

NAC History

The history of the Nantucket Arts Council is a story about lovers of the arts on our island community. Countless individuals have volunteered, donated and contributed in keeping the arts vital over the many years since its inception. This story is about perseverance, transformation, moderation, dreams, revisions, and imagination. It is also about generosity. Some ignited the spark and others were there to keep the flame going. There were competing economic influences, desires and conditions, there were also always characters to fill the roles. Here is some of the story.

In 1974, the Nantucket Arts Council was formed as an organization to administrate the needs of Theatre Workshop (winter organization) and The Nantucket Stage Company (summer organization). There were conflicts between the groups. This was a solution to fundraising, publicity and administration created by patrons and artists committed to seeing the organizations work together. The president of the Nantucket Arts Council Board was *Henry Koch*, (a former director of International Finance Corporation). Board members included *Mrs. Norman Beach, Mrs. Nathaniel Benchley, Mrs. Marie Giffin and Robert Anathan*. Additions to the Board included *Mrs. Bernie Grossman, Alfred Sanford, Richard Deutsch, Martin Fife, Sheilah Cross, Mrs. H. Gerard Bissinger II, John Buckley, Mrs. Richard Congdon, Pete Watrous, Andy Oates, Mrs. Russell Baker, John Sutton, Roger Young, Mrs. Margherita Sutro, Mrs. Huntington Block, Sidney Killen, Peter Heller, Mrs. Pebble Gifford, Mrs. Harold Evans, Bill Euhler and Mrs. Jean MacAusland*. (As was the common practice of the time, women were listed under their husbands' name e.g. Mrs. James Doe.)

Within a few months, the Nantucket Arts Council fancifully and earnestly decided to include all the arts of the island on a year round basis - theatre, painting, music, and "all creative activities," in their mission. The ultimate goal of establishing an island cultural center for participants and patrons of the arts came right along with it. J. Seward Johnson (one of the heirs to the Johnson and Johnson fortune and sculptor of the "hyper-real," who died in 2020) and John Wulp (Artistic director of Nantucket Stage Company who created a revival of Dracula first on Nantucket and produced it on Broadway winning a 1977 Tony Award. Wulp died in 2021 on the island of Vinalhaven, ME where he lived for many years.) provided the initial funding for the Arts Council.

Between 1974 and 1983, NAC kept an office at 58 Main St. Then president John Sutton (noted architect) signed a lease to rent the upstairs of the Methodist Church and created a performance space. It was renovated and decorated by Jack and Jim Hendrix; Bartlett Plumbing added a separate heating system; and Ralph Hardy provided a lighting system. Chandeliers were provided by Reggie Levine from his parents' home. Two grand pianos were acquired for the new performance hall. First, one was rebuilt and owned by the Artists Association of Nantucket and on loan to NAC. Then later another was gifted to the Nantucket Arts Council and dedicated to Robert Rudolf (a summer resident and conductor of renown who started a Bach Festival on the island for the Arts Council). Pianist Leonard Shure provided the opening concert of the Performance Center. Robert Rudolf developed much of the initial programming for the Arts Council. coordinating with Leonard Shure (N.E. Conservatory professor and founder of

Chamber Music on Nantucket) Tickets were often sold at the Camera Shop (owned by Gene Mahon) and Main Street Gallery (owned by Reggie Levine). There was a close relationship with Theatre Workshop of Nantucket (TWN) and the Artists Association of Nantucket (AAN). The organizations often shared Board members and presidents moved from one organization to the next.

In 1975, Straight Wharf Theater burned to the ground and changed the course of theater in the community as well as the focus of the Nantucket Arts Council. Matt Dixon, artistic director of Theatre Workshop of Nantucket, became the only theatre in town at that time. Maxime Shaw (former wife of the conductor Robert Shaw and manager of much of the travel of the Atlantic City Orchestra and Chorus) was NAC president in 1977 and focused on coordinating with Leonard Shure. The first Arts Festival (a collaboration between AAN and NAC) was held in 1975.

Margherita Sutro was a “one woman show” at the Arts Council from 1978 - 95, according to Jon Stoup, her successor in 1995. From her unique home at Gorham’s Court on Orange St., where she had a small performance room with a raised stage, Margherita became the friend and patron of many musicians she invited to the island to perform. She was born in Sienna, Italy and became a permanent resident of Nantucket in 1972. She was involved from the very beginning with the Arts Council and committed herself to seventeen years of organizing dance performances, concerts, theatre presentations, lectures and slide shows. It was all part of the continuous NAC activities. By December 1979, the Nantucket Arts Council was well into its 4th season with concerts which began at 8:30 pm, NYC time concert time.

Sometime in the eighties, the Nantucket Arts Council moved performances from the Methodist Church to the Coffin School which was then home to the Nantucket Chamber Music Center (now known as the Nantucket Community Music Center). The Coffin School was more spacious and had a larger performance area that facilitated for larger groups from quartets to octets. Some of the artists involved were Liederkreis Quartet, soprano Susan Larson, Western Wind Vocal Ensemble, and Empire Brass Quartet.

