconsin, while also gaining a reputation for being unsafe and a hotbed of student behavioral problems. For example, one large fight incident in 2012 led to the arrest of 30 students, further supporting an ongoing narrative about the school's Black students in particular, and becoming, as one commentator pointed out, "a symbol of how poorly Milwaukee—and the nation as a whole—have fared in closing the gaps in opportunity and outcomes across racial lines... and the barriers still separating people."⁹⁴ The community-driven reforms were less an attempt to defy demographic realities than a recalibration to establish academic programs that attracted high performing students from the neighborhood and around the city. Improving relationships with neighbors through active community service was a key component of this strategy, especially clean-up and beautification projects, which promoted the notion that these students were part of the community, not just visitors.⁹⁵

An End and A New Beginning

Meanwhile, other core BVHS functions were carried out as volunteer and financial

⁹³ Erin Richards, "Neighbors Seek to Revive Bay View High," *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, August 16, 2011, BVHS Subject Files.

⁹⁴ Alan J. Borsuk, "How Can We Boost Bay View's Reputation?" *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, October 21, 2012, BVHS Subject Files.

⁹⁵ James E. Causey, "Volunteering For Respectability," *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, May 8, 2013, BVHS Subject Files.

resources allowed. The Brinton House eventually was wired for internet service and the Archives Committee acquired software to assist with managing the physical and digital collections, but changes in storage around the Brinton House and shifting personnel responsible for the collections resulted in a situation where “nobody is quite sure what the Society has and where it is located.”⁹⁶ Likewise, similar to past experience, efforts to track the materials that were variously used onsite and externally were not always successful in preventing items from going missing altogether.⁹⁷ The BVHS added an electronic version of the *Historian* newsletter to the website to extend its communications and outreach to a younger and web-savvy audience, but also remained committed to printing and mailing the paper version, which represented a significant ongoing expense.⁹⁸ As is the case with many maturing but under-sourced organizations, BVHS efforts to widen its appeal and broaden its outlook were characterized by the tension between tradition and innovation, but this was primarily tempered by its ability to stay financially solvent.

The three-year capital campaign (2009-2011) raised over \$50,000 in pledges during the first year following an aggressive period of ramped up activity specifically designed to generate revenue for the BVHS.⁹⁹ The pledges slowed considerably in the next two years, however, and by the end of 2011, it was far from reaching the financial goals of retiring the Brinton House mortgage, covering restoration expenses, and establishing an endowment for ongoing costs. Of the money pledged it received only \$37,000 and the loan balance was over \$310,000. But by the end of 2012, that balance was cut in half thanks to an anonymous gift of \$150,000 that raised an

⁹⁶ Kathy Mulvey, “Digitizing Archives to Begin Soon,” *Bay View Historian*, February 2012, 2.

⁹⁷ Kathy Mulvey, “A Reminder from the Archives Committee,” *Bay View Historian*, April 2013, 2.

⁹⁸ Nancy Tawney, “President’s Message,” *Bay View Historian*, June 2013, 2.

⁹⁹ Kathy Mulvey, “President’s Message,” *Bay View Historian*, February 2010. 2.

additional \$36,000 through a matching gift challenge.¹⁰⁰ A principal reduction payment of over \$164,000 was paid on the mortgage, bringing the balance to around \$133,000 by the end of 2013. The following year, an additional \$80,000 was raised, a substantial portion of which was applied to the principal. By the end of 2014, the mortgage balance was approximately \$60,000.¹⁰¹

From an objective dollars-raised standpoint, the capital campaign was not successful, but it certainly set the stage for the BVHS's later successes through the sheer force of the campaign's ambitious goals. BVHS leadership, volunteers, and their community partners constantly rose to the occasion in tough times and there seems little doubt that the level of engagement after the Brinton House purchase was a decisive factor. Yet it is difficult to determine cause and effect in this instance, partly because the BVHS's position was advanced so substantially by an anonymous benefactor whose motivations can never be definitively determined, but also because the value added to the community by the organization's efforts is impossible to quantify. In any case, it seems that community-minded generosity begets more of the same and in early 2015 the BVHS announced that it was gifted a neighborhood property as part of a long-time resident's will, and that after some cleaning and minor renovations to the house, it was quickly sold at a profit of \$250,000.¹⁰² This allowed the BVHS to pay off the Brinton House mortgage, set aside adequate resources for historic restoration and accessibility updates, and provide a substantial operating fund for the foreseeable future.

Fittingly, the house belonged to Sandra Schuetz, a long-time BVHS member who served on the executive board and volunteered with the Archives Committee on a weekly basis. The house was a 1920s revival Tudor in a section of Bay View called Sauerkraut Hill, because many

¹⁰⁰ "BVHS Given Opportunity to Reduce the Brinton House Mortgage," *Bay View Historian*, October 2013, 1.

¹⁰¹ "Matching Gift Campaign is a Great Success," *Bay View Historian*, February 2014, 1.

¹⁰² "Schuetz Estate—Hillcrest Home in Bay View!" *Bay View Historian*, March 2015, 1.

German immigrants settled there. The house was located on the opposite side of the neighborhood from the historic district surrounding the Brinton House and Schuetz's family went back in the area to its early days as a remote farming village, with several of her ancestors becoming well known over the years for building houses throughout the neighborhood. According to a tribute in the BVHS newsletter, Schuetz lived in the home her entire life and could not imagine living anywhere else besides Bay View.¹⁰³ Her family's roots in the neighborhood and her strong interest in its history prompted her work with the society, and it was her express wish that the house sale proceeds be used to retire the Brinton House mortgage.¹⁰⁴

In many ways Schuetz's generosity brings the story of the organization's relationship with the Brinton House full circle. Much as the house acquisition resolved a logistic and existential matter for the BVHS, closing out the debt created by that acquisition similarly resolved an ever-present reality that colored every group decision and activity since. Both occurrences involved the loss of active individuals who devoted considerable time and energy to the group's success, thereby demonstrating that the BVHS's members were always its most reliable assets. Whereas the opportunity to acquire the Brinton House must have felt more like a rare and fateful alignment of larger forces at work, the Schuetz gift—and the large sums immediately preceding it—were also the result of luck and timing converging with the hard work and commitment the BVHS was known for in its community.¹⁰⁵ None of these occurrences were

¹⁰³ Nancy Tawney, "Sandra Schuetz and Her Amazing Gift," *Bay View Historian*, June 2015, 3.

¹⁰⁴ Tawney, "Sandra Schuetz and Her Amazing Gift," 3.

¹⁰⁵ Gwen Moore letter to BVHS, April 25, 2015, BVHS Subject Files. In a letter from U.S. Congresswoman Gwen Moore congratulating the BVHS on its 35th Anniversary, Moore wrote: "Over the past 35 years, the Bay View Historical Society has exhibited outstanding leadership in preserving the awesome history and promoting the rich heritage of one of Milwaukee's most picturesque neighborhoods... The recognition you have received over the past 35 years from government, civic groups, and community leaders is a true testament of your public service."

inevitable and the resources it gained were not unlimited, but moving beyond the organization's 35th anniversary, BVHS leaders and members were less restricted in thinking about doing big things and enacting whatever vision they chose to follow.

Conclusion: A Legacy that Matters

A Note on Interest and Position

I have never been much of a joiner. During my early school years, I played on sports teams and participated in occasional extracurricular clubs or organizations, but not to the degree that most college admissions officers (or my parents) found impressive. As an undergraduate student and during years of fits-and-starts at a viable career, I half-heartedly supported causes by various groups with compatible political or ideological positions, but nothing that required much more than a nominal donation or irregular volunteer shift. Even now, as a mid-career professional, I continue to pay for memberships and serve on committees in professional organizations mostly based around specific research projects or job duties, but I am increasingly protective of my personal time outside of work obligations. For better or worse, I have rarely joined something for reasons beyond satisfying a purely utilitarian or transactional motivation. I have seldom actively sought emotional or affective connections with fellow community members around shared, deep-seated interests. I appreciate the camaraderie that such activity engenders, but I only really know it second hand.

