

In Memoriam: Maureen Ogden

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All “old-timers” in the New Jersey History community were saddened by the death of former Assemblywoman Maureen Ogden on August 17. While revered as “Saint Maureen” for her work for the arts and the environment, she played an equally pivotal role in advancing the cause of New Jersey history.

We honor Maureen Ogden first for serving as co-architect of the 1987 “Quality of Life” bond act, along with Governor Tom Kean, Secretary of State Jane Burgio and Senator John Lynch. That bond issue provided the first substantial funding, some \$25 million, to the New Jersey Historic Trust, turning that agency instantly into the prime funder of historic preservation bricks-and-mortar projects in every corner of the state.

Equally important, Maureen Ogden provided the road map for realizing a principal goal of our state’s history museums and historic sites in the 1980s and ‘90s — the creation of a General Operating Support (GOS) grant program managed by the New Jersey Historical Commission. For its first three decades, the Historical Commission operated only a small, if important, project grant program on a shoe-string annual budget of \$200,000. That did little to build the capacity of our historical organizations, denying them the kind of GOS grants that spurred the flourishing of the arts from the 1980s on.

Throughout the latter ‘80s and early ‘90s, the New Jersey Association of Museums (NJAM) took the lead in advocating for a history GOS program. In early 1995, NJAM leaders Nancy Gay and I sought Maureen Ogden’s advice on how to proceed. In a meeting in her Milburn office, she declared that a white paper produced by a task force would be an essential first step in securing the support of the legislature and the governor’s office. To that end, she immediately pushed through legislation that created the Task Force on New Jersey History. From the Task Force’s meetings in 1996-97 emerged a report that placed a priority on creating a History GOS grant program. Fortuitously, that recommendation was picked up by the chair of the Assembly Appropriations Committee, Richard Bagger, who with Maureen Ogden’s help, pushed through what we called the “Bagger Bill” in 1999. It appropriated \$4.5 million for general operating support grants for historical organizations. While that number has fluctuated in the decades that followed (now, happily, at a new high), this Historical Commission GOS grant program has



provided the steady stream of operating support that has brought history to life throughout the state.

It was to honor these essential contributions that the Maureen Ogden Award was created by the Advocates for New Jersey History. For a dozen or more years in the aughts and early teens, presenting this award for lifetime achievement was a high point of the annual New Jersey History Issues Conventions. Hopefully, this award will be revived to sustain the memory of this extraordinary champion.