Sharing the Past = Shaping Our Future, part 4: 1990s to the Present
By Mary M. June

The 1990s brought on another changing of the guard and a revitalization of the Chippewa County Historical Society. In the fall of 1994, President Robert Money was approached by Sharon MacLaren, who represented a group of individuals interested in revitalizing the Society. The goal of the group was not only to preserve the rich history of the oldest settlement in Michigan, but to make it accessible for everyone. On January 17, 1995, the first official Board meeting of the reorganized Society was held at Bayliss Public Library. Officers of the new Board were: Mary M. June, president; Yvonne Hogue-Peer, vice-president of publications and programs; Sharon MacLaren, vice-president of membership and fundraising; Nancy Steinhaus, secretary; and Jean Atkins, treasurer. Other members of the board included: Robert Money, Steve Malmberg, Kathy McCullough, Rev. Paul Raappana, Janus Storey, Allan Swanson, Sheri Davie, and Janet Russell.

Much of the first year was spent finalizing organizational matters, such as bylaws, 501(c)3 non-profit status, bank accounts, budgets, increasing membership, the collections, and more. The first programs were held at Bayliss Library, with guest speakers Mark O. Keller on “The Canal Lands and the First Sault Ste. Marie Canal,” Jay Rajnovich about the “Murder of James Schoolcraft,” and Larry Massie with stories from his books. By August, memberships had increased from 36 to 120.

By February 1996, a new logo was adopted. Yvonne Peer approached Oliver Birge about the logo he designed for the 1968 Tricentennial Celebration. A variation was made so that “Chippewa County Historical Society” could be added around the outer circle, keeping the central image of the voyageur approaching the French Jesuit mission on the shore.

For two years, the Society looked for a temporary home. Sharon MacLaren and Fred Smith worked out an agreement for the Society to lease the basement of the Old Hub Building at 409 Ashmun and by January 1997 CCHS’s collections were gathered in one place. Modifications were made to provide a storage area for the larger items, office space, and a public area for displays and meetings.

The new office was not intended to be a museum; however, the public was welcome to view items displayed. The primary function of the office was to serve as a resource center. With its own space, the Society hoped to become a repository for historical items from all over the county, thus preventing important artifacts from leaving our area and thus losing our history. Over the years, many wonderful donations of photographs and artifacts have been made to the Society. They help CCHS tell the story of its people and the area.

Starting in 1996, CCHS began the tradition of honoring its heroes, past Board members who worked on the Society’s behalf to help preserve Sault history. The first honorees in June 1996 were Florence Caffey and Reeta Freeborn. A high tea was held in their honor, and plaques were presented, along with City Resolutions honoring them. Later honorees include Leno Pianosi, Ann Pratt, Bud Weber and Charles Payment.

Since the late 1990s, CCHS has continued to play an active role in opening the Johnston House as a museum during the summer months. CCHS has worked with the City of Sault Ste. Marie to see that much needed improvements were made to the Historic Water Street buildings. The Johnston, Schoolcraft and Baraga Houses have all received new roofs and the Kemp Coal Dock Office and Baraga House have been renovated and opened to the public with displays. With a CCHS representative on the City’s Historic Structures Committee, we work with representatives of Sault Historic Sites, the River of History Museum, and the community to oversee the care and preservation of the historic buildings.

In July 1999, CCHS developed the fundraiser “Dinner with the John Johnstons.” The dinner theatre concept was the brain child of Sharon MacLaren. She wrote the script and directed it in its early years.

Local actor Peter Decourcy portrayed John Johnston, who was the host for the guests; the actors portraying his dinner guests as well as those attending the performance. Many actors and musicians volunteered their time and talents over the 10 years, including his wife Susan Decourcy (later the director), their daughter Mary Bowkus, Yvonne Hogue-Peer, Arline Fitzmaurice, Bernie Arbic, Sue Askwith, Dave Stanaway, Otto Bacon, Don Cooper, Dyke Justin,
John Schaeffer, Karen Sabatine, Aaron Payment, Art Leighton, Paul Sabourin, and Drockton family members.

The 1990s were a time of growth, expansion, and sharing for the Historical Society. Thank you to the Board members who helped us achieve all we accomplished, including Mark Dobias, Don Cooper, Charles Ludwick, Merrill Lewis, and the late Paul Freedman.

The New Millenium brought new controversy, opportunities, and growth. That is the year the Thomas Moran painting of the Grand Canyon was found in our collections. Research did not reveal how or why it was there, so it and another painting were sent to Christie’s for auction. It was then discovered that the painting had originally been donated to the City by Gov. Chase S. Osborn in 1915 and displayed at the Sault High School until the 1960s. Once discovered, we notified the City of the pending sale. The City agreed to continue the sale and more research was undertaken into the painting’s history. It sold for $950,000. After much deliberation and negotiation, a settlement was agreed upon. CCHS was awarded an amount for its costs in storing and caring for the painting from the 1960s to 2000. The City created the Gov. Chase S. Osborn Trust fund with the bulk of the proceeds. It was designated for Sault historical, cultural, or preservation projects. Requests were to come through the revived Historic Development Commission. Funds from the Trust have enabled CCHS and Bayliss Library to undertake conservation projects for artwork, photographic digitization projects, and publications of local historical interest. Funds have also been used to fund fencing at Maple Ridge Cemetery, roofing of the Johnston, Schoolcraft, and Baraga homes, and other construction work at the Historic Water Street Homes, as well as projects for other historical organizations.

The accomplishment of one of our main goals came to fruition in 2006. Then CCHS president, Nancy Steinhaus, negotiated the purchase of 115 Ashmun Street from the owners, Norman and Peggy Cardinal. Old Mission Bank assisted with a loan towards its purchase and for renovation work to the first floor. The historic building was constructed in 1889 to house Chase S. Osborn’s newspaper. He rented out space to the YMCA and other businesses. Later in the 1890s, Edison Sault Electric Co. became a tenant. In the mid-1920s, they purchased the building. CCHS moved into it in January of 2007, opening a Gift Shop and display area in the front of the building. The center of the main floor was turned into a kitchenette, meeting room, and storage space. An office/library was set up in the back addition, with an entrance to a parking lot fronted by Portage Avenue. The building has allowed the Society to continue its work on preserving and organizing its collections, all made possible due to the help of our volunteers and Board members.

Over the last 20 years, CCHS has undertaken many endeavors to preserve and promote the history of Sault Ste. Marie and Chippewa County. These include exhibiting items and photographs from our collections, hosting musical events, holding the Dinner with the Johnstons, publishing books on the area’s local history, publishing the Society’s newsletter River Soundings, and hosting speakers and special programs through our quarterly general meetings. The Society even started sponsoring its own festival—Sault History Fest—in 2009, which has evolved into the Rendezvous du Sault celebration in the past two years.

More recently, CCHS has hosted Cemetery Tours, led by Board member Caroline Grabowski and assisted by Jim and Mary Couling and Board member Paul Sabourin. Caroline has conducted extensive research to uncover interesting facts about the lives of the Sault’s early inhabitants. In 2013 she published Headlines & Headstones from Sault Ste. Marie’s Historic Past.

CCHS made the final payment on the mortgage for its 115 Ashmun Street building on April 29, 2013. Currently, we are participating in a Façade Improvement program through the City’s Downtown Development Authority. Keep an eye out for work on the façade this coming spring and summer. Again, the success of CCHS has been a result of dedicated Board members, volunteers, donors, and Society members. The mix of everyone’s contributions is what has enabled the CCHS to accomplish so much this past 20, in fact, the past 96 years, and we hope that you will to continue to join us in our future endeavors.