

**Ellen Calomiris has worked at Rancho Los Cerritos since 1982 as Historic Sites Officer for the city of Long Beach in California. In 1994, she became Executive Director of the Rancho Los Cerritos Foundation, which raises funds for the preservation of this site. Currently, the Foundation is raising 5 millions dollars for phase II of its Master Plan. Ellen Calomiris and her staff have help several communities in implementing a foundation program that would provide additional financial support for its preservation activities.**

**Ellen Calomiris' Master Planning for Rancho Los Cerritos is an exemplary model for the preservation community. In 1999, this plan was acknowledged as a "Save America's Treasures" project; in 2001 it received the "2001 Design Award" from the California Preservation Foundation; and in 2003, it was awarded the "Merit Award" by Long Beach Heritage. In 2008, the California Preservation Foundation selected Ellen Calomiris' Master Planning as an important topic for its workshop on how to preserve historic landscapes.**

**Dorothy Fue Wong conducted this interview on July 22, 2009.**

**Wong: Ellen, please tell us when you first came to Rancho Los Cerritos.**

**Ellen Calomiris:** I started at Rancho Los Cerritos and also Rancho Los Alamitos. They were jointly operated at the time, in December of 1982. At the time I was the Assistant Curator and we were operating both sites with a very tiny staff, 2 full-time staff members, a custodian, a part-time secretary to run two historic properties that were close to eight miles apart.

**Wong:** At that time was it a National Historic Landmark?

**Ellen Colmaris:** Rancho Los Cerritos was a National Historic Landmark and both Rancho Los Alamitos and Rancho Los Cerritos were on the National Register. They were also both city landmarks. The Rancho Los Cerritos became a National Historic Landmark in 1970, and we did not apply for and receive State Historic Landmark status until 1988 for Rancho Los Cerritos.

**Wong: How was the condition of the site?**

**Ellen Calomaris:** Rancho Los Cerritos had seen significant neglect in terms of ongoing maintenance. The City of Long Beach acquired the site in 1955 and operated it through first the Department Library Services and then the Department of Parks Recreation and Marine. It provided operating budgets, but very little in terms of maintenance. So by the time I came here we had some walls cracking, we had a leaking roof, we had dry rot in some of the woodwork and some other issues like that. But basically to the general public it looked like a fairly sound building. Many people think of eroding, deteriorating adobe buildings and came here and saw a two-story adobe standing in pretty good shape. They didn't understand that a lot of the problem that we had we really within the walls.

**Wong: What were the first things that you did to preserve or upgrade this site?**

**Ellen Calomaris:** Well, I really was able to begin concentrating on Rancho Los Cerritos in 1986 when we split the two ranchos' operations. Rancho Los Alamitos Foundation was created and took over operating Rancho Los Alamitos, and I came here to Cerritos full time. It was a small room where the family gathered on Sunday afternoons and in the evenings and holidays for conversation. And in 1930 the folks who remodeled the house tore out a cross wall in the ceiling and created a room that was almost four times the size of the original parlor, but we were interpreting it as the 19th Century parlor. And that was not correct. It was giving out false information to the public and as a historian and an educator it was very clear. My obligation was to correct interpretation because when we know the truth we need to share it with the public.

**Wong:** I understand that you began developing Master Plans with other professionals.

**Ellen Calomaris:** Actually, prior to developing a Master Plan, the first task we undertook was to create a Historic Structures Report. That enabled us to trace the history of the building itself from 1844 when it was first constructed up through the 1980s when we did this Historic Structure Report. We hired a team that included a historic architect, Gil Sanchez out of Northern California who specializes in adobe structures, and an archeological team lead by Roberta Greenwood who is noted for her expertise in historical archaeology. We unfortunately didn't have funding to hire a historian which would have been the third piece of that Historic Structure Report, so I took it upon myself to do that part of the report in outline form and trace the history of the site.

