

Excerpts from an oral history interview with Charles Hummel about the NCAC, NIC, and HP conducted by Joyce Hill Stoner on Jan. 2, 2020 in the Belknap Room, Winterthur Museum

There had only been two real warnings about the fact that we weren't doing anything to be concerned about the cultural patrimony of the United States, as opposed to the fact that so many European countries were already and had for many years been concerned about that. And have national plans to think about what their priorities might be. The biggest problem of course was in Italy where they knew what the problems were, but didn't have the money or funds.

The major problem was the size of the problem was so immense that everyone just thought, "Well, you can't do anything about it." It was interesting that out of the conference that we had to convince people we needed another training program for training conservators because there weren't enough being trained for even the level of work that was needed at the time. The Belmont Report [on America's museums, 1967; see <https://www.americansforthearts.org/by-program/reports-and-data/legislation-policy/naappd/americas-museums-the-belmont-report>] was general, not specific, but alarming. And [Harold] Plenderleith, when he spoke at the conference at the dedication of our research building here in Winterthur pointed out the same thing. They were indicating, sure, we know the problem is big, but how big is it?

Conference on the Training of Conservators held June 15-16, 1973.

Anyway, I think the calls for concern when the light bulb went on and it was realized that at 1973 conference here at Winterthur that there were no real indications or priorities on a national basis for conservation of cultural property. Peter Sparks, for example, had pointed out correctly that most of the conservation efforts in the United States were directed at fine arts, but not decorative arts, not natural history museum collections, not library collections, not photographs. That added to the size of the problem. So, when it was realized that we needed to have some kind of an advisory council that would take a look at what could be done and what should be done, that I think scared people in existing organizations because of the use of the term "national." I think what happened was all of a sudden, regional centers said, "Gee. Are we going to have to take direction from a national group?" Private conservators wondered "how are we going to fit into somebody setting national standards? Does that do away with our private ability to do private conservation?" Regional centers were concerned and organizations like ICOM and AIC were also concerned because is this group going to be formulating standards, formulating principles, formulating practice that we have to follow.

So, that I think was a major source of concern initially. And then, when I think they began to see that the National Conservation Advisory Council was only going to be advisory and not a policymaking organization, then a light bulb went on everywhere and the problem became everybody wanted to become a member or involved.

The great thing I think was the fact that they were three people who were at that 1973 conference who understood right away what needed or what could be done. And they were Paul Perrot, Peter Powers and Mr. Biddle [Livingston Biddle, Jr.] who was an aide through Senator Pell because Pell had already been involved in grants for education and scholarships, et cetera. I think that the fact that they wanted to take the lead and offered almost immediately, if we could get an advisory council together, to provide meeting space at the Smithsonian and some funding to help with the Council's activities, then it became a question of how do we get people to understand this is not going to be a policymaking organization.

NCAC and its Study Committees

And I think that the great thing that was done was, first of all, to appoint an Executive Director in the form of David Shute and also a Secretary to keep notes. It was Janette Gamble. Janette Gamble is the Secretary. Peter Powers being a legal counsel, was of course great help in helping them put together the bylaws, et cetera.

The other person I think who also was important was Charles van Ravenswaay because it was not only that he was director here [at Winterthur] and was willing to have this conference put on and because of the fact that he'd been at one time President of the Board of Trustees of AAM.

And he came from the Midwest and was acutely aware of how much of the ethnic cultural, material of Catholic Midwest and Scandinavian Midwest and German Midwest had been just scattered and unaccounted for. So, his willingness to be involved ... He was the designated representative from Winterthur to the Council at first. His prestige I think having been involved with the Historical Society, and with museums, was really important.

So, the next thing that was important was the fact that the Council set up study committees. The study committees, by appointing people to them from regional centers, from private conservation, from other facilities, the heads of other facilities, et cetera initially was important because it sent a signal that said, "Hey, we don't know the answers, so we want to study. We're not going to give you solutions, but we want to see what the problems are. And how big are they." So, that I think then began almost a stampede of people who wanted to become part of the National Conservation Advisory Council. Obviously, we had to limit the number who could, but they tried hard not to exclude various aspects of the conservation field and of people working in the field in order to make it as representative as possible regarding attempts at conservation in the United States. I think that really made it go.