I mostly have never felt the rootedness that I believe such a commitment and investment requires. I think this is due to my moving around frequently since I began my career as a librarian and archivist working in a variety of cultural heritage and educational settings in different regions across the United States. At the time I entered the profession, the ability to relocate was key to crafting a sustainable career, one that has since allowed me a range of experiences that have been beneficial in doing the work that I find most rewarding and challenging. I can honestly say that I have never been bored, even if I have often been restless, but what I may have gained in terms of professional achievement, I believe that I have also

sacrificed a comparable amount in feeling at home in the various communities where I have lived. Again, I am not much of a joiner and during my time at these locations there seemed to be no point in joining something that I knew I would be ready to leave before too long anyway. But, looking back now, it is clear that this reticence has not rigidly defined my experience.

As my career advanced and I took on new responsibilities, it became necessary to reach beyond my institutional purview for a variety of reasons—courting new publics, finding dependable partners, expanding collaborative networks, seeking out funding—the variegated activities that cultural heritage institutions rely on for their existence. Usually, I was doing this from a position of relative largesse, where my home institution was the proverbial big fish in a small pond that smaller fish looked to for support, direction, and resources. This positioning allowed me to keep some distance and conduct my work on my own terms and terms favorable to my employer, and to participate without fully buying in on a personal level. However, a few instances in the intervening years forced me to rethink this stance and approach; in each instance I sought a more substantial role in the world of local historical societies, which are absolutely reliant on community-minded joiners. In all instances, it became clear that my background, experience, and genuine fascination with local history only gave me so much credibility with people who have invested a substantial portion of their time and energy into their organization's survival. It also became clear that to move beyond the status of disinterested functionary, it was necessary for me to care about the same things they cared about. The only way I could do that was to join and actively participate, without regard to how long I might stick around.

The first memorable instance was with a county historical society in the Mid-Atlantic region. I was working as a special collections and archives manager for a university located on the periphery of the Washington DC metro area. The university was a relatively new entity and

chose the location for its headquarters mostly based on tax incentives and labor cost savings, but also because of the location's historic qualities as reflected in the built environment and its proximity to important national physical landmarks. The university leveraged its considerable financial resources for good public relations and actively sought partnerships with local institutions as a way to become further identified with the immediate community. This included formal and informal partnerships with various cultural heritage institutions like the county historical society, which worked diligently to highlight the county's rural character and connections to several American founding families. The university seemed more than pleased to have this patina of historical embeddedness attached to their brand, and I was encouraged to explore opportunities that could further strengthen that bond.

After a series of productive interactions and project consultations with members of this historical society, leadership invited me to serve on its board of directors and coordinate the digitization of past issues of their semi-annual journal. The digitization project was straightforward and semi-interesting, but what I really took away from the experience was how fascinated this group of mostly men were with the granular details of the county's history. No fact was considered trivial, no data aggregation inconsequential, no story irrelevant, and no record unworthy of saving. They were content to live among the past because they understood better than anyone that what happened in their county was completely unique from what happened in other locations, and it was their duty to preserve and promote it. It was what I now think of as benevolent overprotectiveness—benevolent because the people who keep these organizations running take on responsibilities that few other people are willing to consider. They simply care about those things in history that most other people in their communities and beyond will never engage with or know about.

In another instance, I found myself in a new job in the rural Midwest and my duties included overseeing a substantial collection of local history and genealogy materials held by a public library system. Thinking I was performing a gracious professional courtesy, I contacted the local historical society to introduce myself and start making connections in the local history community. I called the society's headquarters and was put through to the chief volunteer coordinator and board chairperson. As soon as I said who I was and where I was calling from, I was cut off with an abrupt, "You know, you're *not* getting our stuff." I was momentarily thrown by the brusque and assumptive tone of this response, but somehow managed to salvage the conversation and earned a grudging invitation to attend the society's upcoming board meeting. Apparently, I convinced them that my intention was, in fact, *not* to get their stuff, and over time I built a satisfying and productive relationship with the society, mostly through program collaborations and everyday interactions with its members who frequently used the library's local history collections.

What I had not considered in my initial attempt to reach out was that every organization has a backstory and baggage that accumulates with the people caring for it. Local rivalries, intra-community conflicts, and the constant presence of financial precarity often cause organizations to dig in on a position and close ranks around only those activities and attitudes that are self-affirming and familiar. Over time I discovered that this society had a track record of high intrigue by local history agency standards: the persistent threat of catastrophic flooding to its facility and collections, history community factionalism resulting in the founding of new groups that refused to work together, and, as it turns out, collections and collecting opportunities lost to other organizations through allegedly underhanded means. At the time it seemed easy to scoff at this drama and feel grateful for the distance I kept, but ultimately I realized that this society and

others like it remain viable because of their members' heightened proprietary instincts, not in spite of them. Since modern communities change so frequently, the ability of any local historical society to survive is inextricably linked to how its members and leaders ensure continuity, and that becomes more difficult without personal connections to the work and the history, especially among leadership.

My most recent substantive foray into a local history community was with the Bay View Historical Society shortly after I moved to Milwaukee in the summer of 2018. Purely by happenstance I moved my family to the Bay View neighborhood only three blocks from the Beulah Brinton House. One random day I contacted the Archives Committee and hung out my shingle as an archivist/librarian interested in volunteering. Several discussions later, the committee invited me to coordinate an oral history project. I had no idea it would become the launching point for this dissertation nor that it would advance my intellectual and research interests in local history and cultural heritage institutions, but it all seems fortuitous now. The experience gave me a greater personal understanding of what motivates a group of people to assume responsibility and authority over the history of a person, place, and idea, but the notion of how that authority is sustained and justified over time remained elusive. Hence, my prolonged effort to identify the main historical factors and conditions that influenced the BVHS's founding and subsequent development.

Discussion and Analysis

At the risk of overgeneralizing, there are a few broad conclusions that anchor my understanding of the BVHS within the discussion of historical consciousness, enterprise, and authority that I have referred to throughout this dissertation. First, the BVHS is a thoroughly independent entity, as it draws no dedicated public funding for its operations and relies almost

entirely on membership for its financial needs and obligations. Second, its focus is hyperlocal in terms of collecting, publishing, programming, administration, and membership, but this does not necessarily close it off to a wider potential patron base or community of interest given the age of the neighborhood, its ever-changing population, and the ties across time and distance amongst current and former residents—which are often bridged through the efforts of BVHS. Third, amateur enthusiasts conduct the day-to-day operations, even if trained history, archives, and museum professionals (among others) have been involved in its operations at various times throughout its existence.

The BVHS fits within the expansive realm of collection-based cultural heritage institutions that capture and preserve memory and history, but that is not to say that it is typical, especially in terms of contemporary expectations for public-facing history agencies. Increasingly in this general field of cultural activity, organizations seek out justifications for their existence in ways that reflect the advancing commodification of culture, history, and heritage, bringing a more commercial connotation to the idea of the historical enterprise.¹ For example, in 2012 the History Relevance Campaign devised a statement on ways that the study of history (and by extension its capture, preservation, and delivery) provides value through the networks of historical societies, museums, and other cultural heritage institutions around the United States.² Specifically, it proposed that individuals who interact with history develop identity and critical skills, that communities use history to create vital places to live, work, and support economic growth, and that these communities foster engaged citizens and leaders while building a legacy for the future.³ However, the experience of the BVHS aligns with what Elizabeth Potens found in

¹ Jeffrey P. Brown, “History in an Era of Change,” *The Public Historian* 18, no. 3 (1996): 19.

