

**A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF THE HISTORY OF THE  
OBERLIN HISTORICAL AND IMPROVEMENT ORGANIZATION (O.H.I.O.)  
AND THE OBERLIN HERITAGE CENTER**

The Oberlin Historical and Improvement Organization was formed in 1964 through the merger of the Oberlin Village Improvement Society and the Oberlin Historical Society. The organization was renamed the Oberlin Heritage Center in 2005 though its legal name remains the Oberlin Historical and Improvement Organization. Today, the mission of the Oberlin Heritage Center is to *preserve and share Oberlin's unique heritage, and to make our community a better place to live, learn, work and visit.*

The Oberlin Village Improvement Society was founded in 1903 by Mrs. Adelia Field Johnston (1837-1910) who approached Charles Martin Hall (1863-1914) about improving the town so it would be a place "worthy of the college." The organization was typical of many "City Beautiful" type municipal improvement groups formed during the Progressive Era. The first meeting of the Oberlin VIS was held February 16th, 1903 in the Sunday school room of Second Church and was called to order by General Giles Shurtleff. The early projects of the Society included the placing of waste paper receptacles on street corners, stopping people from cutting across privately owned lawns, and promoting home gardening projects among school children. The Society also worked for better city sanitation, by implementing programs of regular garbage pickup, cleaning up properties deemed "untidy" or "unsightly" within the business district, and encouraging people to keep their farm animals from running loose in the streets. On top of all these projects stood the massive clean-up of the Plum Creek area, which if beautified would, according to the Society's minutes, "mark Oberlin the finest town in Northern Ohio."

The Society also sponsored various informative lectures by respected speakers, such as in February of 1907, when an entomologist gave "a very acceptable lecture on the enemies of trees", and in April of 1915 when the state fire marshall spoke on techniques of fire prevention. These lectures were often accompanied by stereopticon views and slides. At the annual meeting of 1907, Frances Jewett, a crusader for sanitation reform, spoke on garbage pickup and disposal in New York City and Oberlin. Later, in May of 1910, she lectured again, this time on "the house fly, the dangers arising from its presence, and how to get rid of it."

The Society also declared war on "immorality" within the town. "Corner loafers" in the business section, and men in general, were asked kindly to improve their moral conduct so that the children of Oberlin might be raised within the best possible environment. "Why should the youth of the village feast their minds on such livid and unwholesome advertising as is daily exhibited in front of the moving picture houses?" asked the 1915 annual report of the Society. The immorality of a particular few also was thought to offend and deter visitors to Oberlin.

On June 5th of 1913, the OVIS merged with the Oberlin Christian Union, the Mutual Benefit Association, and Associated Charities, to form the Oberlin Federation for Village Improvement and Social Betterment. The Federation split into two key departments: village improvement work, and charities & social work. The village improvement department carried on the work of the OVIS (it isn't clear if the merger destroyed the autonomy of the former OVIS), through efforts to improve upon the physical and moral beauty of the town. The charities and social work department worked to give aid to the poor, create recreation clubs, and offer classes in crafts. The Federation worked especially on building and maintaining a playground as well as on gardening projects. Furthermore, an attempt to improve the conditions of jails was made,

along with setting tramps/hobos to work to pay for the food and shelter they received from the town. (The minutes of the Federation claim "rock crushing is the best work at which to put tramps".)

In April of 1915, a long battle for beautiful lawns culminated in the "Death to the Dandelion" campaign. A special meeting was called at Sturges Hall, at which 150 townspeople declared war on "the yellow peril" of dandelion infestations. Those people who thought of the dandelion as medicinally useful and beautiful were deemed "old-fashioned" and a campaign of extermination was wrought on the plant, which, as a newspaper of the day put it, "multiplies like post office candidates after a general election."

The Federation's last recorded minutes were in 1918. After the decline of the Federation, the former OVIS made a resurgence in February 1923. From this time until the O.H.I.O. merger in 1964, the OVIS focused its efforts on purchasing property along the Plum Creek, cleaning it up, and then turning the land over to the town. This was financed through numerous investments and through the "Community Chest Association". The clean-up ultimately aimed toward creating a park and public walkway along the creek. Attempts were made to stop oil pollution and littering in the creek, along with efforts for tree and shrub planting along the bed to counter the pollution. A proposal for a dam project was also suggested, but never fully carried out.

