

It is difficult to imagine the Little Traverse Historical Society Museum occupying any location other than the beautifully renovated C & O depot. However, the thriving historical center standing today was neither the first nor only intended museum location. In the spring of 1965, years before a functioning museum was preserving the history of the Petoskey area, historical society members first proposed their intention to open a museum that would provide residents and visitors alike with a comprehensive record of Petoskey's intriguing history. In the decade that followed, the Historical society worked tirelessly, materializing its goal of a museum.

Founded in 1965, the Little Traverse Historical Society began efforts immediately to fulfill the Northern Michigan area's need for a local history museum. President Harriet Kilborn, vice president Merton Carter, and secretary- treasurer Albert Schaller, in addition to board members Nancy Newton, Chester Crago, John Wooden, and Jack Finlayson focused their efforts initially on garnering support for the museum from their community. The same year the Little Traverse Historical society was founded, Perry-Davis Hotel owners, Mr. and Mrs. John R. Davis, generously donated their Hillcrest Motel property to the organization, intending to see it converted into the museum. Society members knew much creativity and work would be required to transform the motel property into their envisioned museum, but were eager to see their plan come to life. Meanwhile, Petoskey's community enthusiastically backed the historical society's intention of creating a site to preserve and showcase the heritage of the colorful area. However, after the motel was publicly presented as the site for the museum, not everyone was in favor, with many community members expressing mixed emotions.

In mid-1966, the community was essentially split with some in favor of the motel site as the potential museum, and some opposed with the latter expressing these negative sentiments at the annual historical society meeting held on May 11, 1966. At the historical society's gathering,

a public vote was held, and the side supporting the motel property, located on US 131 South in Petoskey, prevailed. Those who disagreed with the final decision did so in favor of other locations in the area they believed were better suited for the potential museum. Plans were established to construct a “village square type” setting at the current motel site, which was planned to consist of several different buildings, each “depicting a certain period or an aspect of life in the past” that would work together to craft a narrative of the area’s history.

The planned historic buildings, which were intended to be in a “Williamsburg Style” thought up by engineer and designer, John M. Wooden, were supported by the city council, who adopted a resolution in August of 1966 lauding efforts of the little Traverse Historical Society to raise \$75,000 to develop the museum. Robert Dean, headed the committee for the motel to museum project. President Harriet Kilborn, Robert Dean, and the rest of the executive staff worked immediately to begin, as board member Chester A. Crago put it, “the development of the old Hillcrest Motel property into a museum we can all be proud of.”

While the historical society’s fundraising committee, led by committee leader Dr. Robert E. Daniels, held fund drives to increase financial support for the motel’s conversion into a museum, an investigation into the old C. & O. Railroad Station, formerly the Pere Marquette Railroad, was conducted by the historical society. The organization hired a consultant, who publicly stated that the research was occurring on the depot as the history museum’s potential site. The intentions were meant to keep options open for the historical society, who listened to community members who requested other sites outside the motel be looked into. However, the study’s findings quickly squashed the depot’s potential as a historical museum as it was concluded that it would cost over \$80,000 to restore as a warehouse merely. The findings momentarily discouraged the society, but they quickly refocused their efforts towards the initial

steps in the development of the motel property, which resulted in a public sale of all furnishings and a vote to begin construction in the fall of 1966 the proposed museum.

In late 1966, the society asserted their goal was to convert specific units of the motel site into display rooms immediately with the hope of opening the museum early the following year. Although this ambitious attitude failed to be actualized in the following years as construction and advancements stalled, the society's determination was contagious and increased widespread enthusiastic support from the community. Donation drives were held, which allowed the people of Petoskey to aid the historical society to compile items of historical interest for future exhibits to provide the community with a detailed history of the area. A "host oven" used by priests who would haul them from village to village to bake the communion wafer; a book with the names by sections of all the Indian landowners by virtue of the treaty of 1855; early manuscripts and records, pre-1800 silver found in the county were all artifacts donated at this time that the historical society planned to utilize to show early development of the local area.