² Potens, “Connecting Neighborhoods with Their Past,” 1.

³ Potens, “Connecting Neighborhoods with Their Past,” 2.

her research on neighborhood-based historical agencies in Philadelphia, namely that “local historical societies, as smaller cultural institutions, often lack the staffing and resources necessary to initiate projects and programs that bring these types of value to local communities.”⁴

The BVHS clearly aspires to contribute to the quality of life in the Bay View neighborhood through preserving neighborhood history, and this became a more substantial part of their vision and activity over time. The general arc points to heritage tourism, history-based place-making programs, and facilitating other opportunities that allow people to interact with the preserved vestiges of the past in authentic (or authentic-seeming) settings. However, the success of such efforts—the degree to which they can make a noticeable social or economic impact even at the local level—usually depends on considerable investment and external audiences not typically within the reach of independent organizations like the BVHS. Indeed, independent local historical societies often struggle to sustain even a rudimentary level of services and activity due to the persistent lack of resources, so the prospect of becoming some kind of destination or attraction or enhanced service is not always realized. Thus, the BVHS and other small organizations must define and assert their value in other ways that have decidedly emotional and less quantifiable impacts on their immediate communities. Over time, the impact may be significant, but it will always be difficult to measure.

Whether focused on facilitating research or educating the public, there has always been an emphasis on community pride and the importance of place in the founding of both independent and publicly-funded local historical societies.⁵ As one of the most distinctive and

⁴ Potens, “Connecting Neighborhoods with Their Past,” 2.

⁵ Henle, *Rescued From Oblivion*, 4, 56; Jameson, “History of Historical Societies,” 12-13; Kanon, *Material Culture and Public Memory*, 52.

consequential areas in the early and ongoing development of Milwaukee, the Bay View neighborhood is steeped in the local historical consciousness as attested by its regular presence in scholarly and popular publications.⁶ For example, around the time of the BVHS's founding, two books detailing Bay View's history were published, including one by John Gurda, whose more comprehensive subsequent area histories also prominently feature Bay View in the narratives.⁷ It clearly is a neighborhood with a strong sense of its own history in relation to the rest of the city and undoubtedly the creation of the BVHS owes something to the enhanced historical consciousness that coursed throughout the country in the years leading up to its founding.⁸ During this time, Milwaukee County witnessed the creation of historical societies in nearly every suburban municipality in the metro area, including the Bay View adjacent cities of St. Francis and Cudahy, as well as the expansion of a historic building preservation organization in the nearby Walker's Point neighborhood.

At a larger level, this era capped several decades of growth in local historical agencies throughout Wisconsin and the formalization of an affiliate program sponsored by the Wisconsin

⁶ For example, there are several scholarly and popular books that make compulsory reference to the neighborhood like John D. Buekner, *Milwaukee in the 1930s: A Federal Writers Project City Guide* (Madison, WI: Wisconsin Historical Society, 2016). See also the following mass market photograph books focusing on or featuring Bay View, often using items from the BVHS collections: Mario A. c, *Italian Milwaukee* (Charleston, SC: Arcadia Publishing, 2004); Ron Winkler, *Bay View* (Charleston, SC: Arcadia Publishing, 2011); and Ron Winkler, *Milwaukee's Town of Lake* (Charleston, SC: Arcadia Publishing, 2013).

⁷ Bernhard C. Corn *The Story of Bay View* (Milwaukee County Historical Society, 1980); John Gurda, *Milwaukee: A City Built on Water* (Madison, WI: Wisconsin Historical Society Press, 2018); Gurda, *Bay View, Wis.*, Gurda, *Milwaukee: City of Neighborhoods*; and Gurda, *The Making of Milwaukee*.

⁸ Richmond D. Williams, "Challenges to State and Local History Administrators," *History News* 32, no. 1 (1977): 10. As Williams indicates, "Although opinion is still mixed on the ultimate consequences of the Bicentennial for state and local history, the most urgent challenge stems from its success in promoting interest in history. All across the country there have been spontaneous grass roots activities—organizing local historical groups, refurbishing old houses, collecting materials, reenacting battles, and publishing countless institutional, town, and country histories."

Historical Society (WHS) that provided crucial support to member organizations.⁹ The WHS and its precursor (State Historical Society of Wisconsin) are cited frequently in the historical society literature as the leading example of a publicly-funded cultural entity that assumed official record keeping duties for state government while also fulfilling a broad-based research, education, and preservation mission. The present support it provides county, local, and specialized history affiliate members (which currently number over 400) is mostly through meetings, trainings, networking, and a small grant program, but very few of these organizations have any sort of legislative mandate or public revenue allocation that gives them the authority or obliges them to act on behalf of the public in any official capacity. As WHS affiliates they assume similar preservationist responsibilities and, ideally, they are able to benefit from the larger network that includes the WHS, its partners in the University of Wisconsin System, and other players across the statewide cultural landscape. But for most organizations working at the scale of the BVHS, efforts are necessarily driven by the introspection, nostalgia, and parochial interests of the individuals most heavily involved with keeping the organization running and maintaining group identity.

The creation and development of the BVHS corresponds to the contemporary community archives movement in that they both emerged in the wake of social upheaval and subsequent coalescence around identity interests in the 1960s and 1970s. Like historical societies, it is common for community archives to focus on the people, schools, businesses, organizations,

⁹ Lord and Ubbelohde, *Clio's Servant*, 112-121. The authors present a comprehensive history of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin from 1846-1954. This is a detailed chronological account that covers all aspects of operations, including the ongoing relationships between the SHSW and the nearly 400 (at that time) local historical societies and heritage groups both within and outside of its affiliate program. This statewide outreach to localized interests helped set apart the SHSW from older historical societies (mostly back East) in that it demonstrated its focus on public education and engagement, thereby justifying the public expense and official role as a state agency.

activities, and networks within a circumscribed geographic area, but location alone is mostly incidental to more crucial factors shaping a community's identity. Identity itself is frequently informed by a shared struggle against the systemic oppression of a group based on its members' immutable physical characteristics, outsider status, place of origin, maligned beliefs, or another factor. Common location is often an indicator of forced and de facto segregation through legal or social restrictions, but may also reflect community members' conscious choices to live where they feel safe, accepted, and empowered. The BVHS is not a community organization formed in reaction to the inherent inequities and power imbalances that most movement-based cultural groups were then and now seeking to address.

In fact, the BVHS hews closer to the traditional mainstream institutional model that to some might explain why activist community archives came into existence in the first place. Even so, as Fiona Cosson suggests, outward appearances are not necessarily an accurate indicator of an organization's values or potential for activism:

Local history society archives are in fact brimming with their own particular politics, depending on their collectors and curators, the community they serve, the researchers who utilize them, the funding (if any) they receive, and the meanings attached or understandings derived from the archive material or historical outputs that are created from them. As such, local historical practice is *in itself* a political act, and does not have to fall into the binary of 'hegemony' or 'resistance' to be considered as such.¹⁰

The BVHS is neither completely devoid of political undercurrents that may support

¹⁰ Cosson, "The Small Politics of Everyday Life," 48.

liberatory aims of the social movements rooted in 1960s protest culture, nor is its membership and participation categorically exclusive based on anything other than location. Rather, by the time of its founding in 1979, any threat to Bay View residents' history was not related to any identification that neighborhood residency conferred. Similarly, the lack of any inherent systemic threat to group identity is indicated by the fact that the BVHS was organized as a public non-profit with an open membership policy, even if existing attitudes, structures, and demographic realities made it less than inclusive and welcoming to those outside of the white middle-class majority. In contrast, some community archives seek to limit outside influence or uninvited access as a means to protect the group memory and identity that their collections, commemorations, and activities help to define and support.¹¹ Perhaps that point of identity—identity attached to a place and an established historical legacy versus identity born of marginalization, misrepresentation, and resistance—provides the most important distinction between organizations like the BVHS and what we understand as community archives in the current context. Other characteristics of small, locally focused cultural heritage institutions like financial precarity, concentrated involvement, idiosyncratic collecting, amateurism, and reliance on volunteers are more universal and appear to transcend any identity distinctions.