Community members interested in the arts observed how quickly real estate was moving on Nantucket and feared the opportunity for a performing arts center might pass. In 1987, Mitch Blake, a local artist and community member, led the charge to unite the various artistic organizations with the vision of the Dreamland Theater becoming a Performing and Visual Arts Center. He developed a warrant for Town Meeting which did not pass.

In the nineties, there were many changes to the art scene on the island. Theatre Workshop of Nantucket, Artists Association of Nantucket and the Nantucket Community Music Center (formerly known as Nantucket Chamber Music Center) were all thriving. In addition, there was Actors Theatre which was semi professional and created with Richard Cary at the helm (former artistic director of Theatre Workshop). In 1991, Jenny Garneau (publicist at Nantucket Beacon at the time), created the Nantucket Arts Festival as a way to bring recognition to the arts community. She reenergized the concept of the value of arts in the community. But it was a new

organization, the Arts Alliance of Nantucket, that melded many ideas together. Founding members Reggie Levine, Deborah Beale, Kate Stout, Melissa Philbrick, Carolyn Walsh and Charlotte Maison created the arts advocacy organization with the goals of promoting all the arts and advocating for an arts center. Reggie Levine, Donna Tillotson, and then Deborah Beale became president. There was even another organization that was formed named Nantucket Center for the Arts (NCA) in 1997 again with the goal of creating a performing arts center. Board members included Patricia Hohl, Jim Patrick, Gardiner Dutton, Lee Rand Burns and Brenda Hall. The urgency for a performing venue for all the arts was becoming more desperate.

Concurrently, the Nantucket Arts Council continued to provide concerts and programs for the schools. In 1993, the Nantucket Arts Council was a recipient of a large donation. It came about eighteen years after a gift of land was received from the family of Dr. Walter and Mrs. Boyd (1975). Originally, the gift was offered to Theatre Workshop of Nantucket for a new place to build a theatre (Shawkemo) but the Board of TWN turned it down as it was too far out of town. The concept was to build a performance hall on it. When that did not happen, the Boyd family heirs agreed to allow the Arts Council to sell the land and they also sold their adjoining property. The sale of this land was initially called the Boyd Fund and is now simply called the Nantucket Arts Council fund for grants and scholarships. This fund provided the Nantucket Arts Council with an opportunity to fund many organizations and individual projects in the community. Margarita Sutro had the opportunity to see this evolve however she died unexpectedly at the age of 91 in 1995. Pianist Milton Kaye performed a memorial concert in her honor.

Jon Stroup (a former art editor of House & Garden, poet, sculptor, actor and musician) was president from 1995-98 when an unfortunate medical event ended his presidency. It was during his time that there were many confluences in the arts on Nantucket. The X Gallery became a more avant garde gallery and was heralded as an artists cooperative. The X Gallery stayed open from 1989-2001. Jon Stroup supported the gallery and shows there as well as headed the Arts Council which seemed at this time to be geared primarily to concert giving.

In 1995, the Arts Alliance was asked to take over the Arts Festival and the name changed to Arts Alive! Reggie Levine was president and it collaborated with other arts organizations to present a ten day long festival celebrating the arts in the fall. Patricia Kepenash, Peter Greenhalgh, and Arlene O'Reilly were the organizers and implementers of making the festival vibrant and alive. The Nantucket Arts Council was supportive and integrated with the festival with many of the same people involved from one organization to the next.

In 2000, Deborah Beale (president then of Arts Alliance of Nantucket and former director of the Nantucket Community Music Center) and Peter Sutro (president of Nantucket Arts Council) agreed to merge the two organizations. Susan Jarrell (founder of NCMC and NAC Board member), who had originally founded the Nantucket Organ Crawl for the Arts Alive! festival, continued facilitating more collaboration between the Nantucket Community Music Center and the Nantucket Arts Council. Dr. Gerry Mack (then director of the Nantucket Community Music Center and former Director of Choral Studies at Hartt College of Music), began planning the

concert series for the Nantucket Arts Council. Dr. Mack had many connections with musicians from all over New England and he included them in Arts Council concerts over many years.

Peter and Marina Sutro kept the Nantucket Arts Council vibrant and relevant between 1998-2002. Peter was president and Marina was secretary. Peter, the son of Margherita Sutro, continued presenting concerts at the Coffin School, the upstairs of the Dreamland and in various churches. He and Marina also assisted in creating a fund to help sponsor the music education of island vocalist Greta Feeney (presently with her Doctorate of Music Performance and teaching at NCMC).

