

JIM HENLEY / 1944-2014 - Gatekeeper to city history

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Jim **Henley**, a visionary Sacramento historian who was a driving force in the preservation, restoration and public celebration of the city's storied past, died on May 12 of leukemia, his wife said. He was 69.

As official city historian, Mr. **Henley** was the gatekeeper to Sacramento's gilded origins and rustic heritage for four decades. Starting as a graduate student in the 1960s, he spent a career protecting and re-creating landmarks, collecting historical artifacts and establishing a legacy of archives, museums and monuments that tell a vibrant story about the capital of California.

He was working on a master's degree in history when he left California State University, Sacramento, in 1967 to lead the Sacramento Historic Landmarks Commission. With a commanding knowledge of local history, he was appointed to oversee the restoration of Old Sacramento and was widely credited with transforming the former skid-row neighborhood into an authentic historic district.

He gave new life to the Old City Cemetery at 10th Street and Broadway, a resting place for many Sacramento pioneers that had fallen into disrepair. He worked with crews of volunteers who cleaned up the grounds and led popular tours of the graveyard's dramatic markers, elegant statues and lush gardens.

Mr. **Henley** developed archives known today as the Center for Sacramento History in the Richards Boulevard district to house a treasure trove of artifacts, government records, manuscripts, photographs and other materials from public and private donors dating back to the Gold Rush. In 1985, he helped open the Sacramento History Museum in Old Sacramento to exhibit, explore and explain the region's rich heritage to the public.

"Jim's legacy is having the wherewithal to bring all these things together to tell that story," said his successor, city historian Marcia Eymann. "He was here at the beginning to establish a museum and historic district and collections that are a tremendous resource for researchers and a huge source of pride for the community. We're the largest repository of regional history in the state of California."

Born June 14, 1944, in Sacramento, James Edward **Henley** was a toddler when his family moved to Oakdale. The son of a civil engineer and a schoolteacher, he attended junior college in Modesto, studied at UC Berkeley and earned a history degree in 1966 at what was then Sacramento State College.

He enrolled in graduate school and took a history class taught by V. Aubrey Neasham, a former a historian for the state of California and the National Park Service, who wrote the first proposal to preserve Old Sacramento as a historic park. At his professor's suggestion, he quit school to take a job reading blueprints for the Old Sacramento project.

"Who gets a job in the business of history?" Mr. **Henley** told The Sacramento Bee in 2007. "I didn't want to teach, and there were no jobs for historians except teaching."

In recent years, he and his wife, Paula, split their time between a midtown Sacramento Victorian

and a home in Arizona that he remodeled after retiring in 2007.

An imposing man with a deep voice, Mr. **Henley** was widely respected in the local history community for his knowledge of Sacramento and his generosity in sharing resources with others. He was a frequent source of information about the region's people, culture and roots for schoolchildren, scholars, news reporters and community groups.

With a photographic memory and a gift for telling tales, he spoke easily in public and entertained audiences with brief lessons about local history. Many of his stories were recorded on video and posted on YouTube at www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL0B930D162D2D21B3.

"The amount of history and information in that man's head was phenomenal," Eymann said. "He had a passion for history, and he really cared deeply for this community and preserving its history. He understood the value of that to the community and the future."

In addition to his wife of 35 years, Mr. **Henley** is survived by two brothers, Ronald and William.