It was also important I think for the first time ... I mean, the Smithsonian obviously is not only national, but international in its power and outreach and prestige. And so, that sent a signal to foundations in the United States that this was a very important problem, and training centers alone were not going to be able to solve the problem. The other important aspect of that was the students study committees ... This was why David Shute was so good. He would keep on top of the study committees. They had deadlines. It wasn't to be ongoing, ongoing, but they had deadlines to complete their study and provide a report. And then, David Shute was so good about not only reminding them, but getting the material together, and then, following through to circulate the findings of the study committees as reports. They were sent out in huge numbers throughout the field.

I think they were very important aspects for building support for the council, and made it easier to think about the possibility of a national institute for conservation, which again, would not be a policymaking organization, but a research study report support kind of council. That's where I think Biddle was important because he was kept in the loop while all of this was going on. I think he was probably responsible with Pell for what eventually happened and one of the most transformative things that happened was Congress gave money to do some research about what size of the problem, but they gave the money not directly to AAM, they gave it through IMS [Institute of Museum Services]. And under contract, AAM was to work with the museums to see what the size and scope of the problem was. And of the contract, AIC and ... what's the other organization? I mentioned it, but anyway. They wanted to look at the problem from a conservation point-of-view with what facilities existed, what training existed, was the data point enough, what would be required, et cetera.

That I think finally got people aware of the fact that, "Oh yeah, this is a hell of a big problem, but if we work at it in a certain way, we may not get everything done, but that getting some done was better than not getting anything done." So, those reports that came out, and David Shute made sure they came out and was circulated and mailed, were really important.

One of things that upset me frankly and it was too bad, but eventually I guess after about six or seven years of support from the Smithsonian National Museum... Oh and Paul Perrot had come to every meeting. Peter Powers came to some, but couldn't make it to all of them, but Paul came to every meeting. At a meeting I guess after NCAC had been in existence for six or seven years, he indicated to the Council at the meeting the Smithsonian would no longer be able to provide the kind of support it had been providing including probably ending grants on National Museum Act, which he didn't control, but he could apply for. And when he applied for on behalf of the council they got them. And I got upset. I thought, "Hey." I really got angry at Peter and Paul, and I shouldn't have. I just let my emotion take over the fact that are we going to suddenly end this effort that had been in existence now for over several years because of that lack of support?

The Getty Trust

That's what made us think about how are we going to continue the council. Are we even going to be able to make it into a national institute or not. By that time I was going to lots of meetings in California. Some of it with the placing of the Pennsylvania German Exhibit, the art of the Pennsylvania Germans at the San Francisco Museum of Art, et cetera. So, I thought maybe we could convince the Getty Trust to set up their foundation to provide some support. I wish I could remember who went with me, but one of the officers. It wasn't Arthur Beale, but one of the officers of NCAC, they'd go with me, made an appointment with Harold [Williamson] and also Nancy [Englander]. It wasn't an easy sell, but they were willing to listen, which was important. He had the idea that because that they were a trust foundation, they couldn't make grants. And I then pointed out, "Look, Winterthur is a foundation and it makes grants to fellows. It makes grants to other organizations, to get material or information from them. And there's probably no reason IRS would not object for you to be able to provide some support." They not only gave us some thought, but then they did finally come through with a grant that would help the higher development person and some more staffing. That's why I was never aware of any concern by the Getty people about a rivalry between the Getty Conservation Institute and [the NCAC]

We could tell very quickly, they were going to take on ... They could see that what was happening with NCAC and possibly in NIC ... In fact, when NCAC decided to reorganize as NIC, then they saw that as an organization with some legal standing that they'd have no problem giving money to. That's why they provided the funding for a two-year period. It was clear from discussions with them that they saw NCAC/NIC's concern only with problems in the United States. And they were going to take on art history and international conservation problems. That's what they did. So, there was never any rivalry because there was never any thought on the part of NCAC or NIC to get involved on an international basis. Not that we wouldn't welcome ideas and that kind of thing and commentary, but we weren't about to look at what we could do to help each of the ... help Romania or Bulgaria or even Italy. So, that sense of a rivalry I think was pretty quickly dispensed. And that was important.