The Historic Structure Report looked at what was the building's configuration in 1844, what rooms were here, where were windows, doors, etc., how was the building used. Then looked at the changes made with the second owners in the 1867s, looked at what happened to the building when it was occupied by tenants between 1890 and 1927, and then looked at the remodel, and identified which – this is an original door from 1844, this is an original 1844 threshold, this is original 1930s windows, etc. We were able to trace all that out and trace how the rooms changed over time. Archeology assisted with that because in doing limited excavations we were able to determine foundations or lack of for the building.

We were able to determine certain the building's chronology. We found, for instance, a cold joint in the wings which showed us that the building probably ended at a certain point in 1844 and then they added onto it afterwards. We looked at paint samples to find out what the original colorations of the building were, and so forth. And all of that was just packaged into the Historic Structure Report.

We also had given our architect a special pass in that we asked him to evaluate the historic buildings as well as all of our historic documentation, our floor plans, our architectural drawings, extensive photography collection and determine whether or not we had sufficient documentation to restore the building to its appearance in the 19th Century. The architect and the team in doing the work did conclude that we had sufficient documentation. So with that Historic Structure Report and that recommendation, we went forward to the city and asked for permission to restore the site to an earlier time period.

I want to clarify here that that was not an original thought on my part, but that from the 1950s on successive curators had always recommended restoring the site to its appearance in the 19th Century. The goal was to take the building and grounds back to how they looked prior to the development of Long Beach, and looking at sort of the 19th Century history of our development of the Southern California area. Then the goal again was to encourage people to go to Rancho Los Alamitos afterwards and see what happened in the 20th Century. So we could package the two site together for cultural tours and heritage tourism and for educational purposes as – learn about the 19th Century at the Rancho Los Cerritos, proceed to Rancho Los Alamitos for what really happened in the community of the 20th Century.

**Wong: That sounds wonderful. In this Historic Resource Survey you also have a timeline and a list of work that needs to be done. Is that correct?**

**Ellen Calomaris:** That was in the Historic Structure Report, but then the next piece and I think this is where you're going, Dorothy, stop me if I'm wrong, but the next piece was the Master Plan - this document that you've got here, so I can jump into that.

Let me tell you first that we ran into a little controversy. I think this is important for people to know. Our recommendation in 1987/88 was to restore the site to what it was in the 19th Century. The City of Long Beach was going in that direction until it came to the State's attention, and the State got involved because we're a National Historic Landmark and the Federal Government got involved. They objected to us removing changes that were made in the 1930s because we were also guided by the Secretary of Interior standards for preservation, and by the time we made our recommendations the changes in this building were 50 years old or older and had acquired historical significance in their own right.

Therefore, we were urged to find a way to retain the 1930s changes and interpret the site with these layers of history. Had we restored the site to the 1950s, it wouldn't have been an issue, but by the 1980s it was. After long discussions we did agree. By the late 1980s we came to other conclusions and went into a study to look at how we could retain the 1930s changes. We also focus on the 19th Century history with our public interpretation and come up with both the restoration plan for the site and educational programming that would be relevant to the community today and appropriate to the site. That led eventually to the formation of a foundation for the site and the creation of a Master Plan. The Master Plan document looks at preservation needs, restoration needs, education, interpretation, public amenities – visitor amenities such as restrooms, water fountains, parking and so forth, collection storage and staffing needs.

To create the Master Plan we assembled a much larger team than we had for the Historic Structure Report. We had a historic architect and his team. Mildred Wayne Donaldson is a fellow for the American Institute of Architect and has since become the State Historic Preservation officer for the State of California. He led the team. We had a landscape architect from HTU+A dealing with obviously the landscape element. We

brought in a historian, Dr. Ivan Ingstrom, to review our history and put together a monograph as a basis for the Master Plan. We also had an interpretive specialist, an engineering firm and a firm that looked at funding-raising needs. All of them worked together closely for two years with key staff at the Rancho. Steve Iverson, our curator, Marie Barnidge McIntyre, our horticulturist and myself as the Director. And the resulting Master Plan then, based on the history of the site, came up with physical proposals to preserve and better interpret the site, and interpretive proposals. And those are all spelled out then, broken down and just re-phases so that we could implement these slowly over 20-25 years.