Finally, in 1969, after about two years of delays in reconstruction on the motel property, the historical society released public statements that included their preliminary plans for restoring the C. & O. depot into a museum. Spearheaded in October of 1969 by museum consultant Victor Hogg who saw the depot building as the "only good museum site," requests were made by the society to the city requesting they make available the depot for renovation. At City Council's regular meeting in early November 1969, the pros and cons of the proposal were discussed; eventually, the council approved the request, providing the historical society agrees to certain conditions. However, the organization quickly focuses on restoring the old depot, a National and Michigan Historic Site, to a museum. This change was after enough money was reportedly raised to start the construction of the motel building. Efforts were shifted

to the museum when the society decided to conduct meetings with Hogg to hear the sentiments of community members who wished to explore a new site for the museum.

To finance the reconstruction, the society decided to sell the Hillcrest motel donated four years prior. The overwhelming opinion in Petoskey was that the depot location was incredibly desirable. The historical connection and the ability to preserve the character and the feeling of the building and the area it represented fueled positive sentiments. In addition, many involved in the museum committee saw the site as authentic and appreciated its proximity to downtown. In the years following WWII, many historical buildings in the area that might have been suited for the museum were lost, which strongly backed the depot's preservation as it was the only suitable historical site for the museum.

President Harriet Kilborn asserted on behalf of the other historical society committee members that the goal is to construct a small museum built within their means while also being "exceptionally good." Most agreed with this statement and decided to back the depot as the intended location for the museum. Harriet Kilborn, executive director of the historical society, asserted on behalf of the other society committee members that the goal was to construct a small museum built within their means while still being "exceptionally good." The historical society came to terms with the lease agreement for establishing the old C & O depot into a historical museum.

The drafted lease called for a ten year contract with renewable options for \$1, paid to the city. The society would agree to provide the cost of the parking lot for eighteen cars and to restore the building within a period of one year. The matter had been discussed at previous sessions between the council and the society. When the contractual lease was agreed upon by and signed by both parties, work began immediately.

In May of 1970, architects, landscape designers, and curators met to discuss converting the depot building into a museum. Although reconstruction and the creation of exhibits took longer than expected to complete, at the annual society meeting in July of 1970, Victor Hogg reported to the society that by that time in 1971, there would be a “fine area museum in operation in the old depot.” The plan was to convert the building into four large exhibit areas that do not alter the Victorian beauty of the original building by enclosing the two-station platform canopies extending from the central portion of the building. In addition, they decided not to alter the basic lines of the old building regarding the outward appearance and ensured there would be a fireproof vault in the basement for rare books, paintings, and documents.

Victor Hogg stated the “historical railroad building ... is one of the most important still standing in this part of Michigan”. Construction on the depot was set to conclude in Spring of 1971 and was estimated to cost almost \$60,000, a price which would increase as reconstruction drew on in the years that followed. The historical society was able to undertake this cost thanks to the generous donations from the community through fund drives. In the fall of 1970, the museum planned to tell the story of “Indians, pioneers, passenger pigeons, and the early tourist era... along with bits about historical people who spoke from the depot balcony in the early days [in addition to] the story of the Petoskey Stone”. However, later that year, the society reported that the cost of reconstructing the museum rose considerably, and they required \$40,000 more to complete.

In the summer of 1970, while construction efforts drew on, the historical society agreed to underwrite the work of archeologists, headed by Dr. Charles Cleland on Crooked Lake in Ponshevaing. Excavation work, which discovered ancient locations of campsites, quarries, burial grounds, and portage areas was started in the hopes of unearthing artifacts that would

pertain to the intended historical museum. The dig was able to provide the society with information on the region called the “Traverse Corridor” and artifacts that were put on display in the annual meeting that summer.