The timing of the BVHS's creation follows overarching trends influencing the cultural sector throughout the United States. The passage of the National Historic Preservation Act in 1966, the Bicentennial celebration in 1976, and the pop culture phenomenon of television shows like *Roots* prompted an explosion of interest in genealogy, family history, historic preservation,

¹¹ For example, this frequently emerges in discussions about native and indigenous community archives, whether operated independently or in conjunction with other institutions. See, Kay Mathiesen, "A Defense of Native Americans Rights over Their Traditional Cultural Expressions," *American Archivist* 75, no. 2 (2012): 465, 477-479.

and other aspects of history on the small local scale.¹² This renewed local focus had origins in New Deal-era historiography and had been building in the academy since the 1950s with development of identity-based social movements and their emphasis on the history of specific ethnic and cultural groups that were often marginalized and ignored in previous historical narratives, especially the grand narratives that dominated history education and popular culture.¹³ The last decades of the twentieth century also marked centennial and sesquicentennial milestones for many states, municipalities, and other collective bodies located across the United States. Historical legacy and memory were certainly at the forefront of public celebration and reflection, whether this was inspired by patriotism, nostalgia, criticism, or as a response to the uncertainty wrought by rapid social change in the post-World War II era.¹⁴

The founding of the BVHS coincides with other attempts to highlight the nexus of immigration and labor as the neighborhood's defining legacy; among the BVHS's earliest activities was the designation of a memorial marker for the Bay View Tragedy and the initiation of an annual commemoration event in partnership with the Wisconsin Labor History Society. It is likely that these efforts were also a reaction (consciously or not) to flagging union membership and influence through the 1970s, and the commemoration's continuation in the next decade stands in counterpoint to the decline of organized labor in the face of deindustrialization, Reaganism, and other global economic trends.¹⁵ As one of the city's industrial centers and

¹² David A. Gerber, "Local and Community History: Some Cautionary Remarks on an Idea Whose Time Has Returned," *The History Teacher* 13, no. 1 (1979): 7-30.; Tammy S. Gordon, *The Spirit of 1776: Commerce, Community, and the Politics of Commemoration* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2013); Max Page and Marla R. Miller. "Introduction." In *Bending the Future: Fifty Ideas for the Next Fifty Years of Historic Preservation in the United States*, eds. Max Page and Marla R. Miller (Amherst and Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2016), 11.

¹³ Kelland, "Clio's Foot Soldiers," 1-2.

¹⁴ Gordon, *The Spirit of 1776*, 3-4.

¹⁵ Gurda, *The Making of Milwaukee*, 379.

working class hubs, the Bay View neighborhood was susceptible to these trends, going through cycles of decline and renewal up through the current period, which is mostly characterized by solidly middle class residency if not creeping gentrification.¹⁶

These historical factors make the neighborhood something of an outlier in the city of Milwaukee, which is a rigidly segregated majority-minority municipality.¹⁷ The current demographics of Bay View more closely resemble a metro-area suburb (i.e., predominantly white and comparatively well-off), but it does not necessarily feel as exclusive or restrictive as other neighborhoods in the city, possibly due to the vintage character of the built environment and the accessibility of desirable natural features, and perhaps as a reflection of the neighborhood's tradition of assertive (if not always progressive) independence.¹⁸ In many ways, contemporary life in Bay View may signify the open and egalitarian spirit of earlier days—or at least how this has been idealized—even if the reality reflects and contributes to traditional patterns of tension along class, race, and ethnic lines characteristic of Milwaukee in general.¹⁹

As mentioned in previous chapters, many Bay View residents perceived a distinct change in the neighborhood that accompanied busing and open enrollment in the public school system, which began in the 1970s.²⁰ The conventional wisdom is that this has resulted in three main concurrent phenomena: couples or individuals who live in Bay View in their early years then

¹⁶ Alan Mallach, *Gentrification and Neighborhood Decline in a Legacy City: Looking at Milwaukee 2000-2012* (Flint, MI: Center for Community Progress, 2015). <https://www.communityprogress.net>.

¹⁷ Greg J. Carman, "Wall of Exclusion: The Persistence of Residential Racial Segregation in Metropolitan Milwaukee," doctoral dissertation, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 2010; Niles Niemuth, "Urban Renewal and the Development of Milwaukee's African American Community: 1960-1980," master's thesis, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 2014.

¹⁸ Gurda, *Bay View, Wis.*, 54-55; William C. Mona, "An Analysis of Historic Preservation and Planning Policy in Milwaukee, 1964-1994," doctoral dissertation, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 1995.

¹⁹ Niemuth, "Urban Renewal and the Development of Milwaukee's African American Community: 1960-1980."

²⁰ Jack Dougherty, *More Than One Struggle: The Evolution of Black School Reform in Milwaukee*, (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 2004).

relocate elsewhere when they have children; families who live in Bay View but send their children to public or private schools elsewhere; and families who send their children to Bay View schools from other (read: Black and Brown) neighborhoods throughout the city.

Sometimes residents have associated this change with a decline in the quality of life in Bay View and the erosion of personal and historical identification with the neighborhood that resident institutions like schools have traditionally supported.²¹ In many ways, this sense of loss and change informs the work of the BVHS, even as it reaches out to new potential members, widens its leadership recruitment efforts, and seeks to engage diverse audiences. The certainty of change also gives the memory keeping function of the organization a sense of urgency to capture what might remain of the old neighborhood before it becomes unrecognizable in subsequent phases of development. The people who founded the BVHS and those who have kept it going over the years often have deep roots in the neighborhood and strive to honor the past through their personal memories or other affective influences and intellectual pursuits.

The motivation for this activity is often related to members' advanced life stage as well; the volunteers and participants at BVHS tend to be older (at or near retirement age) and with ample time and resources to follow their interests. Control by affluent and well-established volunteers has been a characteristic of American local historical societies since they first emerged in the late eighteenth century. Often the motivations reflect local notables' efforts to conserve or re-assert some kind of status quo in their immediate area, and presumably this plays into the founding and continued operation of the BVHS at some level. But there is a radical political aspect to the BVHS, especially with the emphasis on the legacy of labor struggles and immigration, even if this rings hollow in light of other social and demographic realities—which

²¹ Gurda, *Bay View, Wis.*, 87-89.

were certainly apparent at the BVHS's founding—within the city, the neighborhood, and the organization. As with other historical societies and cultural heritage institutions, the BVHS is a product and reflection of the immediate and overarching social forces shaping its community.²²

Historical Societies' Significance

Since they first emerged in the late colonial period, American historical societies have been created in a variety of conditions and due to a range of factors that encompass local pride, nationalistic fervor, the preservation of material culture, the celebration of stories, the exploration of identity, and the fear of forgetting. Local historical societies, in particular, are tied to the real or perceived importance of a place, not just in a larger historical or cultural sense, but in how individuals and families relate to the everyday world around them. Any number of factors affect the operations and development of historical societies, although the continuous threads of financial precarity and purposeful or accidental limits to their public appeal are especially consequential for small, local organizations. Like other aspects of the society and culture that creates and sustains them, historical societies are increasingly open and inclusive, and not beholden to traditional forms of organization and expression. Historical societies have clearly played a significant role in the communities they serve, which extends out to a wider popular and scholarly understanding of history, memory, and identity, but there is extraordinarily little study of what this looks like at the institutional or community level.

