

# Looking Back

## **The Beginnings of the Pinellas County Historical Society**

*Jim Schnur, Immediate Past President*

Nearly 35 years ago, on April 7, 1976, the Pinellas County Historical Society (PCHS) held an introductory meeting in the County Commission Assembly Room of the old courthouse. At this gathering, plans were unveiled for the Pinellas County Historical Museum at Heritage Village (known as Heritage Park back then). Members of the Pinellas County Historical Commission invited representatives from historical societies and other organizations throughout the county, from St. Petersburg to Tarpon Springs.

The April meeting was not the first gathering of the Historical Society, however. During the early months of 1976, a small group of volunteers laid the foundation for our present organization. Dr. David R. Carr, a professor at the University of South Florida St. Petersburg, served as the first acting president. Dorothy A. Edmunds assumed the role of acting secretary. George F. Gramling Jr., the chair of the Historical Commission, also took on a strong role in shaping the Society. By February 1976, they developed the first bylaws and planned for a membership campaign.

Although the Society officially claims its year of incorporation as 1976, the Society's date of birth actually is November 5, 1975. On that date, the Historical Commission decided to form a committee that would act as "an arm of the museum." This committee became PCHS.

The arrival of the first two structures—the Plant-Sumner House and Seven Gables—during the Bicentennial year led to great excitement and support for the Village. Groundbreaking ceremonies took place in the spring of 1976, but much needed to be done before the original ten-acre tract of land could open to the public. An important step for the Society took place on August 24, 1976, the day that PCHS officers signed their incorporation papers.

Many of the earliest volunteers at the Village also showed their support by joining the Society: Even though dedication ceremonies did not take place until June 1977, by January of that year PCHS had nearly 500 members. On January 31, 1977, PCHS received conditional tax-exempt status from the Internal Revenue Service, thus allowing it to operate as a non-profit and raise funds for the Village.



Soon thereafter, on March 15, the PCHS board held a special meeting to approve a \$5,000 donation to help complete projects at the Village before the June 1977 opening date. The Society also launched a "Dollars for Heritage Park" campaign at local malls. From these early days forward, a strong partnership took shape. Thirty-five years later, as the Village faces new challenges, the Society remains a strong partner.

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