Around the same time that the OVIS was focusing on the Plum Creek project, another group was organizing to preserve the historical buildings and artifacts within Oberlin and Lorain County. The objective of this group, the Oberlin Historical Society (OHS), as stated in its constitution, was to "...collect suitable [and] available historical materials connected with... the history of Oberlin and Lorain County... and carefully preserve same. This shall include...historical relics, museum materials, copies of local county records, old church records, private papers, monographs, letters and genealogical information of Lorain County. The society also proposes to cooperate with the libraries of the county... [and] with other historical societies..." On June 30, 1960 an organizational meeting of the OHS was held at the home of Clifford Barden. Barden was a prominent Oberlin citizen who had discovered the frame of the first school house built in Oberlin, and had subsequently mounted a campaign to save it from demolition as it was in the path where the proposed new city hall was to be built. The preservation campaign was a success and the Schoolhouse was moved and restored. The effort won the OHS a preservation award in 1962 from the Cleveland Chapter of the American Institute of Architects.

In October of 1960, a meeting of the OHS was held at which the idea of moving the historic Monroe House was brought up, because of its presence on the site of the College's proposed new Conservatory of Music. It was decided that the project was worthwhile and necessary, but that \$10,500 would have to be raised in order to accomplish this. A massive community fund-raising scheme was carried out, and by May 1962 the house had been moved to its present site, in cooperation with Oberlin College. Following the death of Barden in 1961, after which Donald Love assumed the position of president, another campaign was set forth to preserve the Monroe House, which was in need of heating, plumbing, interior decorating, and various other repairs. In order to carry out this enormous project, funds again were solicited from many individuals and organizations, including the Village Improvement Society.

The connection between the OHS and the OVIS had begun in May of 1958, when Clifford Barden, a member of the Board of Trustees of the OVIS, proposed that the OVIS provide a site

on OVIS property for the preservation of the Little Red Schoolhouse that he and the Oberlin Historical Society were aiming to preserve. Over the next three years, the OVIS contributed \$700 to the OHS to aid in acquiring and moving the Monroe House to serve as a historical museum. This close relation between the groups ultimately led to the proposal of May 27th, 1963 that suggested a merger of the groups. The new organization would be declared voluntary and tax exempt, and capable of holding real-estate. The group would also work toward the creation of a replica of the "immortal woodshed" of the Hall aluminum discovery, and of a community/civic center to be possibly located at the "Locker Plant" on South Main Street. On May 25th, 1964 the final merger took place as the OVIS changed its name to the Oberlin Historical and Improvement Organization (O.H.I.O.) and incorporated the former OHS.

While the similarity of the groups' interests was probably the main reason for the merger, there were at least three other motives that contributed in some way. First, the merger was seen as beneficial to both groups in that a combined effort would provide better planning and management for the proposed Monroe House and "Immortal Woodshed" museums, the Schoolhouse, and the civic center. Furthermore, a merger would create a better basis for the solicitation of gifts and funds, since OHS was completely volunteer run, while the OVIS had been deemed a corporation. And finally, there were four key figures who were serving on both the OHS and the OVIS Board of Directors: Ira L. Porter, William P. Davis, Donald Love, and T.O. Murphy. The organization remains an unusual hybrid; there are not many towns that have an organization which still addresses both the historic and improvement aspects of a community.

Today, the Oberlin Heritage Center is a membership organization offering public programs on community history, civic improvement and community concerns. The organization owns and administers three historic sites:

James Monroe House (1866)  
 Little Red Schoolhouse (1836)  
 Jewett House (1884)

The Oberlin Heritage Center also owns a group home for developmentally disabled adults, run by the Lorain County Board of Mental Retardation which is located at 89 South Professor Street. The Oberlin Community Center was also formerly under the ownership of O.H.I.O. until it was demolished in January 1997. The property, which continues to be owned by the Oberlin Heritage Center, is now green space with frontage along South Main Street.

