

# The Founding of PHSNE: An Oral History

by Amanda Smith and the *Journal* Committee



**Figure 1.** PHSNE group photo from June 3, 1973. Our archive volunteers have been working for some time to identify all the faces in the group. If you can identify anyone in the photo, contact the PHSNE archive using the form at [pshne.org/archive/AboutThisSite/ContactArchiveAdmin](https://pshne.org/archive/AboutThisSite/ContactArchiveAdmin). Photo by Charles DeBois Hodges. Scan courtesy of Richard Bolt via PHSNE archive web page. **Front row (left to right):** Henry Weisenburger, Nellie Grube, Herb Grube, Valerie Craig, John S. Craig, Walter Lazar, Richard Sanford. **Row two:** Tom Connell, Sheila Meek, Abigail Deacon, (unknown), Michel Auer, Matt Isenburg, Sharon Isenburg, Lawrence Rochette, Luana Rochette. **Row three:** Arthur Lewis, Ellie Lieberman, (unknown), (unknown), Tom Connell, Jr., Charlie Deacon, (unknown), Dick Bolt, Bryon Owens, Mike Kessler. **Back row:** Mel Lieberman, Paul Wing (red shirt), Henry Deeks, (unknown), (unknown), John Hess (not verified), (unknown), (unknown), Guy Livingston, Ben Corning, (unknown), Larry Cuneo. Photo courtesy of PHSNE archive.

The early history of the Photographic Historical Society of New England is replete with the names of early members who helped make the organization what it is today. To recognize forty years of promoting the collecting and study of photographic history, we contacted the four founding members of PHSNE to record their recollections of the events that led them to found PHSNE, their early organizational efforts, and their thoughts on the society. These interviews were conducted with each member individually during the summer of 2013, but taken together they comprise an oral history of our organization and its impact on the world of photographic history over the past four decades.

The official history of PHSNE's founding, as it appears in our current membership directory, reads as follows and can also be viewed on our website, [phsne.org/archive/History/Home](http://phsne.org/archive/History/Home), along with early photographs and selected documents:

*The Photographic Historical Society of New England was founded April 8, 1973, at a meeting attended by some 75 interested collectors at the Old Edgell Library, Framingham Centre, Massachusetts. By early 1974 the founders, other Board members, and general members had created a fully functioning society, operating much as it does today.*

*The first meeting was organized by Lawrence Rochette, Richard Bolt, Richard Sanford, and Bryon Owens. An interim Board was established at that meeting,*

*chaired by Mr. Rochette, and consisting of the other three founders, plus John S. Craig, Valerie P. Craig, Matthew Isenburg, Sharon Isenburg, and Luana Rochette. Luana Rochette was designated Treasurer, and Valerie Craig Secretary. Ben Corning was also added to the interim Board as a Member-at-Large. Mr. Robert Pratt, editor of the newsletter, was added to the interim Board as a nonvoting member.*

*Robert Pratt started publication of the Newsletter with Issue #1 reporting on the April 8, 1973 meeting. Publication continued regularly in 1973. In January 1974, Craig Volmer became the editor and the Newsletter was renamed Photo-Nostalgia with the publication of issue # seven.*

*One of the motivations for forming a New England society was to avoid the trips to New York to attend trade shows. Thus, planning for a trade show began immediately and the first PHSNE Trade Show was held on September 22 and 23, 1973 at Hotel 128, in Dedham Massachusetts.*

*Under the direction of the interim Board, a set of by-laws for the Society was drafted. These first by-laws were approved by the general membership in January, 1974. Under the by-laws, the first official slate of officers and Board members was elected to serve until June 1974. The officers elected were: John S. Craig, President; Matthew Isenburg, Vice President; Richard Sanford, Secretary; and*

*Bryon Owens, Treasurer. Board Members-at-Large were Richard Bolt, Robert Pratt, Lawrence Rochette, Richard Russack, and Paul Wing. The by-laws provided for annual elections to commence in May with one-year terms starting in June. After discussion at the November 1973 interim Board meeting, a membership directory was started. It was published in 1974, after the election of the new officers. The PHSNE 1974 Directory lists 96 memberships, 60 of which were Charter Memberships. Charter Members joined by, or during, the June 3, 1973 meeting.*

