

An American Art Treasure

By Linda Morton



Original Artwork Courtesy Annette Cable

It is hard to imagine living without knowledge of the past, especially if you run a museum. If not for the steadfast vision of Nathalie Andrews, executive director of the Portland Museum, much of the history and heritage that shaped early Louisville could have vanished. Andrews believes that the past holds part of the answer: “It’s the good news for the future.” She said, “You definitely don’t want to go forward without it.”

In 1978, armed with her master’s degree in curatorial science from the University of Louisville, Andrews was hired when a group of public school teachers founded the Portland Museum in an elementary school. Its mission was to develop materials and learning experiences all based on what the kids could see in the neighborhood. It was called an Urban Community as Its Own Resource.

The area of Portland was established in 1811 and got its city charter from the Kentucky Legislature in 1834. Portland was a maritime city on the banks of the Ohio River, and it thrived around river commerce and shipping. The city was settled by French, German, and Irish immigrants and was later annexed by Louisville.

This concept of urban learning had the approval and interest of funders, so when the school that housed the original museum closed in the early 1980s, the group set about to find permanent quarters. The Portland Museum now operates a

10,000-square-foot facility on Portland Avenue that houses its collections, archives, and long-term interpretive exhibits. Its changing exhibits present focused themes with the help of community curators. The museum provides public programs for all ages year-round.

In March, the Portland Museum garnered two new distinctions when Laura Bush, first lady and honorary chair of Preserve America, presented Andrews with the official designation as a Preserve America Neighborhood. At the ceremony held on Capitol Hill, Bush also announced a \$150,000 Preserve America grant to the Portland Museum. The advisory Council on Historic Preservation described the new federal program as “a White House initiative that encourages and supports community efforts to preserve and enjoy our priceless cultural and national heritage.”

In the early 1980s, curator Andrews soon had the duties of administration thrust upon her. This small team of visionaries had to learn the business end of running a museum from buying real estate and raising funds to fix it, to purchasing everything they needed. Andrews said that until that time, they had never purchased a thing—not insurance or even toilet paper. “We had to grow up fast.”

The size of the museum staff has fluctuated from as many as six to the current two that run operations with the help of volunteers. Erin Gerrity handles

“I’ve always thought of the museum as a kind of anchor. We put out an awful lot of good news about the community. We feel like we cannot succeed if Portland doesn’t succeed.”

Nathalie Andrews

Photo Courtesy of the White House



“First Lady Laura Bush and Nathalie Andrews of Louisville’s Portland Museum, at the Preserve America ceremony in Washington, D.C.”

visitor services and public relations, serves on committees, organizes meetings, and coordinates volunteers. The museum’s board of trustees governs the museum.

Andrews’ vision and talent to forge disparate partnerships is key to the museum’s success and growth. “There’s not a heritage project in this end of town that we haven’t had our fingers in,” she said. She has formed partnerships with governments and kindred agencies at all levels: Louisville’s current and former mayors, the Kentucky Archaeological Survey, the Louisville Metro Parks Dept., the Kentucky Heritage Council, the Landmarks Commission, and Preservation Alliance are among the long list of participants.

The future Portland Wharf Park project is under development on land that has yielded important archaeological evidence. The Portland Museum paid for the architect and the research to have its rare 1852 U.S. Marine Hospital designated a National Historic Landmark. The museum promoted that project for years, and now the hospital is under renovation.

Portland residents and friends, historians and architects, and funders such as the National Endowment for the Arts and the National Trust for Historic Places are all vital resources. Groups like Portland NOW are active in overall planning and are writing a Cultural Plan. The die-hards won’t give up, even in the face of economic and social decline of several decades.

They know what the neighborhood once was and what it can be again. Andrews said, “Truly, there are wonderful people here—a breed you don’t see anywhere else.”

Andrews’ wish list includes the time and funding to catalog its growing collections of historic and contemporary photographs and artifacts relating to the history and architecture of Portland. Paintings by John James Audubon are among its holdings.

Professor Tom Owen has been the Archivist for Regional History at the University of Louisville since 1975. He is well known for his neighborhood walking tours and his video series, Tom Owen’s Louisville. He speaks and writes widely about the history of Louisville’s neighborhoods and serves on the Louisville Metro Council.

Owen said, “For Nathalie Andrews, the story of Portland’s colorful past is more than fodder for the casually curious. It nourishes and shapes how folks feel about themselves and their community. The museum into which she has poured her life blood is subtly as much about Portland’s future as it is about its past.”

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