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'Sandisfield Then and Now: 1762 - 2012'
by Ronald M. Bernard

Town Culture

Sandisfield Then and Now

The Sandisfield Arts Center *5 Hammertown Road*

The idea to restore and transform this venerable house of worship into a community arts center is said to have emerged in the 1970s. For years the Sandler family had been devoted caretakers (see *Montville Synagogue under Meeting Houses*). In 1984, a group of Montville residents, former members and descendants of the Congregation B'Nai Abraham, decided that something had to be done about saving their old synagogue building which was in disrepair. They formed a steering committee, called the Sandisfield Arts & Restoration Committee. The trustees were (alphabetically), Eric Bibb, Leonard and Virginia Dryansky, Sylvia German, Anne Hoffman, Toby Jensky, Bernard and Carol



Roof and belfry repairs, May 2000. (Richard Migot)



Ground breaking ceremony, May 2002.

L to R: Sylvia German, Anne Hoffman, architect Chuck Chieko, Sandy Parisky, Liana Toscanini.

Kessler, Sidney and Terry Pinsky and Jack and Lena Sandler.

Eventually funds were raised through activities such as play readings, children's talent shows, musical performances, and holiday events. Enthusiastic volunteers cleaned and painted the interior and cleared heavy brush to make way for parking. The priority was to fix the leaking roof. Other infrastructure repairs included partial new wiring and stabilization of the foundation. Early donations allowed for new seat cushions for the not-so-comfortable old Baptist pews. It had been agreed in a special meeting of the B'Nai Abraham trustees in October 1995 to convey the property "as is" to the previously established (1986) non-profit entity, Sandisfield Arts & Restoration Committee, Inc., "for charitable, educational and/or civic purposes."



A major break came in 1998 when the National Trust approved a grant for a feasibility study for building restoration. The Massachusetts Historical Commission eventually awarded a major matching grant to fund infrastructure repair.

The upstairs hall set for the annual holiday Extravaganza in 2010.

In this phase, board leadership was provided by Erica Fay followed by Dr. Ronald Myers and then Liana Toscanini. They made major decisions, established executive and standing committees and drafted and adopted bylaws. The board was expanded to include professionals with relevant experience in fund raising, architecture and grant writing. An extended capital campaign, which included naming opportunities such as Adopt a Pew and the Bill Crofut Stage, was a big success. About \$250,000 was raised from the community. Major renovations including foundation work were completed by 2003.



Receiving the preservation award in Boston in November 2006, were, from left: Roberta Myers, Liana Toscanini, Nancy Flach, Massachusetts Secretary of State William Galvin, Val Coleman, Dr. Ron Myers, Anne Hoffman and Susie Crofut.

Membership grew to more than 400 and a large array of programs was offered every year, April to December. A memorable early event featured Bill Crofut and Ben Luxon singing on a hot summer evening. An attendee later penned, "Such was the excitement of the audience expressed in foot stomping and applause that Crofut was compelled to remind the audience to temper enthusiasm, considering the state of the building, lest everyone wind up below in the basement!"

This grassroots effort spanned two decades and included both full-time and part-time residents. The community was inspired and came together in a way not seen in living memory. A beautifully restored building and an impressive venue of cultural events was the result.

SARC was awarded the Massachusetts Historical Commission's prestigious Preservation Award for adaptive reuse in July 2006. An even greater honor came that October when the former Montville Baptist Church was accepted on The National Register of Historic Places (NRHP).

The Arts Center is a pride of the community and is a destination for both artists and audiences, not only from Sandisfield but also from surrounding communities. Audiences enjoy performances by poets, authors, historians and musicians. Workshops, films and forums covering a wide range of topics and tastes are also popular.

<i>SANDISFIELD ARTS CENTER BOARD PRESIDENTS</i>	
<i>1985-1997</i>	<i>Leonard Dryansky</i>
<i>1997-1998</i>	<i>Erica Fay</i>
<i>1998-2001</i>	<i>Dr. Ronald Myers</i>
<i>2001-2002</i>	<i>Liana Toscanini</i>
<i>2002-2003</i>	<i>Irene Conley</i>
<i>2003-2006</i>	<i>Tina Sotis</i>
<i>2006-2008</i>	<i>Rhee Kasky</i>
<i>2008-2010</i>	<i>Barbara Elton</i>
<i>2010-2012</i>	<i>Jean Atwater-Williams</i>



The building 2010.



Seated from left: Flora Parisky, Trudel Michelson, Zita Fox, Helen Biederman, Dassy Herman, Lena Sandler, Liana Toscanini, Irene Conley, Anne Hoffman, Roberta Myers & granddaughter, Anna, Evie Silverman, Nina Carr and grandson.

Standing from left: Joyce Campetti, Tilly Mirochnick, Linda Cormier, Jan Cohn, Nancy Flach, Ben Luxon, Karen Luks, Ron Myers, Allan Luks, Sandy Parisky, Susie Crofut, Harry Pisila (architect), Bill Cohn, Cynthia Matthews, Jane Hason, Phyllis Lebeau, David Lebeau, Sid Pinsky, Val Coleman, Jerry Herman

Absent: Bernice Jensky, Debbie Stone, Megan Whilden, George Preston, Sue Salame, Michael & Susan Rosenberg, Bernie & Carol Kessler, Sylvia German, Connie Canty & Bob Donaldson, Tina Sotis, Marcia and Terry Ignace, Cora Roraback, Norton Fletcher, Erica Fay, Barry & Josephine Freedman, Jenks Schachter, Marion Bernstein, Cindy Pinsky

Remembered: Jack Sandler, Len & Virginia Dryansky, Bill Crofut, Wayne Matthews, Will Barrie (Baranoff), Max Schachter, Toby Jensky