The Oberlin Heritage Center is governed by a volunteer Board of Trustees (comprised of no more than 18 members). It is not affiliated with Oberlin College although college faculty, staff and students have been involved through the years in a number of capacities (Board members, volunteers, student interns, etc.).

The organization was given a \$200,000 bequest by the late Frederick B. Artz in the mid-1980s. Income from a trust fund set up by this bequest provides operating support, but is not sufficient to cover the growing maintenance needs, staff salaries, program costs, etc. A large grant from The Nord Family Foundation in 1992 allowed O.H.I.O. to hire its first (part-time) staff persons, transforming the organization from an all-volunteer group to a professionally led organization.

Memberships and other contributions are an increasingly important part of our operating budget. Today the Oberlin Heritage Center has about 725 individual, family and business memberships

(growing from just 12 memberships in 1993) and approximately 200 volunteers working on a variety of projects.

In 1996, O.H.I.O. launched its first Endowment Campaign to help increase the endowment to provide funds toward annual operating expenses. In 1997, the organization introduced its first end-of-the-year annual fund effort, which helped bridge the gap between operating expenses and income from membership fees, investment interest, fee-for-service projects and grants.

It is perhaps worth noting that the Oberlin Heritage Center/O.H.I.O. changed from a grant making organization in the 1980s to a grant-seeking organization in the 1990s. In the 1980s, O.H.I.O. gave out grants to various other organizations in the community. Today, with its own very active program and staff, the Oberlin Heritage Center's role has changed and it is seeking grants to support its programs and operations.

Since the Oberlin Heritage Center/O.H.I.O. was formed, some of its accomplishments have included:

- In 1966, O.H.I.O. acquired the Jewett House. Beginning in the 1960s the furnishings now in the houses were acquired by donations from people in the Oberlin community.
- In the 1960s (exact year?) the Walter Nord family gave O.H.I.O. the Oberlin Community Center Building on South Main Street, where O.H.I.O. provided space for the Oberlin Community Services Council, Oberlin Seniors, Inc. and the Firelands Association for the Visual Arts (FAVA). As mentioned previously, this building was demolished early in 1997.
- In 1965, O.H.I.O. began publishing a series of books on aspects of local history. Two were by Ernest Barret Chamberlain; three more were by Frank Chapman Van Cleef.
- In 1968 the Schoolhouse was moved from East Vine Street to land near the Monroe House.
- In 1972, O.H.I.O. acquired the Ferguson House at 89 South Professor Street to use as a group home for developmentally disabled adults.
- In the early 1980s, O.H.I.O. renovated the Monroe House (it sat vacant for nearly 20 years after its move from "College Place," before being restored as an Oberlin sesquicentennial project).
- 1984 - Artz Bequest (discussed previously)
- In 1986, O.H.I.O. provided financial support for the development of the Martin Luther King, Jr. Park on East Vine Street and for the exterior renovation of the Charles Martin Hall house on East College Street.
- In 1988, O.H.I.O. granted the Oberlin College Archives \$20,000 to establish the Frederick B. Artz Travel Grant program to aid visiting scholars to use the records at the College Archives.
- In 1989, The Nord Family Foundation gave O.H.I.O. the Burrell-King House at 315 East College Street, along with an endowment to support a portion of the costs of maintaining and preserving the house.
- In 1992, O.H.I.O. received a grant from The Nord Family Foundation to hire its first (part-time) staff person. The first person hired worked for the organization only a few months. The second and current person, Pat Murphy, began working as the part-time Administrator for O.H.I.O. in June 1993. Murphy is now the full-time executive director.
- In 1993, O.H.I.O. introduced regular tour hours for the first time in its history. (Previously the buildings were open only by appointment and during Commencement Weekend. Total number of visitors that year was about 1,300.) In 2008, the total number of visitors was more than 11,600!