*The aims and goals of the Photographic Historical Society of New England include:*

- 1) To promote an interest in, and a knowledge of, our photographic history and heritage, including the invention and advancement of apparatus and processes, and the related literature; and*
- 2) To promote friendship among those interested in the collection and history of photography and to provide an atmosphere within which those persons can share their knowledge and benefit from the knowledge of others.*

*The Society, now forty years old, has continued to operate under these aims and goals, using trade shows, publications, educational exhibits, monthly presentations, and the World Wide Web to preserve and promote the history of photography.*

## Developing an Interest in Photography

*Richard Bolt:* I was going to college for mechanical engineering, and to keep my car on the road I was doing professional photography. I went from a Brownie, a cheap Brownie camera, to a 4 x 5 Graflex and a 2<sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub> x 3<sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub> Graflex for color.

I was doing newspaper work, portraits, and so forth. I worked for a wedding studio and did some [work] on my own. The local newspaper was hell to keep up with and get the stuff ready for the next morning newspaper, but when you covered the local women's groups, somebody always had a daughter or knew somebody that was going to get married. So I got into doing weddings and making money that way.

*Bryon Owens:* I love art, and I'm a frustrated artist who got into photography. Eventually I had a darkroom and enlargers and all that kind of stuff. We were looking for bargains one time, and I ran across a little camera. It was so cheap I couldn't leave it there, so I bought it.

*Richard Sanford:* I was stationed in Greenland for a year, and the Air Force base had a hobby shop. I couldn't send my prints out for processing because they took weeks to return. It was mostly black and white in the 1960s—this was around 1963. I had taken pictures around the base and started doing portraits of the guys to send home. And I processed them all in the photo lab. That was my start. Then when I moved back to the States, after a year I started my own studio, in my basement at my house in Buzzard's Bay [a locality in Bourne, Massachusetts].

That was my whole career. I did photography until I left town in 1984. I would do portraits and passports. Passports were very lucrative—I made a lot of money on passports, but you had to process them that night. But weddings were my big thing.

*Lawrence Rochette:* I got into photography as somewhat of a hobby. But to be more specific on this, I had been fooling around with cameras and photography for a long time. I had a subscription to *Modern Photography* magazine in the late 1960s. I think it was around 1969 they ran an article about a New York collector, and they highlighted his collection. About six months later I found a Kodak Ektra, and that started my camera collecting.

## The Transition from Photographer to Collector

*Richard Bolt:* Well, I knew where some of the other collectors were. I was working for Hamilton Standard in Windsor Locks, Connecticut, so I was running back and forth every day to work, from Springfield, Massachusetts to down in the Hartford area. I didn't know of anyone picking [through the antique shops and flea markets for cameras] in that area—except John Craig [PHSNE's first president]—so I went.

As I was going back and forth every day [between Springfield and Hartford] I advertised in the penny savers—the little-ad things, local-ad things, and it was free, I think, to put in—that I collected cameras and was interested in buying. People would call me, and I would stop on the way home from Hamilton Standard, where I was doing system safety and reliability on the backpack life support system

that they walked on the moon with. So I was stopping by, and some people would have whole collections from their relatives that ran a photo studio or did professional photography. Others just had single cameras. So that's not *exactly* how I got started, but it certainly built the collection up fast.

*Bryon Owens:* At first it was just equipment. I did use some of those old folding cameras, and I used to get 620 film and stuff. It was a treat. I was basically into black-and-white because I didn't want to fool with color. I made contact prints from a lot of black-and-white glass negatives. I still shoot pictures today, but of course, we're in digital now. And I said, "Geez, if we'd had this a few years back, we probably wouldn't have had a society!" But, I don't know. Someday someone is likely to collect all those digital cameras, too. The Polaroid [family of cameras] I thought was a very important one. That's about the only thing I've got left. I have the 4A, the grandfather of them all, but the rest have all been passed on.

The first camera that I bought was like a 3A folding camera [the 3A Folding Pocket Kodak]. Of course I ended up buying anything I could get my hands on that I could afford. The only real significant camera, which I traded with Matt Isenburg, was a sixteen-lens wet plate camera, and that was the only one that I felt was of any significant value in my collection. But I never found a daguerreian camera or anything like that.