Memory and history are essential for both collective and individual identity. Historians Conal Furl and Michael J. Salevouris note that without this “society would be as rootless and

²² Franco, “Personal Connections to History,” 27. Franco advocates for studying historical societies, writing that they “have their own distinctive history as part of American cultural and intellectual history. Matching broad historical trends with the founding dates of various organizations reveals interesting patterns and shows how closely historical societies mirror the cultural changes around them.”

adrift as an individual with amnesia... individually and collectively *what we are* is the product of *what we have been*.”²³ In many ways, a neighborhood’s cultural memory takes on a life of its own, which enables it to influence and be influenced by the community; but in the long run, the more durable narratives emanating from that memory remain, because a neighborhood’s residency patterns and cultural composition are always changing. Local cultural memory may absorb and incorporate individual pieces of new narratives from the people who live there and then eventually move on, but major threads remain much longer because of institutions like the BVHS. In addition to its built environment, natural amenities, location, and other physical characteristics, what makes a neighborhood livable and desirable are the stories it has to tell. Bay View’s history is essential to local storytelling and the BVHS is a prime physical and intellectual embodiment of the institutional memory required to tell those stories.

Using history to understand those who capture history helps keep such institutional memory from erasure. This dissertation’s focus on its particular subject area builds on, expands, and complements previous comparable research in the LIS discipline. As mentioned in the introduction, historical research—especially that which might be included under the broad rubric of library history—has been limited in the LIS knowledge domain in recent decades, but not completely absent. In reviewing recent library history output across the LIS scholarly landscape, the methodological and subject foci exhibit notable variation. For example, there are several studies detailing small local history organizations, archives, and libraries and certain issues they surface around community identity, meaning-making, racial justice, and sustainability.²⁴ Other

²³ Furl and Salevouris, *The Methods and Skills of History*, 5 (Emphasis in original).

²⁴ See: Ronald E. Bergquist, “‘It Could Have Been Bigger, But Its Residents Like It As Is’: Small Town Libraries in Moore County, North Carolina,” doctoral dissertation, University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill, 2006; Caileigh Morrison, “My Canadian Story: Multiculturalism and Meaning-Making in Local Archives,” master’s thesis, Trent University, 2017.

relevant studies covering similar themes to this dissertation reside mostly outside of LIS but within related disciplines like art history, education, public history, and museum studies.²⁵ More recent work employs microhistory as the study's main or supplementary research methodology, while others examine specific cultural heritage institutions within a community.²⁶

Four main research questions guided this study: What conditions and factors led to the creation of the BVHS? What factors influenced the BVHS's subsequent operations and development? What characterized the BVHS's relationships and interactions within its community and how did this evolve over time? How has the BVHS understood its role within the community it represents? In summary, the general upswing in interest and the expansion of history-based initiatives created a conducive atmosphere for the emergence of new institutions, but an equally important factor for the BVHS was the community-based focus on lived experience and shared history in the Bay View neighborhood. The BVHS's operations were continually informed by interactions and relationships within and outside of the neighborhood, which helped the organization manage change as the world changed around it. Financial and logistic factors played a role in its development, but even from the early days this did not stop the BVHS from assuming a position of authority on the neighborhood's history through direct engagement with its people and institutions. But why does the case of the BVHS matter beyond this study or those immediately involved or familiar with its operations?

²⁵ See: Grant Rommel, "Examining the Small History Museum's Impact on Place Identity," master's thesis, University of Washington, 2020; Hope J. Shannon, "Mobilizing the Past: Local History and Community Action in Modern Metropolitan Chicago," doctoral dissertation, Loyola University Chicago, 2020.

²⁶ Anne Marie Lindsay, "Redefining America's Eighteenth-Century Heritage Sites," doctoral dissertation, University of California-Riverside, 2010; Rose Delia Soza War Soldier, "'To Take Positive and Effective Action': Rupert Costo and the California Based American Indian Historical Society," doctoral dissertation, Arizona State University, 2013; Jessica Swigger, "'History is Bunk': Historical Memories at Henry Ford's Greenfield Village," doctoral dissertation, University of Texas at Austin, 2008.

The BVHS example demonstrates that historical societies can provide a wealth of opportunities for greater historical understanding of, within, and across communities. They document locations, people, institutions, and what happened over time through collecting existing records, artifacts, and information and in the active creation of new documentary resources that help fill gaps in the associated historical record. Location-based historical societies often focus preservation efforts on the built and natural environment, if not necessarily to save everything, then to at least record and understand how living conditions change and help manage the inevitable loss that occurs in all communities. Historical societies often emphasize community-building for greater connection, pride, and identity, which in their best forms make room for similarities, differences, and the possibility that disparate viewpoints might find common ground. Often these organizations fill many roles in an area's civic and institutional landscape and perform multiple functions to meet unmet needs and promote desirable outcomes for their community. This may include non-history or preservation related functions like information provision, promoting social capital as "third" spaces, and supporting economic development, citizen engagement, and sustainable growth.

For organizations like the BVHS, authority is built through the public affirmation and acknowledgement of what history is important to the community. This is why both commemoration and preservation—which are very much related—are often enacted in public and the fruits of these efforts are continually publicized. An institution like the BVHS gains authority over time through repetition and consistency, but this authority gradually becomes more dispersed and shared, moving from a hegemonic process of assumption to a dialogic process of co-creation. Yet it seems that an institutional association or endorsement remains a necessary component of building authority; indeed, the processes of historical commemoration

and preservation could be read as part of a larger system of civic ritual that incorporates public ceremony or celebration backed by an institutional chain that frequently ends with some type of official governmental body. Two examples from the BVHS that spring to mind are its landmarking program, which is modeled after city, county, and national preservation programs, and the annual Bay View Tragedy event, which the Wisconsin State Legislature is currently considering for official statewide observance status.²⁷

It is apparent that Bay View's sense of cultural uniqueness within Milwaukee is based largely on its history—as a company town, as a one-time independent polity, as a home to various waves of immigrant groups, and as a symbol of the labor movement that the community still embraces. In addition to its natural and built features, which allowed the neighborhood to develop in relative isolation, Bay View's uniqueness has long been a point of pride for its residents and deemed worthy of celebration. But perhaps more consequentially, geography is destiny; one's specific location is among the most important components of one's identity and knowledge of the world. Neighborhoods in particular are delineated at the cognitive and ontological levels at an early age—the physical spaces, the affective characteristics of the environment, the people one is surrounded by, and the landmarks that constitute one's world and form the basis of subsequent memories of the past. I believe this is true for most people, but especially so for people in urban neighborhoods.

However, organizing around history at the neighborhood level may not always be feasible, simply because often the borders or what constitutes a neighborhood are unclear and thus not subject to universal consensus, even within a community. Also, neighborhoods change over time, sometimes drastically, due to factors outside the control of those residing there. Since

²⁷ Wisconsin State Legislature, “2023 Assembly Joint Resolution 35,” April 28, 2023, <https://docs.legis.wisconsin.gov/2023/related/proposals/ajr35>.

almost no neighborhoods have any official ability to create or support public facing institutions, and since the political power of any one neighborhood is usually limited as part of a larger polity, it is not always easy to route resources in a way that may provide for historical and cultural preservation, which are often considered ancillary to other needs. For many people it is not very appealing to take financial and administrative responsibility for what is, essentially, a community service provided without remuneration or some other incentive that makes such an enterprise sustainable. At the neighborhood level the number of people who might be so inclined to invest significantly of their time, money, and energy is limited. Yet, neighborhood identification clearly matters because whether it is an objectively good or a bad place to live, it is somewhere that one can still feel at home in, especially if one has the community ties that naturally accompany sharing public and private space with others over time. It is no surprise, then, that an organization like the BVHS emerged in Bay View as its own distinctive manifestation of the community's historical consciousness.