- Also in 1993, O.H.I.O. began an active volunteer program.
- In 1994, the Jewett House was added to the regular tour program and O.H.I.O. offered its first docent orientation program.
- In 1997, O.H.I.O. coordinated the reconstruction of the bell tower atop the New Union Center for the Arts (Westervelt Hall).
- Also in 1997, major work began on the landscape plans of O.H.I.O. - the Little Red Schoolhouse was moved to a better position on the site, North-South and East-West stone and brick walkways were created, and the front lawn of the Monroe House was extended forward.
- O.H.I.O. opened in 1997 its first major exhibit, "Aluminum: The Oberlin Connection" at the Jewett House, which detailed the life of Charles Martin Hall and the rise of the aluminum industry, as well as a recreation of Hall's "Immortal Woodshed" (discussed earlier as one of the early intended projects of O.H.I.O.) and the lives of Frank Jewett (Hall's mentor) and his wife Sarah Frances Gulick Jewett.
- In 1997, O.H.I.O. published *Westwood: A Historical and Interpretive View of Oberlin's Cemetery*.
- In 1998, the O.H.I.O. Board of Trustees adopted a two-year strategic plan which included the renaming of the main complex as the Oberlin Heritage Center, owned and operated by the Oberlin Historical and Improvement Organization.
- As part of this same strategic plan, O.H.I.O. stepped up its Endowment Campaign effort to build its endowment to the \$1 million mark by offering Endowed Life Memberships. A challenge was offered from an anonymous donor to endow the Director's position through a \$500,000 gift if the Endowment Campaign goal was met by the end of the year 2000. (The goal actually was met by the end of 1999 – twelve months early!)
- A new for-profit subsidiary of O.H.I.O., called OHC Properties, Inc. was formed in 1998 to acquire and rehabilitate rental properties on the perimeter of the Oberlin Heritage Center.
- In 1998, O.H.I.O. published *My Oberlin History and Adventure Book* for school-aged visitors and teachers for pre-and-post visit educational activities.
- In 1999, O.H.I.O. became part of the Electronic Oberlin Group's local history web site (which can be visited on the Internet at [www.oberlin.edu/EOG](http://www.oberlin.edu/EOG).)
- O.H.I.O.'s executive director, Pat Murphy, received the Ohio Association of Historical Societies and Museums Individual Achievement Award at the OAHSM annual meeting in November 1999.
- The Oberlin Heritage Center/O.H.I.O. became part of the national Time Travelers' Network of historical organizations and historic sites that offer one another reciprocal admission discounts and other benefits.
- Construction was completed on new disabled access ways to the Little Red Schoolhouse in the spring of 2001, and to the Monroe House in the fall of 2001.
- O.H.I.O. launched its new website at [www.oberlinheritage.org](http://www.oberlinheritage.org) in the fall of 2001.
- The brick walkways were completed, with the last section extending out to West Vine Street, in summer 2002.
- In 2003, Downtown Oberlin became designated as a National Register Historic District (nomination prepared by O.H.I.O.)
- In 2003, the Oberlin Heritage Center/O.H.I.O. became part of the National Trust for Historic Preservation's Statewide and Local Partner Organization network
- The *Biking Tour of Historic Oberlin* received a History Outreach Award from the Ohio Association of Historical Societies and Museums (2003).

