

Association of the Oldest Inhabitants Gets Older

by Zach Klitzman

The year 2015 marks the sesquicentennial not only of the end of the Civil War but also of the founding of Washington, D.C.'s oldest civic organization: the Association of the Oldest Inhabitants of the District of Columbia. Thirty-one prominent white Washingtonians, including two previous mayors, launched the association on December 7, 1865, at the old City Hall, currently the D.C. Court of Appeals at Judiciary Square. There, these men pledged "to preserve memories and matters of historic interest," and "to aid in every way the prosperity and well-being of the District while preserving the heritage of its past."

It is no coincidence that AOI was established the same year the Civil War ended. Its original constitution states that the organization was created in "an effort to restore the capital's dignity plagued by lingering and divisive sectional loyalties following the Civil War." According to William Brown, AOI president since 1999, the founders "were concerned that all the hoopla following the Civil War — influx of veterans, expanding government, newly freed slaves — would overwhelm the District" and that the first 75 years of the city's history "would be forgotten or overlooked." To combat this potential amnesia where antebellum Washington was concerned, AOI was "formed to recall and reminisce about the 'good old days'" and became "a de facto oral history-based, historical society," Brown said. (By comparison, it predates the Columbia Historical Society, the predecessor of the Historical Society of Washington, D.C., by 29 years.)

For 150 years, AOI has remained dedicated to civic pride, and the results are evident on the District's landscape. In 1870 AOI donated a memorial stone to the Washington Monument that can be seen today on the 22nd landing, about 240 feet up the obelisk. Two generations later, the members of AOI pooled funds to help build the District of Columbia War Memorial, which commemorates the 499 D.C. residents who died in World War I. Completed in 1931, it sits just off Independence Avenue on the National Mall across from the Martin Luther King, Jr., Memorial. Eighty years later, with encouragement of deceased member Joe Grano, AOI lobbied Congress to keep the memorial D.C.-focused, instead of being subsumed as a national World War I memorial. Lastly, AOI members have fought against raising the city's height limit, and have sought to preserve, maintain and promote the original L'Enfant and McMillan Plans.

Since the early 20th century, AOI has pushed for greater home rule for D.C. Speaking at AOI's 73rd anniversary dinner, Theodore Noyes, editor of the Washington Star and longtime AOI President argued that "political equity" for Washingtonians "will raise the voteless, unrepresented, politically impotent Washingtonian from the status of convict and lunatic to that of an American sovereign with power to participate self-protectingly." While Washingtonians have since received the right to vote for President, Delegate to the House of Representatives, Mayor and City Council, Noyes' 1938 dream remains mostly unfilled, despite the best efforts of AOI members.

Perhaps AOI's greatest success as an institution dedicated to preserving Washington's past, has been its effort to rehabilitate, both literally and figuratively, Alexander R. Shepherd. Shepherd, a native Washingtonian, was the city's Territorial Governor from 1873-1874. Under his auspices as the head of the Board of Public Works, a vast program of infrastructure improvements transformed the city after the Civil War and persuaded Congress not to move elsewhere. Yet Shepherd became a target of criticism (in part because he overspent by \$10 million) leading to both his political downfall, and a restricting of District self-government. Still, citizens of Washington adored him, throwing a goodbye

dinner before he left for Mexico, organizing a lavish homecoming parade, and installing a majestic statue of Shepherd in 1909 after he died in 1902.

This statue is where AOI left its mark. Situated outside the District Building on Pennsylvania Ave (the construction of which AOI members encouraged), the statue stood for 63 years until 1972 when it was put in storage as a result of the redevelopment of Pennsylvania Avenue. Sadly, as the statue faded from the landscape, so too did Shepherd's legacy. However, thanks to the dedicated efforts of AOI, not only was the statue reinstalled outside the John A. Wilson Building in 2005, with a bronze plaque honoring his accomplishments added in 2010, but the organization has worked to restore the reputation of so-called "Boss" Shepherd. AOI gave then-Mayor Anthony Williams its Governor Shepherd Award for Public Works Improvements in 2006, and several members have written works on Shepherd.

Despite these successes, AOI has struggled at times. It often was seen as an exclusive, reactionary organization. Created during the very early days of Reconstruction, for most of its history the organization was segregated by race and gender, and it had strict standards about the length of residence required for membership. By the turn of the 20th century, it had become purely ceremonial, and outsiders joked about its aging membership falling asleep during meetings. Even after a midcentury surge in popularity, it was a conservative institution. For example, at its centennial celebration in 1965, keynote speaker Burton Langhenry railed against Vietnam protestors who had descended on the capital, describing their demonstrations as "the most recent example of un-Americanism and lack of patriotism." Specifically calling out the protestors' youth, Langhenry drew applause from the crowd of 650 at the Sheraton-Park Hotel when he lamented that "on our campuses we are getting more and more characters with less and less character. And here in Washington we have more than our share of them."

Because the organization did not officially abolish race or gender admission requirements until 1993 (though it loosened them over the years), black Washingtonians created a parallel Association of Oldest Inhabitants (Colored) and incorporated it in 1916, copying the language from AOI's 1903 letter of incorporation. The two organizations did not have an official relationship, though in 1919 there was a joint meeting of both "AOIs" to honor District of Columbia citizens who served in World War I. AOI (Colored) reached a peak of 400 members and was active in efforts to promote integration in the city, but apparently dissolved in the 1970s. For several years the AOI actively sought to locate the records of the AOI (Colored) thought to be missing. After being serendipitously discovered by member-historian James Goode, three scrapbooks highlighting architect William Nixon's presidency of AOI (Colored) from 1942 until 1962 were donated by his granddaughter to Howard University for further research and study at the urging of AOI. As for women, there was a discussion of creating a female auxiliary group in the late 1960s, but that never came to fruition. (As the Washington Post recounted years later, "the excuse offered was that no woman would admit being over 50.")

Today, AOI is a racially diverse organization of approximately 360 members, male and female. Anyone interested in advocacy for D.C. history and AOI's lively monthly lunchtime history lectures can join, but full members must be more than 40-years old and have lived, worked, or operated a business in the city for 20 years (or descend from such a person). As the organization celebrates its 150th anniversary, it not only has successfully bridged sectional divisions, but also has become more inclusive as well.

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Members of the AOI assemble in front of the David Burnes cottage which stood near 17th & B Street, NW (c. 1885) [HSW Collection]