Limitations and Caveats

There are several imitations to the history presented in this dissertation, which, as mentioned in the introduction, was intended to be both exploratory and explanatory. Since the data gathering and analysis focused on a single subject (the BVHS), any findings and insights generated do not necessarily meet empirical standards for external generalizability and/or transferability, even if the BVHS case exhibits characteristics and illuminates phenomenon commonly found across small local historical societies in other settings. Methodologically, the study utilizes strategies from microhistory, which is based on interpreting the past in small units and relies on drawing conclusions from documentary evidence to put together a coherent and convincing historical narrative about those events. Given the subjective nature of this process, it

is impossible to determine how another researcher's work would compare if they examined the same subject, reviewed the same archival resources and secondary literature, and employed similar analytical strategies.

Outside of the ideas of historical consciousness and historical enterprise, this dissertation did not use any overarching theoretical or conceptual framing—much in line with certain strands of the microhistory methodology—and doing so certainly would have produced a very different account than what is presented. It is entirely up to the reader to determine whether a compelling and coherent account has been achieved, and admittedly researchers inclined to replicate the process in another setting likely would not benefit greatly from my example. Additionally, the data and evidence used throughout the dissertation is primarily based on what I could extract from archival collections, the contents of which can be unreliable, incomplete, difficult to comprehend, and devoid of crucial context. Putting together a substantive account relied on narrative and thematic analysis of a limited range of records to discern meaning and draw conclusions, which frequently leads to dead ends and necessitates the occasional qualification in the text when relevant data cannot be found. Writing history at the small scale mostly means drawing evidence from a small pool and comes with the risk of the end product having limited resonance because of the targeted focus.

I was fortunate to have extensive access to the BVHS's facility and organizational records, despite some of the restrictions that emerged with the COVID-19 pandemic while I was conducting research. My professional background, previous experience with historical societies, and larger research interest in local and regional history initially motivated my consideration of BVHS as the study subject. But after becoming acquainted with the BVHS through volunteer work and living in the Bay View neighborhood, I also recognized the rare opportunity to study

an organization that offered a such wealth of resources. Several of these collections were not fully processed or readily available to the public, and I hope this study helps inform future uses of the BVHS's resources, both internally and externally. I chose the BVHS as opposed to another organization or multiple organizations because my access converged with my interests in a way I had not expected; the fact that I held the BVHS in high personal regard made it an easy decision. That said, though I approached the subject as objectively as possible and strived to present an honest, accurate, and source-based history of the BVHS, I acknowledge the biases I brought to the project. I also acknowledge such an opportunity likely would not be afforded to researchers in a less privileged position vis-à-vis their subject.

Contribution and Future Research

This study adds to and expands the body of knowledge in Library History as a subfield of Library and Information Studies, providing an example of what Alistair Black identified as “a knock-on effect of giving further boosts to histories of the antecedents of the digital information revolution,” resulting from and overall increase in multidisciplinary research produced across the information sciences and beyond.²⁸ Similarly, this study responds to and supplements recent research in the Archival Studies domain related to community archives, identity, social justice, and memory-keeping, as well as perennial topics like collection management, leadership recruitment, volunteer coordination, and operating within limited means. It also contributes another small facet to the large body of scholarship on Milwaukee's cultural history, particularly that on local collections, historic landmarks, and homegrown institutions. Finally, the

²⁸ Alistair Black, “Library History and the Information Sciences: Past and Future,” *CILIP Library and Information History Group Newsletter* 4, no. 36 (2016): 10.

dissertation provides an institutional history for the BVHS that can be used in whatever ways they see fit.

It is unclear if such a study can have any substantial impact on cultural practices and policies at a meaningful level within or beyond the BVHS, but hopefully it offers a few takeaways, models, or lessons that may inform local history agencies more generally. This dissertation is the first time the many disparate elements of BVHS's organizational story has been pulled into a single work, so at the very least it offers a source of institutional knowledge and an opportunity for reflection on the organization's place in a larger ecosystem of history and cultural heritage. Such reflections may well prompt action on the part of the BVHS leadership in areas such as community engagement, membership relations, or operational procedures, but it is difficult to guess what outcomes they may derive from it. For the BVHS and other similar organizations, I hope that the study demonstrates the value of history in small, local contexts and that as community organizations *their* stories matter and are part of the history that they work so hard to capture.

The global network of historical societies offers a nearly endless supply of potential cases for general research into local history and cultural heritage institutions and their community roles and responsibilities. One possible area of further investigation is the impact of large public commemorations and governmental policy on historical awareness and institutional development, especially for organizations created after the U.S. Bicentennial era in the mid-1970s. There also appears to be many opportunities for applied research in bridging the various domains of the historical enterprise to facilitate greater access to and understanding of historical resources—a process that can make good use of small and local organizations as partners. Furthermore, although there are several instances in the dissertation that indicate friction or

conflict within the BVHS and with external partners, it is mostly a story of success and progress, which leaves out possible critical voices or alternate explanations that were not sufficiently documented or uncovered. As satisfying as it might be to contemplate why some organizations are successful, it is equally valuable to learn why other organizations fail.

With another national milestone on the horizon in 2026—amidst an ongoing national debate over whose history matters, how history should be presented, and what that history means—historical consciousness is likely to be at the forefront of public conversation as the various arms of the historical enterprise find a way forward in the post-pandemic world. The individuals, groups, and communities who safeguard local history have an opportunity to assert their relevance in a variety of ways to a hungry public looking for greater connection within their communities. Similarly, changing conceptions of historical understanding and evidence offer opportunities for multidisciplinary analysis of the vast network of local institutions that have for centuries provided the basis for that historical understanding and evidence. Ray Bethke wrote that in such pursuit of the past, “we must not lose sight of the fact that we ourselves are immersed in the flow of events which is history in the making,” and that it is through the laborious and thankless work that goes on the local level that those in the future might discover “what happened while we were here.”²⁹ Organizations like the BVHS merit due consideration because when a community is faced with the daunting task of confronting its history, the people who make up these institutions are usually the first to ask “What can we do about it?”

²⁹ Ray Bethke, “A Message From Your President,” *Bay View Historian*, December 1987, 4.

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Appendix A: Milwaukee County History Agencies