*Richard Sanford:* I studied to become a professional photographer after I got out of the Air Force. It was this interest that made me wonder how it was done in the early years. A friend gave me an

old roll-film camera with film still in it from the 1940s, so I processed that and found some family pictures on it. I was excited, so I got some more old cameras and used them. I eventually ran ads to buy old cameras and ended up with one of the largest collections of large cameras. I bought thirteen large cameras from the remains of an old studio in Newport, Rhode Island. I later collected toy cameras and small spy cameras.

I started running ads in the magazines. Then *Yankee* magazine featured me in one of their articles. So I got some nice feedback off of that. And by going to an auction in Plymouth [Massachusetts] I met Bryon Owens. Then I went to a camera show in Ohio, met John Craig and some

people out there, and I went to a show in Chicago. So I just met people at some of these shows—you know, buy and sell. Usually I would buy more than I sold.

### Collecting Equipment and Images

*Richard Bolt:* I got into collecting equipment because I knew what I was using, which was modern at that time—of course they're antiques now—but I was very interested in the design changes and the interesting designs that had gone through from the 1840s on up. That was what got me going.

It started out as equipment only. But I soon found out or figured what was important important to me or

important to the country or whoever—was the images, not the cameras. So I tried to switch over, and I never really found a way to trade cameras for images. They're just too different, but eBay is giving me that chance now.

I actually made salt prints and researched them because I was buying salt prints from the 1850s–1860s period, and I wanted to be able to detect the forgeries. So by making them myself I could see the colors and the way they were made and so on. I really got into it so I would not buy a forgery, and there were some out there. There were some guys selling photographs from the Civil War period that were phony. Even way back people were trying to pawn them off. They still are; you can see them on eBay.



**Figure 2.** Photo of a PHSNE meeting at the old Edgell Library in Framingham, Massachusetts, believed to have been taken in the 1970s. Photographer unknown, courtesy of Alan Kattelle. Scan by Joe Walters via PHSNE archive web page.

I have a collection of salt prints, and I even have a Talbotype [by William Henry Fox Talbot] in my collection. I even have a whole-plate daguerreotype. Matt Isenburg and I collected them at the same time.

I haven't collected in many years. It's mostly what I collected many years ago that I've been holding and transporting around the country.

*Lawrence Rochette:* Initially I collected equipment. When I ended up with no room to move in my living room because I had just picked up a collection of large and small you-name-it, I decided it was probably time to get away from cameras and move more into images.

What really focused my collecting

on images was this: I had gone around to antique shops and other places asking them about cameras, lenses, and stereo views. I was over in Acton [Massachusetts], and a fellow told me that there was a lady in Acton who sold stereo views out of her home. I met with her, and I picked up a bunch of stereo views. It turned out later that these were part of a world tour that her family had taken back in the late 1800s.

One of them is very rare if not unique. It is a stereograph of the Confederate cruiser *Shenandoah* taken at a dock in Australia in 1865. It shows the Stars and Bars on the masthead and we know its history. Once I found out about that, I ended up doing a lot of research. It had been built in the River Clyde [near Glasgow, Scotland] by

the Confederacy, sailed for the South Atlantic, and commissioned as a naval vessel for the Confederate navy. It sailed around the tip of South Africa, went to Australia, and was refitted there.

I've given copies of this view—not the original stereo view—to several people, and one of these days I'll probably dispose of it, but not yet.

So that started my collection. Now I own somewhere around 4,000 stereo views. Most of my collection is focused on maritime images, ships—which I like—lighthouses—which I *really* like—other vessels, and miscellaneous things along the line. So that's my collection.

*Richard Sanford:* Well, originally my collection was just equipment, but at an



antique show I saw a daguerreotype, so I bought it, thinking it was worth *something*. I took it to the Columbus [Ohio] show, and I put a price of twenty dollars on it. I didn't know. I'd paid, like, fifteen. John Craig—I think it was John Craig—bought it right away the first night. And he looked at the sticker and said, “Is that twenty dollars or two hundred?” I say twenty. Well, it was an outdoor scene with a horse in it. Now, regular daguerreotypes were just people. That was the rule. An outdoor scene with an animal was super-rare. I didn't know. So that's learning the hard way.