**Wong: How much of the phases have you completed already?**

**Ellen Colamris:** We have completed Phase I which involved the seismic retrofit of the historic adobe building. We felt that this is our most important resource so we dealt with the adobe first. We retrofitted the building to meet current earthquake standards which are pretty rigorous in Long Beach. We also addressed ADA concerns for the whole first floor, altering some thresholds, putting in a wheelchair lift, and doing some other things like that to make the building acceptable. Also, we addressed the leaking roof and rotting woodwork. In the end, when the whole project was done, it looked almost as though nothing had been done to the building except new paint colors because all the work was done sensibly within walls so that nobody could tell that we had strengthened the building and so forth. That was key to make sure that we didn't introduce architectural \_\_\_\_\_ that would have detracted from the integrity of the site.

**Wong: How many more phases do you have?**

**Ellen Calomaris:** We have two more phases. We're involved currently in Phase 2 which involves constructing a new small visitor education center based on an earlier historic adobe that was on the property. A small caretaker residence exists there because our current caretaker is important to the security of site. So we want to remove that presence from the building and put him in a modern structure. This will enable us to restore more of the interior of the 1840s adobe. This phase also involves improvements to the entryway to provide better site security and also more imposing an appropriate presence with better signage. And finally we're looking at restoring our arrollo, 3/4 acre landscape element on the property and expanding and developing a California native garden.

**Wong: How long do you think the second phase will take?**

**Ellen Calomaris:** We anticipated about five years. We started fund raising for this in 2006 and this is 2009. We're at about 77.6% of our goal, and we are actually looking at starting part of the project before we finish our campaign goal because we have received some grants and funding that have deadlines associated with them. So we're not to lose that funding. We anticipate breaking ground this December.

**Wong: What will be your third phase?**

**Ellen Calomaris:** Our third phase involved reconstructing the barn complex that was here in the 19th Century and moving all other support services that are currently within the historic adobe into that barn complex. That means moving all staff offices in there, moving our California research library and moving all of our collections into this new building. This new building will have proper temperature and humidity controls to better preserve the collections and the research library and we'll also be able to put the research library up to the Internet and provide better access not only to the local community but nationwide.

**Wong: When do you think this third phase will be completed?**

**Ellen Calomaris:** We will not even start raising funds for the third phase until the completion of phase 2. Right now we're hoping to complete phase 2 fundraising and bring in all dollars by December 2010 and complete construction by 2012. After that we will start fundraising for phase 3. And again I would anticipate that would be 3-5 years minimum.

**Wong: I'm very impressed with how at the very beginning you involved the State Office of Historic Preservation and also the Federal Government because you're a National Historic Landmark. Do you want to make any comments along that line?**

**Ellen Calomaris:** Well, they were in retrospect rightly brought into the process. We had worked, I think, a little poorly here initially basing our restoration plans on earlier decisions from the 1950s and 1960s and the fact that we were by then a National Historic Landmark, having the Federal Government Department of Interior weigh in and provide their advice was helpful in guiding us. In addition to guiding us though, these agencies then were also able to provide credibility for the decisions we made; and that credibility, of course, was essential in going forward to persuade potential donors and state and federal agencies that we're worthy of grant funding and private funding. So all of that was necessary.

**Wong: When you contacted the Department of Interior and the State office of Historic Preservation, what documents did you have, or was it an informal conversation?**

**Ellen Calomaris:** The initial contact came from the City to the State and then they contacted us. We had an exchange of letters explaining our position and what we were doing. And then they exchanged their thoughts with us in writing and then we brought the State folks down here for a walk through the property and discussion of what we should do. So it was first a phone that came from the City to the State. Then the State and Federal Department of Interior weighing in, calling us and then a letter of exchange before a site visit.