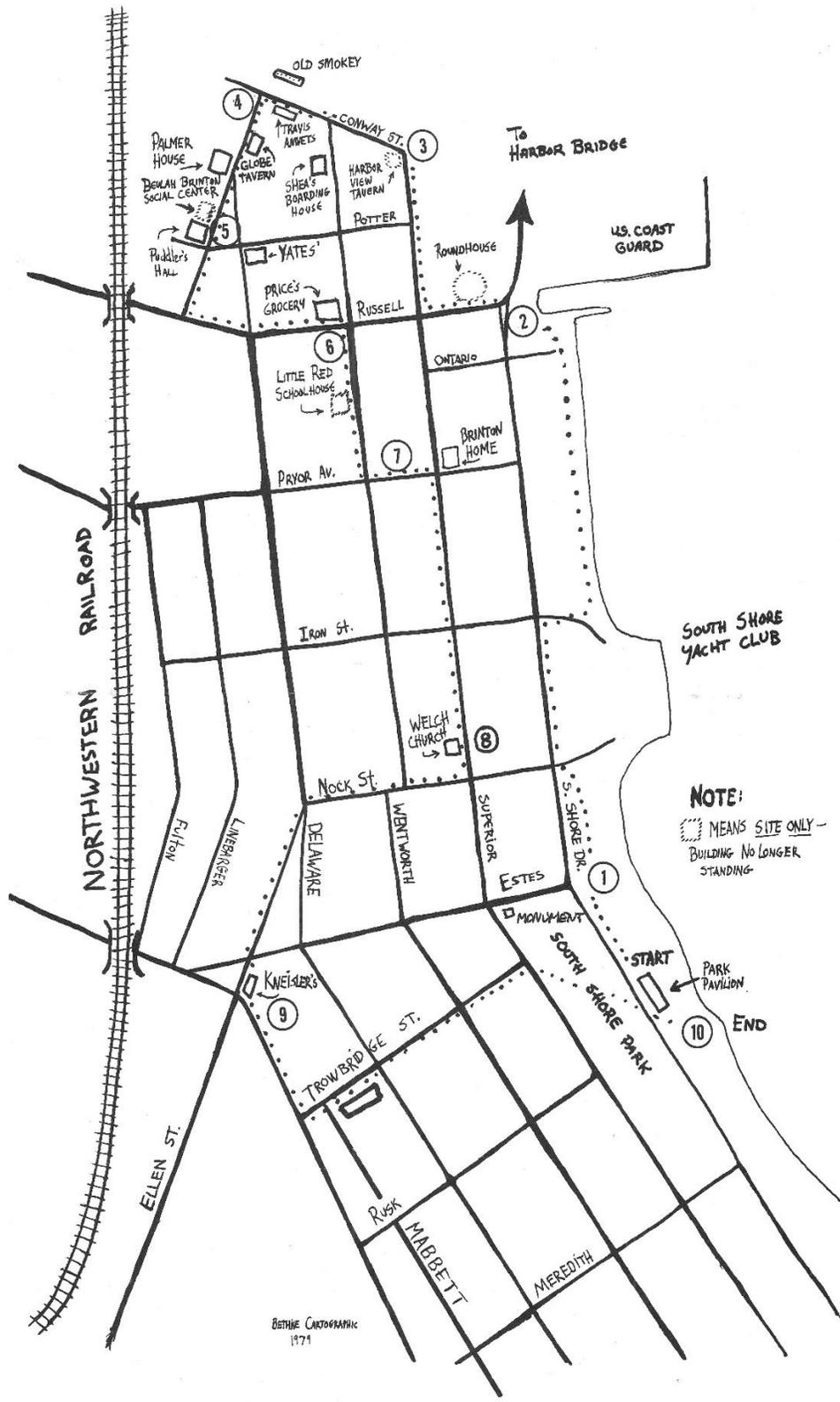
| <u>Location</u> | <u>Organization Name</u> | <u>Year Founded</u> | <u>Mission/Vision Statement</u> | <u>Purview</u> |
|------------------------------|-------------------------------|---------------------|---|--|
| Bay View (City of Milwaukee) | Bay View Historical Society | 1979 | Bay View Historical Society encourages a sense of community by conserving, celebrating and sharing Bay View's rich heritage. Bay View Historical Society will serve as a portal to, and archive for, celebrating Bay View's history and promise for the future. | Milwaukee neighborhoods of Bay View and Fernwood |
| Village of Brown Deer | Brown Deer Historical Society | 1971 | The Brown Deer Historical Society was organized on November 23, 1971. It became a nonprofit incorporated society on November 3, 1972. Membership in the Society is open to men and women and is tax deductible. The Society depends upon memberships and contributions to carry on its restoration, publication, education, and museum activities. Financial contributions, donations of services, and donations of local historical artifacts are greatly appreciated. | Village of Brown Deer |
| City of Cudahy | Cudahy Historical Society | 1972 | The Purposes of this organization are exclusively educational and shall be to preserve, advance, and disseminate knowledge of the history of Cudahy Wisconsin. | City of Cudahy |
| City of Franklin | Franklin Historical Society | 1970 | The mission of the Franklin Historical Society is to seek to preserve and foster appreciation of local history and to maintain living museums for educational and community enrichment. | City of Franklin; former St. Martins, Harrisburg, Painesville, and Oakwood settlements |
| Village of Greendale | Greendale Historical Society | 1976 | It is the mission of the Greendale Historical Society to preserve and promote the buildings, landmarks, and artifacts that illustrate the history of Greendale, Wisconsin; to increase awareness, understanding and appreciation of the Village's founding, growth and designation as a National Historic Landmark; and to strengthen the current and future historic character of the Village. | Village of Greendale |

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|-------------------------|---|------|---|--|
| City of Greenfield | Greenfield Historical Society | 1966 | Our purposes are to collect and preserve library materials, artifacts, manuscripts, and photographs, maintain historic buildings, and conduct educational programs pertaining to the history of Greenfield, Wisconsin in Milwaukee County. | City of Greenfield |
| Village of Hales Corner | Hales Corner Historical Society | 1974 | The Hales Corners Historical Society consists of volunteers dedicated to preserving the rich heritage of Hales Corners and sharing what they learn with the community. | Village of Hales Corner |
| City of Milwaukee | Historic Milwaukee, Inc. | 1974 | Historic Milwaukee, Inc. (HMI) is dedicated to increasing awareness of and commitment to Milwaukee's architecture, history, and the built environment. | Various Milwaukee neighborhoods, but started out in Walker's Point |
| City of Milwaukee | Milwaukee Fire Department Museum and Historical Society | 1981 | The Society is dedicated to preserving the rich history, heritage and traditions of the Milwaukee Fire Department. Our facility enables us to be accessible to the public, display our collection of memorabilia and vintage fire apparatus and to conduct educational and historical research activities. https://city.milwaukee.gov/MFD/Aboutmfd/MuseumHistoricalSociety | City of Milwaukee |
| Milwaukee County | Milwaukee County Historical Society | 1935 | The Milwaukee County Historical Society was founded in 1935 to collect, preserve and make available materials relating to the history of the Milwaukee community. Through a broad range of activities, the Historical Society seeks to recognize and preserve our local history. In promoting a greater appreciation of Milwaukee County's heritage, the Historical Society hopes to develop a better understanding of the issues and challenges facing Milwaukee County today. The Milwaukee County Historical Society is the place to learn about and to celebrate Milwaukee. | Milwaukee County |

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|---------------------------|-------------------------------------|-----------------------|---|--|
| City of Milwaukee | Milwaukee Police Historical Society | 1980s (1996 official) | The Milwaukee Police Historical Society is dedicated to preserving and retaining the Milwaukee Police Department’s long and unique history, as well as to honoring and remembering the many selfless officers who served the Department and the citizens of the City of Milwaukee. https://www.mphswi.org/ | City of Milwaukee |
| City of Oak Creek | Oak Creek Historical Society | 1964 | Our society is dedicated to the preservation of the history of Oak Creek, Wisconsin through the operation and maintenance of our pioneer village, the growth and upkeep of our collection of artifacts and historical records and through educational outreach to the community. | City of Oak Creek and Oak Creek Township |
| Village of Shorewood | Shorewood Historical Society | 1984 | The Shorewood Historical Society was formed in 1984 to preserve and promote the rich history of our Village. Our collection of documents, pictures and other artifacts inspires research and educational programming and encourages us to serve as the institutional memory of our Village. | Village of Shorewood |
| City of South Milwaukee | South Milwaukee Historical Society | 1972 | Our city’s motto is “Proud Past...Promising Future.” Our mission is to preserve that Proud Past. | City of South Milwaukee |
| City of St. Francis | St. Francis Historical Society | 1977 | Our mission is to collect, preserve, interpret and make accessible the history of St. Francis, Wisconsin. | City of St. Francis and Town of Lake |
| City of Wauwatosa | Wauwatosa Historical Society | 1977 | The Wauwatosa Historical Society supports, encourages, and provides historical education and preservation for the Wauwatosa community. | City of Wauwatosa |
| City of West Allis | West Allis Historical Society | 1972 | The West Allis Historical Society is a dedicated group of volunteers committed to preserving the City of West Allis’ history and educating and inspiring new generations to connect with and appreciate the past. | City of West Allis |
| Village of West Milwaukee | West Milwaukee Historical Society | 2018 | — | Village of West Milwaukee |