I also had one stereo camera from a studio in Newport, Rhode Island. That was on a wood stand that was hand-carved by the guy that was the photographer. I had one of the largest sub-mini [sub-miniature camera] collections in the country. But I've bought and sold so many things now it's hard to remember them all.

### Meeting the Other Founders

*Richard Bolt:* Some of the local collectors knew each other, and there was a list at the Eastman House [George Eastman House International Museum of Photography and Film, Rochester, New York] with the very small number of collectors that they knew about, and they would give you a copy. Then we'd talk to each other. So we kind of knew each other, but we would see each other at organizations that were already going. The New York collectors' group [Photographic Society of New York] would have a flea market—a tag sale, a camera sale—and we would see each other there. That's where we got to talking and my idea was, “Why are we down

here when all the good stuff is up in New England?” That's when I brought up the idea of starting our own club in New England.

*Bryon Owens:* I was going to flea markets and—just like everybody else—antique stores and all that stuff. Then I ran across a fellow I used to work with, at an auction, and that was Bob Pratt. I said “What are you doing here?” He said, “I'm bidding on a camera,” and I said, “Oh, geez.” So we got together. He came down to the house and looked at what I had, and I went over to his house a couple weeks later and looked at what he had. We were going to New York, to the New York shows—this was years ago—and I kept saying to Bob, “We should have our own society.”

The next thing I know, we met Dick Sanford at an auction, and the three of us became friends. Then Dick knew Larry Rochette. Actually the four of us got together, and Larry was the best at organizing. He's an organizer from way back, I guess. He got in touch with a few people, and next thing I knew we had a big list of people who were collecting throughout New England. We sent them all a mailing saying that we'd like to have a meeting and start the Photographic Historical Society of New England.

*Lawrence Rochette:* During the early 1970s I found that there were other collectors and that the closest meetings were the New York group. They would hold a show twice a year at one of the hotels there. I went down initially by myself or with my wife. Then I met John Craig, and we would stay with him and his wife halfway through the trip and then drive down the rest of the

way. We all decided it was too damn far, and we couldn't meet on a regular basis. So then it started.

*Richard Sanford:* I was at a camera show in Columbus, Ohio with John Craig, and we talked about having a club of our own so we wouldn't have to travel to all these shows. I was at an auction in Plymouth [Massachusetts] when I ran into Bryon Owens, and I mentioned to him that I had talked to John Craig about a club. What happened next I am not quite clear, but we set up a meeting and posted notices somewhere.

But a funny side story is I when met Bryon Owens, he had Bob Pratt with him. Bob Pratt lived in Taunton [Massachusetts], and he was convinced that collecting was dead. I don't know how many years he had been collecting. He had some cameras, but he stopped collecting at that time. And I was just starting.

### The First Meeting and Early Years

*Richard Bolt:* There was Bryon Owens, Dick Sanford, and Larry Rochette, and they were the hard workers and they lived in the Boston area. So they organized the club meetings and things like that. And I was, as I am now, into finding and knowing where people are and contacting them. So I put together the list of who we were going to try to get involved. Of course, they had some as well, but because I was living, let's see, two hundred miles away—then a hundred and fifty, I guess—it was kind of hard to keep in touch, so we had to go to Boston. That's where we had meetings and so forth.

The thing that I write up quite often is that John Craig was very interested in the group, and he was selling

commercially to the other members—cameras and other photographic items, books and so on. John was worried because he was afraid a club would destroy his sales. Eventually we convinced him that it was good to have the group because it could increase his sales and that it wouldn't hurt his sales, and it would help us. So once that barrier was crossed, it was a win-win. John had the list of where all these people were as well, so John made it really go. We had a list of all the people in New England and New York that were interested in it. Eventually we had people coming in from California for the meetings and the shows and so forth.

*Bryon Owens:* The only thing I can really say, it was a happy group. Everybody got along. There was no back-stabbing or any of that kind of stuff. And everybody contributed. They might not have had a title, but they all contributed. They all put up signs, or they passed the word around. It just was a great feeling just to be part of. It took me out of myself—I was sort of bashful. And I found out if you don't open your mouth and ask, "Have you got any old cameras?" you're not going to get them. So it brought me out of my shell—photography and the society.

