

ALHFAM Expanded History

The Association for Living History, Farm and Agricultural Museums began when twenty-three likeminded individuals met on September 17, 1970, during the Agricultural History Society conference at Old Sturbridge Village. They represented diverse perspectives interested in a vibrant new breed of museum – living history farms – and they decided that they wanted to continue to communicate and meet on a regular basis. They wasted no time in doing just that. The Association for Living Historical Farms and Agricultural Museums (ALHFAM's original handle) was organized on November 20, 1970, and the first issue of the *Living Historical Farms Bulletin* (now the *ALHFAM Bulletin*) was published on December 1, 1970.

John T. Schlebecker, Smithsonian Institution, along with Wayne D. Rasmussen, U.S. Department of Agriculture, and Ernst T. Christensen, National Park Service, signed the Articles of Incorporation in April 1972, taking responsibility as ALHFAM's first directors. By the time ALHFAM convened its second meeting, at The Farmers' Museum, Inc. in Cooperstown, New York in 1972, ALHFAM was incorporated in the state of Maryland (June 30, 1972). They pledged to:

- encourage research, publication, and training in historic agricultural practices
- facilitate the exchange of agricultural information and items
- develop a genetic pool of endangered agricultural plants and animals
- sponsor scholarly symposium and publications dealing with agricultural history
- accredit living historical farms and agricultural museums
- foster in present and future generations an appreciation and understanding of the ideas and ideals which have contributed to the greatness of American agriculture.

ALHFAM set a standard in the museum field because of its advocacy of using reproductions rather than originals in museum programming, of systematically collecting and preserving living collections (stock and crops), and of sharing findings broadly. Publications such as *Living Historical Farms Handbook* (1972) by John T. Schlebecker and his research assistant, Gale E. Peterson, and articles published in the proceedings of ALHFAM's annual meetings by Darwin Kelsey and Edward L. Hawes, provided theoretical information about conceptualizing living history farms. Others provided practical nuts-and-bolts ideas about managing them.

From the beginning, however, ALHFAM appealed to many not working in farm and agricultural museums. ALHFAM survived and prospered because its members recognized the need to evolve as the field changed. As G. Terry Sharrer recounted at the twentieth anniversary meeting, many of the twenty-three founders were economic historians, but soon, "folklorists joined and dragged the agricultural economists into discussions of foodways and planting by the moon. Then 'living history' re-enactors. . . impressed their notions of interpretation on the rest of us." Out of such growth

emerged the regional groups that provided additional opportunities for ALHFAMers to network at the local level.

By 1997 ALHFAM members debated the merits of a name change to reflect the greater influence of living history on interpretation beyond agricultural history. The ALHFAMily remained committed to its acronym but agreed that adding a comma in the name could expand the audience served in major ways. As of August 7, 1998, ALHFAM has stood for The Association for Living History, Farm and Agricultural Museums, an appropriate reorientation that set the course for the next generation of ALHFAMers.

Another characteristic of ALHFAM that has ensured its survival, according to G. Terry Sharrer, is the multidisciplinary nature of the organization that helps members “display their ignorance” in a positive way. “We seem to enjoy one another’s curiosity. We have investigated the . . . past from perspectives of archaeology, geography, material culture, biology, and even parapsychology, because we wanted to know something – and we didn’t let disciplinary or professional posturing stand in the way.”

ALHFAM’s commitment to professional development reflects the multidisciplinary nature of its members and the range of museums served. In keeping with the name change, the purposes have broadened. Today, as Edward Baker so aptly phrased it, ALHFAM is an international organization for people who bring history to life, open to all people and institutions interested in living historical farms, agricultural museums and outdoor museums, including but not limited to history, folk life and agriculture. To reach its constituents, ALHFAM provides a forum for communicating the various ways to interpret history, including but not limited to agricultural and rural life. ALHFAM does this by using the ever-evolving means and modes of museum interpretation as the state-of-the-art permits.

Sources:

ALHFAM Bulletin, letters to the editor debating the name change, 1997 and 1998.

Articles of Incorporation, The Association for Living Historical Farms and Agricultural Museums, Incorporated, State Department of Assessments and Taxation, Maryland, filed April 27, 1972; approved, June 30, 1972. Amended

August 9, 1974; Amended August 7, 1998, henceforth The Association for Living History, Farm and Agricultural Museums, Inc.

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Schlebecker John T. and Gale E. Peterson. *Living Historical Farms Handbook*. Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1972.

Sharrer, G. Terry. "Looking Back." *Proceedings of the 1990 [ALHFAM] Annual Meeting, Providence, Rhode Island*. Vol. 13 (1993), n.p.