**Wong: So the State actually contacted the Federal Government.**

**Ellen Calomaris:** Yes, they contacted the Department of the Interior.

**Wong:** **At this point did you have your Master Planning finished?**

**Ellen Calomaris:** No, we had not done any of that. At the time when the State and National Landmark's group got involved, we had completed the historic structure study which had recommended the earlier restoration. After the conversations, discussions, and investigations with the other agencies, we then recognized that we needed to take another look at what we were going to do with the property. With the help of the City of Long Beach Mayor's office we assembled an 18 or 19 member Mayor's advisory taskforce that met with us for three years reviewing the options for the site. The taskforce had some State people on it, we had historians, we had a historic architect, we had local school representatives, we had local city representatives, we had our local preservation office, we had a couple of people from other museums who all spent close to three years with us looking at the options for the site.

During that time period though we found that we needed even more expertise, and I applied for it and received a grant from National Endowment for Humanities to fund a self-study. And during this one-year self-study period the curator and I investigated other sites in the country that had put together interpretations from multi-layered history. Then we assembled a team of experts in historic architecture, historic site interpretation and California history and had a three-day meeting here at the site where we came up with proposals for the site's future interpretation.

These all led to the formation of a non-profit foundation to help us raise money for that implementation, and then the Foundation's first task was to create a Master Plan. I think that the historic structure reports one thing with other documentations, but without a detailed blueprint of where we are now and where we need to go we do not feel that we can adequately represent the site to the community or fund raise it for it.

So the Foundation funded that Master Plan and the Master Plan then was formally approved by the City of Long Beach, our governing body is the City Council, so that we had on record, this is the direction that all parties involved felt was correct for the Rancho. And then we could move forward on implementing the phases.

**Wong:** **Could you comment also on a participation of the community at large.**

**Ellen Calomaris:** We brought the community and others in as often as we could. Back in the 1980s when we were looking at what to do with the site, I personally invited a couple of curators and directors from other museums in the area in Los Angeles County and said come to the site and give us your informal opinion. So we started gathering information in that way.

For the task force we had, as I said 18 or 19 community members involved in helping us shape where we were going to go for three years. As we got into the master planning

process we put together an advisory group for the Master Plan. And that too had I think 20 or 25 people on it – representatives from all walks of life, the business community, the arts and cultural community, education, our Friends volunteer group and others who met with or consulted periodically throughout the whole master planning process which took two years and weighted in on different aspects of it based on their expertise and experience. And that helped shape the plan. We also had a meeting or two with our neighbors, immediate neighbors, and brought them up-to-date on the plan, asked for their input and that too helped us make some different decisions. And then we had one or two public open houses where we presented preliminary plans. At one of them I think we 80 or 100 people help who weighted in. We took that data back before finalizing our plan.

**Wong:** And all these comments were recorded and shown to the Department of Interior?

**Ellen Calomaris:** No, actually the Department of Interior once we had decided that we would retain the 19 changes in the site said they were satisfied, and what we decided to pursue in terms of interpretation is up to us. So they kind of backed out of the picture at that point. We did keep the State office of Historic Preservation apprised of our plans and brought them down to look at the Master Plan. I almost forgot that part - The State Historic Preservation officer at the time looked at the plan, provided some guidance on one of the issues that we were unsure about and that got incorporated into the plan. Then we sent a copy of the Master Plan to the State office.

As I said, the one who developed the plans is now the State Historic Preservation officer, and we've kept in touch. He's also aware of our progress on the plans and what we're doing.