I think between Bobby Pratt, Dick Sanford, Larry Rochette, and me, there will always be a tie there. Dick Bolt was in there too, but we didn't get to have him at many meetings because he was farther out on the [Massachusetts] Turnpike. It just was so great, what we went through. And it worked. It also helped a lot when we got some of the bigger names out there. That brought in more people too.

Bobby and I were both in the

printing trade—and he did all the stuff for us to mail out. I don't think he actually got the credit he deserved. And Larry, he went on the high side, he got us incorporated as a nonprofit. And John Craig, he did a lot of stuff nobody knows about, too, that helped. Matt Isenburg did too. But the people that came, the members that came, they were the heart and soul of the society. Some of them became presidents or joined the board. At meetings, people would bring projectors and show things you couldn't just go downtown and find. One of the guys presented stereo views, and he gave everybody the [3-D] glasses. He was showing all kinds of things. He's passed now. You probably don't know who he was. He lived in Hingham [Massachusetts], I think. I know his name like my own, but I just can't pull it up [prominent stereo collector and longtime PHSNE member Paul Wing].

We had a big board of directors. That's on record, anyway. Then it just kept going and going. Then we had our first shows, and I said "This is really working! All the work we did is paying off." And we had some *really* good people that joined us. Everybody was a helper. It was really like a family for the first couple years. And then it got bigger and bigger and bigger and bigger and things kept getting better and better. I'm just thrilled that the society is still going because it's an important thing. I recommend it all the time to anybody I think would be interested in it.

*Lawrence Rochette:* I'll tell you how I approached it, and I had help as well. I went and found a list of camera collectors in a publication—I think it was in the early 70s—by a fellow from

California at that time. It was called the *National Directory of Camera Collectors*. I got to meet other people.

We recently lost a famous camera collector from New York, and I can't remember his name right now, but he published a newsletter. He wouldn't give me his mailing list, but we would send out pre-stamped envelopes, and he would put the names on them and send them out to all of his list people. So from there I used every resource that I could find and every resource that everybody else could find to find out who might be interested.

After [the founders] met initially, Dick Sanford, Bryon Owens, and I would meet often at my house in Brockton [Massachusetts]. My little five-room ranch had a lot of people and a lot of stuff coming in and out to actually get this group rolling.

We finally ended up having our first [public] meeting over in Framingham [April 8, 1973]. I got to know some people on the library board. We had about forty people there for the first meeting, and people from all over [official records show seventy-five people in attendance]. People I never knew showed up. But it was a lot of fun and things sort of grew from there. We stayed there about two years for meetings and then it became not only too small but they had not kept the place up—it was cold and wet and whatever. So we found various other places to meet as we went along.

I keep thinking of things we did just to get the people going. I used to go to photographic fairs as far away as Chicago. I was a lot younger, a lot more mobile. And I'd get to meet a lot of wonderful people. In fact our first charter, all the information for it, came primarily from an attorney

who worked for Ford Motor Company at that time. I used to see him and his wife at shows and I asked him—you don't get it if you don't ask—so I asked him to give me an idea of an outline of what to work for. And that's what we worked on initially, the background for our organization.

*Richard Sanford:* We were in Framingham, I believe, for the first meeting and I think something like fifty people showed up. It was quite exciting. It was once a month, usually the second Sunday of the month. We figured that was the day most people weren't working. That's how it started.

### The Past and Present Role of PHSNE

*Richard Bolt:* I'd like to see PHSNE keep people on by making sure they can take away something. That's where I'd go. The education and even online bidding or something, you know, as a way to keep them involved as a total group. There's a British group that I listen to or read their stuff online.

I live in a foreign country, too. It's called western Maryland. If you were here you'd understand what I'm talking about. We live on a lake and it's really nice. I'm remote, and I don't get up [to New England] because of the long drive, even though I have relatives up there. I don't really feel like I'm in touch. You know, I'm not involved with any webinars. I get to see some pictures of what was in [each Photographica] show, but I don't really get the feeling of being there, and I don't get enough information. I get more from the Internet about each camera and that's why I started running a Facebook page to try to solve some of that.

