



Olympia Historical Society and Bigelow House Museum

2021 ANNUAL REPORT TO OLYMPIA CITY COUNCIL

OLYMPIA HISTORICAL SOCIETY-BIGELOW HOUSE MUSEUM (OHS-BHM)

January 2021

- I. Introduction to the OHS –BHM
 - A. By the 1980s after decades of love, care and stewardship by three generations of Bigelow family residency, it became increasingly clear that the future of the home’s presence and role in the community was uncertain. Third generation occupant of the house Daniel S. Bigelow and his wife Mary Ann, were aging and though active and intellectually sharp, found it difficult to maintain their Glass Avenue building and grounds. Recognizing the historical and architectural significance of the Bigelow family and the house, a circle of family friends, local historians, civic leaders, and historic preservationists, began conversations with the family with a vision that would preserve the house beyond the Bigelow’s lifetime. Thus, the **Bigelow House Preservation Association** was formed in 1992 dedicated to preservation of the Bigelow House and interpretation of local and regional history. In an innovative approach, Daniel and Mary Ann received a life estate in exchange for conveying the house & property to the Association.
 - B. The Association soon acquired a generous grant from the State of Washington to secure a life estate of the property from the Bigelow family and undertake needed repairs and restore lost or deteriorating architectural elements.
 - C. The **Olympia Historical Society** was founded in 2001 with the vision to collect and preserve Olympia area historical resources from family attic treasures to architectural gems, and to find ways to make that history accessible and available to the public.
 - D. In December 2013, the memberships of both organizations voted to merge and become the **Olympia Historical Society and Bigelow House Museum (OHS-BHM)** with a mission to preserve, protect, and promote the history and heritage of Olympia and of the Bigelow House.
 - E. We currently have 164 dues paying members, 12 Board members, and 14 active volunteers who serve as docents, help with gardening, and museum maintenance.
 - F. We acknowledge and *sincerely thank* Olympia Parks and Recreation staff who regularly mow, edge, clear, and fertilize the BHM lawn. In 2020 they also hauled away ivy that was removed to make way for the woodland garden (see II F. below) and cut back brush on property behind the museum.

- G. Creation in 2017 of a county historical journal on local history, the ***Thurston County Historical Journal***, involved the Olympia City Council from the outset. Council together with other heritage-based organizations (including the OHS-BHM) have joined to support the Journal's publication through coordination by Thurston County with the Olympia Tumwater Foundation, and has remained a vital contributor to its quarterly printing and distribution.

II. 2020 OHS-BHM activities and accomplishments

As a result of COVID 19 and as a measure to protect our visitors, members, and volunteers, OHS-BHM cancelled tours and events at the Bigelow House. Also cancelled was our popular Holiday Historic Home Tour, held annually each December. Despite the challenges posed by COVID, OHS-BHM proved resilient, creative, and resourceful. A few highlights of 2020 are:

- A. In autumn, OHS-BHM entered into a contract with the Thurston County Board of Commissioners to manage the distribution of the recently published Thurston County history book titled "Water, Woods, and Prairies." OHS-BHM provided 164 copies of the book to local heritage organizations and Tribes. In turn, these organizations (including OHS-BHM) marketed and sold copies of the book in their communities. This entirely volunteer coordinated effort resulted in the distribution of 463 copies of the book within the span of a month from mid-November to mid-December and brought welcome new income to local heritage organizations including OHS-BHM.
- B. 2020 marked the centennial of the passage of the 19th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution and Olympia and the Bigelow family played an important role in this nationwide celebration. OHS-BHM in conjunction with the League of Women Voters launched the observance with an event on February 15th (before pandemic restrictions) celebrating the 200th anniversary of the birth of Susan B. Anthony and the 100th anniversary of the founding of the National League of Women's Voters. Celebrants came in period dress and were feted with a program, refreshments, and special exhibit.

The Washington State Historical Society (WSHS) served as statewide coordinator for the centennial events and programs including the virtual Suffrage Special Whistle Stop Tour. The last "stop" on the virtual tour was recorded on the Bigelow House lawn and featured several prominent local leaders, including Olympia Mayor Cheryl Selby, who all spoke of the impact the 19th Amendment since 1920.