At a progress report meeting on Tuesday, April 20, 1971, the historical society asserted with great enthusiasm that they were in the final construction phases of the new museum. Victor Hogg said at this meeting that there is a completed exhibit layout plan and that they are currently being constructed. The goal for the museum is to have an entrance lobby that will feature industrial exhibits, famous authors of the area, a sales counter, and other historical material from the region. In addition, the plan for the west wing will contain the works of the old town hall clock, a superb old melodian, and a Victorian room exhibit furnished in period pieces, with one section of the room set aside to show how a railroad ticket office looked at the turn of the century. Finally, in mid-April 1971, the board of trustees for the society commissioned a large mural painting by artist Dirk Gringhuis of East Lansing as a backdrop for the passenger pigeon exhibit. (It was near Petoskey that the last extensive nesting of the now-extinct bird took place in 1878).

By late August of 1971, renovations on the depot were reportedly finished, but few planned exhibits were done. The historical society held an open house to display the best and largest exhibition, which was completed. The world’s largest example of Indian beadwork, “the Last Supper” by Mary DeGuvara was displayed in the passenger pigeon mural. In October of that year, while still not fully opened to the public, a donation of a civil war manuscript was made by Petoskey native and civil war historian, Bruce Catton who visited the newly converted museum and expressed his favorable sentiments towards the converted C & O depot. The historical society also asserted that Pioneer C. F. Honkey’s story would be told through exhibits

at the museum. Including info about his personal experiences in the Civil war and his family tree. Items of interest were also donated by Ephram Shay, who was an early resident of Harbor Springs. Shay processed several old photos and important papers in his Harbor Springs home, which pertained to the mission of the historical society and were thus included in the museum's collection.

In the early months of 1973, the historical society stated they require an additional \$30,000 to complete the museum (fix the roof, pay debts, etc.). If acquired, they noted, they would have the ability to open their doors in the summer of that year. At that time, the garden club offered their expertise for the first time to design and maintain the landscaping of the renovated depot for the benefit of the historical society and community. On May 7, 1973, the museum opened an exhibit to the public daily from 1-5 pm and 6:30-9 pm; the exhibition was a youth art showcase. The annual Crooked Tree Arts Council photography contest and show exhibit was held in 1973 and returned for the second year in July of 1974.

At the beginning of 1974, while not yet open, the museum announced its plan for the contents of the exhibits. There would be a carrier pigeon mural, a painting by contemporary artist Norman Rockwell, the only published color photograph taken of a live passenger pigeon, as well as old lumbering pictures, books, maps, tools, log marks, and a miniature lumber camp operation. In addition, a Victorian display would occupy the west wing of the depot and serve as a permanent exhibit in the museum.

In late January of 1974, the Historical Society requested the city pick up their utility expenses. Their request was for the city of Petoskey to pay the electric, water, and sewer bills for the Historical Society museum. The historical society pointed out how the building is used as a meeting place for the society, the Crooked Tree Art Council, Antique club, and hopefully more

groups. The city agreed to their request, meaning they would need to pay the utility bills for three years. After an agreement was come to with the city, the society was able to channel its focus into creating its exhibits.

After a decade of planning and work, Petoskey's Little Traverse Historical Society officially opened its museum to the public on Thursday, August 1 1974. President Merton Carter announced to the community; "the museum would utilize more than 40 of their volunteers to lead the public through guided tours through the exhibits of the museum from 1 to 5 pm, Monday through Friday". Although Carter declared that the historical society was not yet financially able to hire a full-time curator, they had been able to spend the "... over \$100,000 to restore the old C. & O. railroad depot in Waterfront Park" that was now open and able to serve the community of Petoskey.

The functioning museum proudly displayed the Victorian Room exhibit, the temporary Ernest Hemingway display, and the Bruce Catton manuscripts. Other panels in the walk-through display area of the museum showed the extensive collection of antique Indian baskets, lumbering tools, old photographs, and early publications about Northern Michigan. The passenger pigeon exhibit was stated as completed for visitors who will be granted the unique opportunity to see a passenger pigeon, a recent gift to the Historical Society by Mr. and Mrs. T. C. Curtis. The passenger pigeon mural by artist Dirk Gringheus is to be a part of the exhibit as well. Although some exhibits and the library will not be open yet, Carter asserted that the public would enjoy what is on display, which they did, and still do to this day.