*Bryon Owens:* There are always questions. You can't know it all yourself. Without other people, nothing works. You have to have other people. Bob [Pratt] taught me a few things. Larry [Rochette] taught me a few things. Dick Sanford taught me a few things. I taught them a few things. And so forth and so on. And that's what it is. It's helping each other and getting down to where people have the knowledge, and other people have a knowledge area.

It's always good to have someplace and somebody you can talk to, and a meeting was the best place. Every month—I think it was the second or third Sunday of the month—I couldn't wait. I couldn't wait to go. It was pretty exciting. I would say the first two years for me were the best. It was a thrill. And most of the people there were always excited. There wasn't a dull moment. Someone would bring a show-and-tell and you'd go "Oh, holy mackerel! Where did they find *that*?" And it just went on and on, but like everything else you get older. I still appreciate it though. Every time I get the newsletter I say to myself "This is great. I'm so happy for it."

*Lawrence Rochette:* We were not as socially oriented as we might have been back then. Everybody was looking to amplify their own collection, or however you want to put it. Initially it was a group of people who were interested either in cameras or images. In the latter part of the first years, there was more interest in images, whether they be daguerreotypes, stereo views, or tintypes or anything like that. We started out heavily into cameras, then it turned around 180 degrees.

I notice now that there seem

to be alignments with educational organizations [and PHSNE]. Spread the word. The history of photography has always been part of our agenda, from day one.

*Richard Sanford:* In the beginning PHSNE was for antique camera collectors. When we started the club, it was a hard time to put a value on anything. There were no price guides on cameras. There were some image collectors, but people in the club were hardware-type people. That was the main challenge as far as the field itself went.

I think we had a role in making camera collecting popular. New York was the big club at the time, but PHSNE is all over the world, as you know. And it was the influence from other people—like the book by Michel Auer [whose first book was *Collection Michel Auer*, published in 1972]—that really grabbed the market. And Harry Gross—the Harry Gross book [*Antique and Classic Cameras*, published in 1964] was the first one around here that was published and gave people some idea of what to look for.

We certainly hoped we could influence collecting; that was why we used the word *historical*. But I'm sure there'll be continued interest in old-time photography. People in the future will still want to trace photographic history back to the beginning.

### The Future of Collecting

*Bryon Owens:* It's something we really won't know until it happens. You can't tell the future. But I think there's always going to be some people interested in the history. Actually if you go to the Eastman House like Bob and I used to do, or the Museum

of Fine Arts in Boston—they have a beautiful display of Southworth & Hawes daguerreotypes—it gets people interested in daguerreotypes and so forth. I think young people, they're into technology now, but there's always that little spark that will go off sometime where they say, "How the heck did this get to where it is?" And they'll get into it. But it's like everything else. Nothing lasts forever, but you never know.

*Lawrence Rochette:* Hopefully PHSNE is going to be around. There are only a few organizations like ours that haven't folded. So that's it. And we, luckily, had some good input in the early days, and Jack Naylor knew people that I didn't know. The first of our bankroll, if you will, came from Jack convincing a fellow, a doctor from Kansas City, that he should donate his collection to us and take a tax write-off, so we could start what we have now. Photographica shows that we have today do not bring in as many people as they used to, but we still make money on every one of them. Now we only have one major publication a year, and then there's the monthly newsletter. Down from up to six publications a year, so this has changed.

*Richard Sanford:* Collecting will get smaller. People will lose interest, but there will always be those few that want to trace photography's history back to the beginning and still collect. Because you can't go out and just find these wood cameras anymore. They're all gone! 📷

The Photographic Historical Society of New England was founded April 8, 1973, at a meeting attended by some 75 interested collectors at the Old Edgell Library, Framingham Centre, Massachusetts. By early 1974 the founders, other Board members, and general members had created a fully functioning society, operating much as it does today.

The first meeting was organized by Lawrence Rochette, Richard Bolt, Richard Sanford, and Bryon Owens. An interim board was established at that meeting, chaired by Mr. Rochette, and consisting of the other three founders, plus John S. Craig, Valerie P. Craig, Matthew Isenburg, Sharon Isenburg, and Luana Rochette. Luana Rochette was designated Treasurer, and Valerie Craig Secretary.

— adapted from the PHSNE's  
1974 Membership Directory