Arthur Beale

I think once we moved to NIC, Arthur Beale was absolutely indomitable. He gave so much time, so much energy, so much good thinking to where we were going, what could be done, creating more study

committees. But then, also when the study committees finished a study and made some recommendations, or their finding created working committees so that they could continue on with also broad representation among the field. And also keep track of what newer things might be going on or coming up that could be and should be reported. And so, Arthur Beale was just absolutely incredible.

Because he was, that's why they called on him to provide assistance to IMS when Congress decided they were not only going to give that money to AAM, but then later, I think they decided, "Look, if we've got an institute of museum services, which then as you know became an institute for museum and library services [IMLS], why do we need to create one more national institute? Why not give money to set up a program within that agency?" And boy, that was really transformative because out of that came CAP [Conservation Assessment Program], and out of it came the ability for IMS and then IMLS to provide funding on a matching basis for work that was legitimate and could be done. It created a tremendous number of applications for both aspects.

And it also was important because it always used people who were very active in the conservation field to study the applications and make recommendations for or against. And that was important because that made the board, National Museum Service Board, strictly a policy approving, policy discussion group, and not a group that could favor ... you know, "I'm from Louisiana." "I'm from the mid-Atlantic states" et cetera. That that just didn't happen. And so, that I think was a really transformative aspect of the work that was going on. Add in the reports that I already mentioned that were circulating through so many people working in the field in the United States.

I guess once ... I'm not sure why, but I just don't recall why it was suddenly felt that NIC should really then become Heritage Preservation. It may be because it was felt that still having something called the "National Institute" was not a good idea with the term "national" in its title. And also, as an institute it sounded like it might be become more involved with policy and standards, and it shouldn't be. And then, I guess with Congress setting up a lot of money. Their first grant was about \$2.85 million I think to IMS.

National Museum Services Board

The other thing that happened then because of that, because they would be discussing policies, they created what they called the conservation seat on the National Museum Services Board. I held that seat for what seven years. I could report it and I was to report problems that were raised by AIC and by AAM. One of the things that disturbed me was AIC was no problem. It was so easy to work with them. AAM, as soon as I was appointed, the Executive Director came in and laid down the law to me about not ignoring the museum field and making sure I reported to them about things that were going on and needed, et cetera. And I thought to myself, "Boy, you have some nerve." I didn't. I was being tactful, but hey. Why would they think that somebody appointed to that seat would ignore AAM? I don't know. Any rate.

Joyce CAP

Larry Reger did a very good job as Executive Director of Heritage Preservation. I guess IMS saw that. That's why they entered in the contract with IMS to run CAP and MAP, Museum Assessment Program and the Conservation Assessment Program. Boy, I'll tell you. I say that MAP [Museum Assessment Program] was a failure, but CAP was incredible success because it provided support for conservation professionals to go in and work with them and force them to look at their collections. Which ones were important and which ones ... And it taught them I think what a lot of the conservation facilities in the United States knew they had to do if they were in organizations with major collections. That they have to put in some categories of one, two and three. We got to work on the ones.

Then we'll get to the twos. And the threes, maybe we'll never get to, but you know. So, that was important.

So many of the MAP reports would go to boards of institutions and they'd shove them into a drawer and not act on them. That was horrible.