- In 2003, O.H.I.O. coordinated many major events in celebration of the State of Ohio's Bicentennial and its own Centennial, including a week-long Ohio Chautauqua sponsored by the Ohio Humanities Commission, *From Here: A Century of Voices from Ohio* oral history-based theatrical production and dedication of Ohio Historical Society markers at the Oberlin Heritage Center crossroads, Burrell-King House, and Jewett House.
- In December 2003 the National Endowment for the Humanities awarded a \$100,000 challenge grant to O.H.I.O. to build an Endowment for History Education.
- Designation of Oberlin as one of the National Trust for Historic Preservation's Dozen Distinctive Destinations for 2004
- Oberlin Heritage Center/O.H.I.O. received the "Preservation Hero" award from Downtown Ohio/Heritage Ohio (2004)
- Designation of the Oberlin Heritage Center as a part of the National Park Service's National Underground Railroad Network to Freedom program (2004)
- O.H.I.O.'s publication *Sarah Margru Kinson: The Two Worlds of an Amistad Captive* by Marly Merrill received a History Outreach Award from the Ohio Association of Historical Societies and Museums (2004)
- Publication of *Investing in Community: The History and Legacy of the Nord Family of Ohio* by Martha Pickrell (2004), a fee-for-service project commissioned by Eric and Evan Nord.
- Installation of Richard R. Hallock Memorial Flagpole and Garden west of Monroe House (2004)
- Installation of "Straus," a restored cast iron Victorian garden ornament north of Monroe House (2004)
- The Oberlin Heritage Center was one of 3 museums in Ohio to receive a Museums for America Grant from the Institute of Museum and Library Services (2004).
- The Oberlin Heritage Center received a History Outreach excellence award for *Investing in Community: The History and Legacy of the Nord Family of Ohio* and past president Cathe Radabaugh received an Individual Achievement Award at the Ohio Association of Historical Societies and Museums annual meeting (2005).
- The Oberlin Heritage Center was accredited by the American Association of Museums in December, 2005.
- In 2006 Executive Director, Pat Murphy, was named "Oberlinian of the Year" by the Oberlin News-Tribune.
- The organization introduced its new logo and new public identity as the Oberlin Heritage Center at the April 2006 annual meeting.
- In the spring of 2006, Executive Director Patricia Murphy spoke at the centennial meeting of the American Association of Museums in Boston on "Take This Job and Love It"
- In July 2006 the organization completed phase one of the Endowment for History Education campaign, raising \$400,000 to partly endow a new Museum Education and Tour Coordinator position.
- The Oberlin Heritage Center was selected to be part of the National Trust for Historic Preservation's *Partner Places* program (2006).
- In 2006 the Ohio Association of Historical Societies and Museums (OAHSM) Individual Achievement Award was presented to Pat and Dick Holsworth (Pat is a current staff member and a former Board President and Dick is an Honorary Trustee and active volunteer)
- In December 2006 the organization donated the Burrell-King House to the Oberlin Conservatory for use as the Community Music School.
- In 2006 the Oberlin Heritage Center reached 700 memberships from Oberlin, Lorain County, 26 states and 2 foreign countries.

- In June 2007, Elizabeth (Liz) Schulz joined the Oberlin Heritage Center staff as the new Museum Education and Tour Coordinator, her position funded in part by the Endowment Fund for History Education
- In 2007, staff members Mary Anne Cunningham (Assistant to the Director) and Prue Richards (Collections Assistant) received Individual Achievement Awards from the Ohio Association of Historical Societies and Museums (OAHSM).
- The Oberlin Heritage Center was pleased to be the recipient of a one million dollar grant from the Richard R. Hallock Foundation in April 2008. The grant is to be used as a permanent restricted endowment in support of the Oberlin Heritage Center executive director position.
- The History Outreach Excellence Award (2008) was given to the Oberlin Heritage Center's Black History Month series of community programs entitled, "*Black Indians: A Hidden Heritage.*"
- The Oberlin Heritage Center was among the first eleven recipients nationwide to be designated a *Preserve America Steward* by the White House and the U.S. Advisory Council on Historic Preservation (2009).
- The American Chemical Society's Division of the History of Chemistry awarded a Chemical Breakthrough Award to the Oberlin Heritage Center and Oberlin College in recognition of the work each has done to preserve and share Charles Martin Hall's discovery of an inexpensive process to produce aluminum and his principal patent for that process (2009).

Presidents of O.H.I.O./Oberlin Heritage Center have included:

1964-1967	Frank Chapman Van Cleef
1967-1969	John A. Cochrane
1969-1972	Raymond D. Campbell
1972-1985	Stephen Johnson, Jr.
1985-1990	Robert D. Jenkins
1990-1998	Marianne Cochrane
1998-2001	Pat Holsworth
2001-2003	Roberta Garcia
2003-2005	Cathe Radabaugh
2005-present	James W. White

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