- C. In other national observances, OHS-BHM celebrated Black History Month in February 2020 with a special program at the Olympia Center co-sponsored with the Olympia Heritage Commission. An overflow crowd enjoyed the program that focused on Black History in Thurston County with special guest speaker Thelma Jackson.

- D. OHS-BHM is grateful to have received four grants to conduct much needed projects at the Bigelow House Museum, including 1) a \$10,000 grant from the Thurston County Heritage Grant program to install a new roof on the “shed” adjacent to the Bigelow House in addition to structural stabilization, 2) a \$1250 grant from the WA Trust for Historic Preservation for decorative architectural fascia on the front porch, 3) a \$10,000 grant from the Mary P. Dolciani Halloran Foundation to undertake interior restoration and interpretation work on the museum’s second floor, and 4) a \$3,000 grant from the Penelton & Elisabeth Carey Miller Foundation enabling a start on digitizing photographs in the society’s collections.
- E. OHS-BHM awarded \$2,000 from its Roger Easton History Grant program to David Fuller, history teacher at the Nova School, to aid students work to research, locate, and record “lost Olympia” places.
- F. Initiated work to establish a woodland garden located adjacent on the east to the Bigelow House. This effort is conceived as a four-season ornamental garden with a mix of nature and cultivated plants, both deciduous and evergreen. The garden is being realized with funding provided by the Dolciani Halloran Foundation.
- G. In the fall of 2020, OHS-BHM has been engaged with the Washington Military Department (WMD) and other interested parties regarding the future disposition of the Armory on Eastside Street. OHS-BHM has provided comments to WMD about the building’s historical and architectural significance as well as on mitigation measures for selling the property for unknown purposes.

In addition to the special projects listed above, in 2020 OHS-BHM volunteers and partners continued to support and sustain the following ongoing programs and outreach work:

- H. Volunteer Archivist Sue Goff dedicates her time to curating an ever-growing collection of donated objects, photos, and documents that preserves the material culture of the city as well as the Bigelow family for the public to examine.
- I. A noteworthy addition to our website was the agreement by historian and former Olympia resident Lynn Erickson to make the Sylvester's Window Cityscape project available on line. The original paintings and associated materials have been scanned and are fully searchable. The Sunday *Olympian* Looking Back column (see also paragraph L below) is featuring people and events from this project, linked to our website, throughout 2021. Lynn has also made several hard copies of the project available for distribution. She spearheaded this extraordinary work that links art and heritage in order to share local history in an engaging and visual way. The original paintings will be back on display at the Timberland Library, post COVID.

- J. Circulates online a quarterly newsletter to members, as well as a semi-monthly bulletin to a broad contact list of about 600 that lists historic preservation and cultural activities and events.
 - K. In January, hosts an annual membership meeting with a program. In 2020, Historian and OHS-Board member Shanna Stevenson presented on the role of Olympia on the suffrage movement.
 - L. Our Research Coordinator and webmaster Deborah Ross continues to provide images and text for the weekly Looking Back feature in *The Olympian*, which is also posted on our Facebook page and website.
 - M. Deb also continues to maintain and add to our website, which received almost 50,000 unique visitors and nearly a million page visits in 2020. She also responds to queries about local history.
 - N. Acquiring and executing grants that help us fulfill our mission to collect, preserve, and interpret local history and the Bigelow House.
 - O. OHS maintains a social media presence through Facebook and Twitter, administered respectively by members Deb Ross and Ed Echte.
- III. 2021 Projected Tasks
- P. Develop and implement plan to restore and interpret 2nd Floor rooms.
 - Q. Request \$50,000 Capital Budget request for preservation and maintenance projects.
 - R. Implement County Heritage Grant for replacement and safety of front porch steps.
 - S. Engage with implementation of Armory MOA mitigation.
 - T. Continue cultivating woodland garden.

Respectfully submitted,
Greg Griffith, President
Olympia Historical Society-Bigelow House Museum