I guess the other transformative things that came out of NCAC and NIC was the fact that all of a sudden, you began to see work going on in architectural conservation, and saving sculpture. It was very popular in communities because most communities, well, I mean you see the arguments in heat over now about taking down all these Confederacy monuments. It isn't that people would want to remember slavery only. It's that it's part of their community. Some of them like the sculptors who did them. So, they got a lot of community support behind that program. That was the first program that Heritage Preservation was successful with. That probably led to IMS being willing to contract with them for MAP and CAP.

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The Demise of Heritage Preservation

Why "Heritage Preservation"? I think the whole thing about the demise of Heritage Preservation was what was happening with finances in the Federal government. Somebody in the Federal government decided that FEMA and other organizations could take over their jobs, and they were already being funded. But FEMA couldn't do it, never has done it. That's been a horrible mistake I think to have ended that amount of funding. It wasn't direct funding. The funding always came through, first IMS, and then, IMLS. So, all of their work was done under contract. And if you didn't have any money, you couldn't have any contract. So, that was very unfortunate.

Some of the things I noticed about some of the things that had been recommended, but have never been picked up. We still don't have ... Why couldn't we have set up under the Bureau of Standards, a conservation department that would be looking into all the time, materials, and longevity studies, and that kind of thing. A lot of that work is being done individually, but it doesn't really filter through the whole field. And I think that was probably, again, a result of NIC being merged into Heritage Preservation. There was no contract for that. And it's possible the Bureau of Standards didn't want it. Who knows. I don't know. I just wasn't party to any of those discussions.

What was needed was a separate department and laboratory that would be dealing only with materials relating to conservation problem. And the Bureau of Standards I guess decided, "God, we've got no problems with what we've got, so we don't want that too." I don't know. But it's still important, I think, because sure the results will get published in the Journal of AIC.

Kress Foundation

Peter Sparks and I made at least two trips personally to talk to people at the Kress Foundation. We just couldn't get through to them. And they were invited to that 1973 Conference, but didn't send a representative. Maybe they felt their resources could only be directed to fine art, I don't know. But they would listen, but then we'd never get any results. Peter and I spent three years trying to fundraise to get the training program started. Once the '73 conference said, "Yeah, we need a third program" and we hadn't alarmed NYU or Cooperstown; they became very cooperative. But we couldn't seem to make a breakthrough until we pulled that conference together in 1973 because Winterthur and the University of

Delaware wanted to have the training program. But neither one of them was going to fund it entirely. In fact, Winterthur made it clear, they weren't going to fund it at all.

The other thing that I think was so ... so . . . When Charles van Ravenswaay retired, he requested that I become Winterthur's representative to the Council. And every other director after him was happy to provide the time to be involved, which was important. They could have said no. And I don't remember any ... When the council had its meetings, when NIC had its meetings, I don't remember any real animosity. I think there was discussion, there was disagreements, but not animosity. That I think was another important factor in the work that they were able to get done for so many years.

Once we couldn't meet at the Smithsonian, we were meeting at the National Architects ... the headquarters of the National Association of Architects in Washington, DC. Yeah, that was important because it also brought into ... what's the name of that group that still meets? Their professional organization. [American Institute of Architects?] Well, in fact when we finished in 1967, with the HVAC systems of the whole museum, that organization invited me to talk about what they had done. That was when they met in Halifax and asked me to give a talk about what the systems were, what problems we had, how we solved them, that kind of thing. I told them that I don't know that we solved them, but it's better than it ever had been. When we had to race around the building closing windows. And chasing birds out of chimneys that hadn't been capped. Yeah. It seems to me that's the most important aspect of everything that happened once NCAC was founded. And then, NIC and Heritage Preservation, that now there is a much broader understanding of the fact that if you set priorities, you're going to be able to accomplish. If you don't set priorities, you're just going to say, "Oh. Oh. Oh. What a headache." And it is still a headache. Sure, we have a library conservator, book conservator here now, but the job, given the size of our library is enormous. And look at the Library of Congress or the New York Public Library, et cetera. But again, four of them are at least working on the problem, providing some resources and facilities for that problem instead of ignoring it.

