

Some Save Outdoor Sculpture Activities

by Susan Nichols

Between 1989 and 2015, Save Outdoor Sculpture! (SOS!) conducted a comprehensive survey of America's outdoor sculpture, jointly sponsored by Heritage Preservation, Inc. and the Smithsonian American Art Museum. Together with 106 cooperating regional partners and nearly 7,000 vital and dedicated volunteers, 32,000 outdoor sculptures across America were identified and recorded. Recruited, trained and launched, volunteers combed their locales to document outdoor sculpture, public or private, new or old—the first-ever effort to inventory our national collection and to describe the condition of the artworks. Volunteers measured, photographed and researched background on the outdoor artworks in all fifty states and the District of Columbia. SOS! also helped educate local communities regarding the condition of their sculptural heritage pieces – whether they were safe or endangered due to weather and acid rain in general or lack of maintenance in particular. Several communities were already familiar with the need for ongoing maintenance; others were introduced to that “must do” piece of responsible ownership of outdoor sculpture.

In Cleveland, Ohio, in addition to the documentation of sculptures, Juilee Decker, the Sculpture Center's Conservation Program Coordinator, developed a series of programs focused on the need for proper maintenance of sculptures. Several local school children and Girl Scouts were introduced to the history of local outdoor sculptures and the need for regular and appropriate care. A professional conservation team was hired to clean and protect the James G.C. Hamilton's monument to Harvey Rice (1800-1891), father of the common school system in Ohio.

Decker visited with students from the Harvey Rice Elementary to share information about Rice's sculpture located a few miles from their school. The students learned about methods for creating sculpture, the process for conserving sculpture, and the importance of caring for public sculpture. After professional treatment, the Harvey Rice sculpture was re-dedicated with a centennial celebration in the fall of 1999. Students from the Harvey Rice Elementary School saw the completed conservation of the bronze sculpture and met descendants of the sculptor.



Figure 1. Sculpture before conversation

Another extension of sculpture preservation, was a project for Girl Scouts from Natchitoches, Louisiana Brownie Troop 462 and Junior Troop 1512 to earn their Save Outdoor Sculpture patch. To earn the SOS! patch, girls were required to complete two learning activities and one service activity. The patch program began a lesson from Jason Church, a conservator with the National Park Service's National Center for Preservation Technology and Training on how bronze sculptures are cast. Next the girls learned how bronze weathers and patinas are formed. An activity in weathering was viewing randomly selected pennies and arranging them from the oldest to the newest dates. Next the Scouts took the same pennies and rearranged them from the darkest to lightest. A discussion ensued as to why some of the pennies fell back into the same arrangement as they had with the date and why some of the newest pennies looked the oldest. The Brownies and Juniors then were taught why and how bronze deteriorates. Following the talks on bronze deterioration, the girls learned how stone sculptures are made from the quarry to the sculpture. The girls learned how and why stone sculptures deteriorate from pollution, vandalism, and human interaction. The final lessons discussed best practices when cleaning stone sculpture and stone grave markers.



Juniors chart the age of their pennies.

One additional service activity was needed to complete the SOS! patch. Girl Scouts, troop leaders and parents met at American Cemetery in Natchitoches to clean and care for the cemetery sculptures. The National Park Service staff member Jason Church, with the help of Scotty Williams of Williams Gravestone Cleaning and Payne Williams of the Natchitoches Historic Foundation supervised the Girl Scouts' cleaning of over 60 historic stone grave markers. Geared in goggles and gloves, the girls used D2 Biological Solution, soft bristle brushes, and lots of water to clean over 60 headstones of marble and granite. This activity earned them a combined 63 hours of voluntary community service for the Natchitoches Historic Foundation. The Girl Scouts were in amazingly high spirits all morning. A few overheard remarks of the day included, "This is way more fun than cleaning my room," and "I am just imagining that I am Cinderella scrubbing." It is important to remember that it is never too early to teach respect and care of historic sites and cemeteries to our communities' youth.

Save Outdoor Sculpture! was a collective effort in all ways. Approximately 7,000 volunteers in all fifty states plus the District of Columbia participated in finding, documenting and photographing outdoor sculpture. Exhibitions about local sculptures were created; some traveled state-wide. Suggestions for teachers in elementary, middle and high school classes aimed to integrate local outdoor sculpture in math, science, language arts and art coursework.

Save Outdoor Sculpture! (SOS!) concluded its documentation and assessment of 32,000 outdoor sculptures in 1995. As the first and, thus far, the only documentation of our national collection of outdoor sculpture, SOS! raised awareness of the ways in which communities chose to reflect and honor their past. Comparisons of outdoor sculpture circa eighteenth and nineteenth centuries with those created in the twentieth century raised discussions of taste changes, topic or theme selection, choice of material, placement and seating. Sadly, when Heritage Preservation disbanded in 2015, Save Outdoor Sculpture came to an end.