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, many economic changes and living conditions were happening on the island. Fissures began to show in the Nantucket Arts Council in the 90s as opposing ideas and purposes began to show among members of the NAC Board. Arts organizations had been growing and were supported by their patrons. Like-minded people kept the mission alive and Reggie Levine took over as president again in 2002. Beverly Hall joined the Board in 2002 and there were many new creative initiatives. Christie Cure had worked with Reggie Levine at his Main Street Gallery and helped him with the art shows for the festivals. Christie also had her own active parlor for the arts at her residence on Orange St. where she was known as a patron of the arts encouraging many young artists. Seaside Shakespeare directed by Susan McGuinness was produced annually by the Nantucket Arts Council for six summers. Gene Mahon became president of the Nantucket Arts Council in 2008-10. This was right when the housing market crashed.

In the 2000s, with the creation of The White Heron Theatre and the newly redesigned Dreamland Performing Arts Center, the arts were flourishing on the island. (NAC donated financially to secure the satellite dishes to receive the Metropolitan Opera performances at the Dreamland.) The Nantucket Atheneum had a concert and lecture schedule. The Nantucket Community Music Center produced many community concerts. There were many active theatrical productions for all age levels. There were even four theatre organizations on the island at one time. Even the Whaling Museum had a concert series. There was less desperation for designing a performing arts center that could house all the community organizations.

Many creative NAC projects began in the 2000s. Beverly Hall created the Shakespeare in the Garden event in her beautiful gardens at her home in Madaket, (2007-2012) then moved to the home of artist Judy and her husband Bob Brust. At last it moved to the Sconset Casino before it ended. The ten day Fall Arts Festival in Preservation Hall continued and represented many artists and musicians in the community.

In 2010, Reggie Levine headed the organization once more until John Miller became head of the organization. During the presidency of John Miller and administrative assistant Alexandra LaPaglia, the organization had a huge technology update. There was a new logo and a website developed as well as a database of supporters. John Miller (former principal of Nantucket Elementary School) was president 2012 -14 then Dan Driscoll (videographer and president of NCTV) until 2015. William Ferrall, first executive director was hired in 2014. In 2016, it became

clear that NAC was not wealthy enough to maintain a salary for an executive director. Barbara Elder became president in 2016.

A large accomplishment of William Ferrall and his work with NAC was the establishment of Nantucket Cultural District. This came into fruition through the efforts of the many arts organizations but was led by William Ferrall with the support of ReMain Nantucket. NAC signed on to the state's Spring ArtWeek in addition to running the Fall Arts Festival, the Downtown Celebrity Concerts Series and managing all the details of the Nantucket Cultural District including applying for grants, managing the website and publicity.

Most of the NAC finances were secured in Vanguard asset accounts with strict rules surrounding their purposes including grants & scholarships. The Vanguard funds were set up by Phil Stambaugh, a Board member and vice president of Cape Cod Five. Through Merit Awards, NAC established a vehicle for fundraising by honoring islanders who had contributed extensively to the arts. Recipients included Susan Jarrell, Paulette Allemand, Deborah Beale, Lucile Hays, Seward and Cecilia Johnson, Reggie Levine, Beverly Hall and recently Gene Mahon (2021). The Margareta Nettles for excellence in the Visual and Performing Arts was left in memory of Anita Nettle's mother, Margareta Nettles. The intention of this award is to recognize an individual in our community for excellence in the arts. A memorial fund for island photographer Claudia Kronenberg was set up with grants given to artists to do their work. In addition, money was given by Lloyd Schultz to the Arts Council for awards in the visual arts for school children.

Since 2016, NAC has focussed on clarifying the mission and finances. Russell Carson (treasurer and ReMain Nantucket employee) helped establish a rigorous bookkeeping and budget for the organization. The programs, which included the Downtown Concert Series (in collaboration with the Dreamland Theatre), grants to cultural institutions and individual artists, scholarships to graduating seniors and arts festivals in the fall and spring, faithfully continued. Christie Cure and Robert Frazier curated the NAC Fall Arts Festival when Reggie Levine retired from doing the festival. Although there was no executive director, Jill Sandole was administrative assistant and tackled many of the programs with president Barbara Elder with committees and contracted personnel. In 2019, NAC returned the management of the Nantucket Cultural District to the Town of Nantucket 's Department of Culture and Tourism.

With the pandemic, concerts and festivals were halted. NAC reached out to NCTV for assistance in video and online programming for 2019 & 2020, NAC moved programming on to YouTube. A series of four videos featuring artists who were funded by grants through NAC was produced with and available on NCTV. Two videos were produced for the Nantucket Public Schools including The Cobblestones and Cape Cod musician Bruce Abbott. Over the years, the offices of NAC have moved from Reggie Levine's Main Street Gallery, to the upstairs of the Sea Grille Restaurant, to the White Heron Theatre and then to the Chamber of Commerce. The offices are presently closed and stored at Barbara Elder's home and Mollie Glazer's garage. The NAC grand piano is in the upstairs of the Unitarian Church. All work is done remotely for the time being.