If we kept trying to make an effort toward perfect, probably nothing would get done. And that's what ... I still remember a talk that a historian gave at a conference in Hagley when I was an assistant curator. He called his thought the Doctrine of Imperfection. He pointed out that what made America so quickly an industrial giant was to not do what so many European countries did with their manufacturing processes, and that is the tolerations had to be absolutely perfect. Here, as long as it was perfect enough to work, you went ahead and did it. And somehow or other, it took us a long time to get to that point with tackling the problem of conservation of cultural property. The problem with that doctrine is of course when it gets too sloppy then you fall behind in your ability to prove something that works.

I think the fact that we began the focus on priorities was what made the big breakthrough. There's still a lot of work to do. So many institutions either don't try to find the money or don't find the money, and that includes Winterthur, to create decent storage facilities for their collections and property. I mean, ours are horrible. I think it's a disgrace. ..And this is true I think of so many institutions. There needs to be ... if we could convince Congress to have IMLS set up a program in which they would provide funding, even on a matching basis, to create storage facilities, that would be a big breakthrough too.

No, I was not [involved in the but] I read it, but I was not ... You had to be appointed from your area to the Council at AAM. When somebody else either retired or gave it up, then they would look for someone else. So, I was not involved with the Belmont Report in its production, but I thought it was great, but again, it was so general. And I think it created more angst frankly than it meant to. But that was the reason why later once NCAC came into being that IMS was willing to give money to AAM to

look at the size of the problem. Once they did that, then that got national publicity, which it should have gotten all along. Again, I'm afraid that national publicity made people also say, "Oh that's so big. . . "

Let's see. Well, I had talked about committees and reports and circulation of them. Oh yeah. That was the other thing that I think that helped with NCAC and NIC to herald this preservation. That they not only issued the reports, but they also issued discussion papers and asked for commentary from the field. So, it was clear that they wanted to involve everyone and not exclude anyone.

There still is ... and I don't know that you'll ever be able to get together a national conservation plan. We don't have a real national conservation plan. The reason that's important is I think that we still need more training programs frankly. I really do... On the North American continent, well, if you include Mexico and Canada, you still have what? Maybe seven or eight training programs. I can see a need for probably double than that frankly.

One of the good things that some not-for-profits do is they show how much they contribute in the way of money toward taxes that are paid, this kind of service, that kind of service. Why conservation doesn't do in part of a national plan in order to say, "Our cultural property in the United States is worth ten gazillion dollars. But we're only spending 1.5% of all our gross national product to take care of it." And we don't do that. I know it makes an impact because, again, Walter Laird came to me at one point when he was Chairman of the Board and was concerned about the amount of money we were spending at Winterthur in conservation. What I did was then when I met with Walter, I said, "Walter, the collections at Winterthur, if they were assets and went on the market, are worth today," and this is 1970-'71, "are worth \$10 billion." I said, "We're spending 1.5% total for the whole support of our facilities and personnel and laboratory." He, being involved in finances, when he heard that, "Oh okay. That makes sense."

I still remember being a big mouth at an AIC meeting before we got the go ahead to build our conservation facilities here. I was at the annual meeting during the general meeting and raised the point about AAM is working with their representative senators. They have their headquarters in Washington and they're working at that all the time. Why isn't AIC doing this?

Well, I already have taken seriously the fact that if the professional definition of a curator is one who's responsible for collections. And if you're responsible for collection, it doesn't mean you're only responsible for finding money to buy more collection.

When I was still an assistant curator, the first annual meeting of AAM that I went to, Caroline Keck was on the program, and reamed directors and curators of museums and historical agencies for not taking care of their collections. She made no bones about it.

Heritage Preservation was basically a contract "Let's get it done" organization rather than one that was thinking about what do we need and what are our problems. And that certainly is a problem that lack of information about what is going on in general in the field in the country or on the continent. I mean, I knew when we had to set up our facilities that I had to find out what they were doing in Canada and Mexico too because I wanted to profit from what they told me they would have done differently.