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|--------------------|--|------|--|--------------------------|
| Whitefish Bay | Whitefish Bay Historical Society | 1980 | The Whitefish Bay Historical Society is dedicated to researching and preserving the history of the Village of Whitefish Bay, Wisconsin. Our collection of documents, pictures and other artifacts inspires research and educational programming and encourages us to serve as the institutional memory of our Village. | Village of Whitefish Bay |
| City of Milwaukee | Wisconsin Black Historical Society and Museum | 1987 | The mission of the Wisconsin Black Historical Society/Museum is to document and preserve the historical heritage of African descent in Wisconsin. The Museum exhibits, collects and disseminates materials depicting this heritage. Serving as a resource center for all people interested in Wisconsin's rich African American heritage, the Museum's purpose is to encourage and promote family community and cultural activities. | State of Wisconsin |
| City of West Allis | Wisconsin Free Will Baptist Historical Society | — | — | State of Wisconsin |
| City of Milwaukee | Wisconsin Labor Historical Society | 1981 | The Wisconsin Labor History Society is a volunteer-based organization working to record and catalogue the historical labor events of Wisconsin. | State of Wisconsin |
| City of Milwaukee | Wisconsin Marine Historical Society | 1959 | Founded in 1959, the Wisconsin Marine Historical Society is a self-supported, nonprofit organization devoted to collecting, preserving, archiving and making materials related to Great Lakes marine history accessible to the public. The Society, with its 150 members, is affiliated with the Milwaukee Public Library. | State of Wisconsin |
| City of Milwaukee | Wisconsin Slovak Historical Society | 1980 | The Wisconsin Slovak Historical Society was founded in 1980 by a small group concerned that the descendants of Slovak immigrants were being assimilated so successfully that they risked losing all knowledge of their Slovak culture and traditions. | State of Wisconsin |

Appendix B: BVHS Walking Tour Map (1979)



Appendix C: BVHS Landmark Designation Timeline

BVHS Landmarks (1983-2022):

- **Beulah Brinton House**, 2590 S. Superior St. (1872-1873) May 15, 1983
- **Bay View United Methodist Church**, 2772 S. Kinnickinnic Ave. (1888) May 6, 1984
- **State Historical Society Marker for Bay View Rolling Mill**, NE corner of Superior and Russell, June 2, 1985
- **Puddler's Hall**, 2461 — 63 S. St. Clair St. (1873) May 3, 1986
- **St. Augustine School**, 2507 S. Graham St. (1888) August 28, 1988
- **St. Lucas Lutheran Church**, 2605 S. Kinnickinnic Ave. (1888) October 16, 1988
- **Estes House**, 2136 E. Estes St. (1880-81) June 4, 1989
- **Kneisler's White House Tavern**, 2900 S. Kinnickinnic Ave. (1891) October 6, 1991
- **Club Garibaldi**, 2501 S. Superior Street (1907) October 1, 1992
- **Trowbridge Street School**, 1943 E. Trowbridge St. (1893-94) May 20, 1994
- **Dover Street School**, 619 E. Dover St. (1889) December 5, 2001
- **Wisconsin Champion European Copper Beech Tree South Shore Park**, across from 2116 E. Estes St., September 24, 2005
- **Immaculate Conception Catholic Church**, 1023 E. Russell Ave. (1907) May 20, 2006
- **Keller Winery**, 324 E. Deer Place (1909) September 30, 2006
- **Groppi's Grocery**, 1441 E. Russell Ave. (1900) June 21, 2008
- **South Shore Park Pavilion**, 2900 S. Shore Dr. (1933) November 10, 2008
- **Delaware House**, 2499 S. Delaware Ave (ca. 1870) June 27, 2009
- **Eschweiler House**, 2445 S. Kinnickinnic Ave. (1903) June 27, 2010
- **Joseph Williams House**, 606 E. Homer St. (1865) June 18, 2011
- **T.H. Stemper Company**, 1125 Potter Ave. (1911) September 29, 2012
- **Pryor Avenue Well**, 1700 block E. Pryor Ave. (1882-82) 2013

- **Avalon Theater**, 2473 S. Kinnickinnic Ave. (1929) June 1, 2015
- **George W. Edmunds House**, 2550 South Shore Dr. (1873) June 18, 2016
- **Cream City Real Estate**, 3474 S. Pennsylvania Ave. (1923) June 3, 2017
- **Three Brother Restaurant**, 2414 S. St. Clair St. (1897) June 2, 2018
- **Lenox Street Home Bakery**, 2438 S. Lenox St. (1989) June 1, 2019
- **South Shore Yacht Club**, 2300 E. Nock St. (1913) June 11, 2022

Appendix D: BVHS Annual Membership Information, 1979-2015

This chart provides information on BVHS’s membership count and membership fee revenue by year from 1979-2015. The information is based on sums reported in internal sources like annual financial and membership statements, as well as external sources like newspaper articles. It also includes information on the membership fee structure over this time period. The figure with the single asterisk indicates the charter member count at the BVHS’s initial founding. Figures with a double asterisk indicating a count of 500 are based on approximate claims recorded in BVHS communications, especially the *Bay View Historian*, but may not represent the actual count. Information that could not be located is indicated accordingly and the purpose of the chart is to provide a general numerical impression of BVHS membership, not an exhaustive accounting.

| <u>Year</u> | <u>Member Count</u> | <u>Membership Fee Revenue</u> | <u>Membership Fee Structure</u> |
|-------------|---------------------|-------------------------------|---|
| 1979 | 165* | N/A | |
| 1980 | 269 | \$1345.00 | Individual \$5.00, Contributing \$15.00, Corporate \$30.00 |
| 1981 | 320 | \$1725.00 | |
| 1982 | 343 | \$1560.00 | Individual \$5.00, Couples \$10.00, Contributing \$15.00, Corporate \$50.00 |
| 1983 | 330 | \$1770.00 | |
| 1984 | 452 | \$2400.00 | |
| 1985 | 436 | \$2195.00 | |
| 1986 | 430 | \$2555.00 | |
| 1987 | 435 | \$2510.00 | |
| 1988 | 455 | \$2875.00 | |
| 1989 | 450 | \$1975.50 | |

| | | | |
|------|-------|-----------|--|
| 1990 | 524 | \$3365.00 | |
| 1991 | 555 | \$4235.00 | Individual \$5.00, Couples \$10.00, Contributing \$15.00, Corporate/Business \$30.00 |
| 1992 | 520 | \$3845.00 | |
| 1993 | 505 | \$3750.50 | |
| 1994 | 448 | \$3874.00 | |
| 1995 | 475 | N/A | |
| 1996 | 465 | \$3526.50 | |
| 1997 | 500 | \$3784.00 | |
| 1998 | 460 | \$3381.00 | |
| 1999 | 505 | N/A | |
| 2000 | 488 | \$3816.00 | |
| 2001 | 500** | \$3413.00 | Individual \$8.00, Couples, Household, or Contributing \$15.00, Corporate/Business \$50.00 |
| 2002 | 482 | \$3828.00 | |
| 2003 | 519 | \$3480.00 | |
| 2004 | 525 | N/A | |
| 2005 | 400 | N/A | |
| 2006 | 450 | N/A | Individual \$15.00, Seniors (Age 65+) \$12.00, Household \$25.00, Senior Household \$20.00, Non-Profit/Small Business \$25.00, Corporate \$50.00 |
| 2007 | 500** | \$5890.00 | |
| 2008 | 500** | N/A | |
| 2009 | 500** | \$5757.00 | |
| 2010 | 500** | N/A | Individual \$20.00, Seniors (Age 65+) \$17.00, Household \$30.00, Senior Household \$25.00, Non-Profit/Small Business \$30.00, Corporate \$55.00 |
| 2011 | N/A | \$3424.00 | |
| 2012 | N/A | \$4181.00 | |

| | | |
|------|-----|-----------|
| 2013 | N/A | \$3986.00 |
| 2014 | N/A | \$3157.00 |
| 2015 | N/A | \$2931.00 |