

Alexander Macomb Historical Award  
**Individual**



**Year Award Given:** 2017

**Awarded to:** Thomas Cairns – Memphis, Macomb, MI

**Nominated by:** Anita Labinski

**Presented Where:** MCHA Annual Meeting – Selfridge Air National – May 20, 2017

**Presented By:** Macomb County Heritage Alliance

Tom has been a member of the Memphis Historical Society since 2002 and serves as their official historian. Over the years he has amassed a huge amount of photos, newspaper articles, maps, books and other ephemera, some through donations, some through networking with longtime or former Memphis citizens or their relatives. His work has put him in contact with countless individuals from all over the country in search of information which would lead him to be able to identify a photo or clear up a question about a particular person, place or event in Memphis history.

Tom has researched several genealogies at the request of Memphis residents, on his own time, and mostly without compensation, because he enjoys the investigation and it gives him the chance to learn more about the history of the community. One genealogy search, for a family in Memphis, led to a particularly meaningful project for Tom.

During his inquiry, Tom found evidence that some of the ancestors he was researching were buried in the Richmond Cemetery in the 1920's. He contacted the director of Richmond Public Works for assistance in finding the gravesites, and learned that the director also cleaned and repaired headstones. Tom observed the director's work and consulted with him about procedures and materials he used, then, Tom surveyed the oldest section of the Memphis Cemetery to determine the need for repairs and cleaning of the headstones there. He made an inventory of the broken or damaged headstones, and found the number was significant enough to have a concern. He did further research and contacted other people about restoring the Memphis Cemetery, then brought it to the Memphis Historical Society's attention. This project is now on the society's list things to accomplish.

As one of their main fundraisers, since 2009, the Memphis Historical Society has published an annual calendar featuring highlights of Memphis history and Tom has been integral to each one of them. He collects and chooses the majority of the photos, takes them to a photo shop to produce large, detailed copies to use in the calendars, then researches and writes a paragraph to accompany each photo. The success of these calendars is very much due to Tom's hard work and dedication.

Over the years Tom has given presentations to elementary school children, cub scouts, and adults through oral histories, slide shows, and bus tours during the annual Memphis Days celebration

Tom was also instrumental in the opening of the Memphis Historical Society Museum. In 2014, the Memphis Historical Society was gifted the use of a historic store front in the Memphis Downtown to use as their new museum. Tom wrote a "Letter of Understanding", basically an agreement with the building owner, so we would not forfeit this opportunity. He then measured the space and drew up detailed plans for placing showcases and exhibits.

Tom has made many contacts with people who have memories or stories of Memphis, to preserve their history and add it to the growing stockpile of information he has collected as the Memphis Historian. A recent example involves the relatives of a man whose name "Sturdevan" appears on one of the downtown buildings. Tom was always curious if this person could be John Sturdevant, who was an undertaker in Memphis in the early part of the century. If this was the same person, Tom wondered why his name was spelled differently on the building? After speaking to Mr. Sturdevant's relatives, he discovered that the plaque on the building wall was left for a stonecutter to carve. The man did not have small enough tools to carve the name in proportion to the space and ran out of room, having to omit the "t" from the end of the name. Tom passed this information on at one of the Memphis Historical Society meetings and now it has been captured in print for posterity. Without his many contacts, that humorous, but absolutely true, anecdote may have been lost.

Tom has always been the driving force behind so much that has been done to capture Memphis history. He continually reminds the historical society and the City of Memphis of the importance of saving documents because the smallest detail could be the item needed to fill in a blank on the Memphis history timeline. He continually promotes and encourages donations of artifacts and documents that deal with Memphis history. For his many accomplishments to preserve Memphis history, Tom was honored as the 2017 Individual Alexander Macomb Historical Awardee.

Information Resources: Anita Labinski / March 2017