**Wong: Do you have the Landscape Cultural Plan in the Master Plan?**

**Ellen Calomaris:** The master planning includes landscape within it. We just had the one document and it's got, as I've said, the history of the site, it's got the interpretive plans, it's got the physical changes proposed, and it's got the landscape recommendation. In the back we included a list of historic plants that we know on the site that are still here. We also identified which historic plants have been lost over time and we'd want to include in any restoration of the gardens. We also included a ground maintenance plan in the Master Plan. And those two pieces of the plan were really done primarily by the staff here on staff, not by the outside landscape firm. They looked at the broader picture. But we felt that we didn't have enough detail. I wanted a plan where if our horticulturist left tomorrow and a new person came on board, they would have enough guidance to be able to care for the gardens on a manual basis as well as have a strong idea of where we were taking the site in the future. That annual basis detail wouldn't have been in the plan had we not put it in ourselves.

**Wong: You mentioned to me one time that if you were to do this Master Plan over again, it would be much more detailed. Is that correct?**

**Ellen Calomaris:** I would have loved to have seen more detail. The plan, though in some ways as I think about it again, it might not have needed to be in the Master Plan. The Master Plan is a blueprint, an overview. It allows some flexibility which is I think very important because this plan is to serve over 20 to 25 years. It gives strong guidelines. But in 20 to 25 years things change. I think it's very important that there's enough flexibility where we can look at it and go, let's tweak it here or there. Not change it drastically, but let's tweak it. So the plan allows that. Where I would like more detail, I think we can do this in this report. One would be as the simple landscape plan where we would have a month-to-month plan on this is what gets done in the month of January in the gardens, this is what gets done in the month of February, and so forth. We started that kind of a plan ourselves, but I think that's helpful for the ongoing maintenance of the site. For the restoration of the gardens and grounds, there's no getting around having to go and work with the landscape architect when we get into developing those plan, and that's where the detail will come.

**Wong:** You may need an operational plan that's under the Master Plan.

**Ellen Calomaris:** It's an operations manual for the gardens, but I was also going to say that we need the same thing for the house. We don't necessarily have it all written down. I think it would be less stress in our operations if we could so that our successors would have a starting place.

**Wong:** Ellen, what part of your program do you feel is the most important in this master planning?

**Ellen Calomaris:** Our Master Plan – most of the recommendations in this plan were done with an aim on improving the educational value of the site in the community. When we talk about new construction, it's not just to build a new building. It's to provide better public orientation or to be able to remove public uses out of this historic building so that we can restore more of the building and interpret it. Education is by far the most important aspect in our planning.

**Wong:** Please mention some of the ways that you educate the community.

**Ellen Calomaris:** We offer a broad range of educational opportunities. We are open Wednesday through Sunday to the general public. We offer tours to the public. We offer school programs for fourth graders and occasionally for the third grade classes that complement studies of California history or neighborhood history. We offer a living history tours on certain days throughout the year where visitors experience the history of the site through the stories of people who once lived and worked here on the property. We offer workshops and lectures. We do an annual lecture series which one year might focus on cultural diversity, another time it might focus on the historic gardens or on Victorian custom ideals. We have had a series of workshops. They might be anything from how to take care, conserve textiles or take care of old books, or it might be a workshop on putting together a dry flower reef or tussy mussies. We offer a lot of family activities such mud mania which is coming in a month. This is a family festival that

teaches people about adobe soil, about building with adobe, about archeology, about clay and its uses and pottery and so forth. It teaches them how to improve their adobe soil – all of these interactive activities are educational but a lot of fun for people. And the goal is to teach people about the various uses and aspects of adobe soil.

We offer kids programs. We have right now going on a series of week-long workshops for kids on either Vaquero adventures, Victorian adventures, or adobe adventures for children 6 through 10. And yesterday I overheard a six-year old tell his mother, “Mom, this is the most fun, best place.” What an exciting thing to hear from a young kid.

We offer Rancho adventure tours for youth groups, and these tours are taught by teens who we train. So we’ve got teen mentoring younger children. We offer garden tours. We offer sometimes specialized tours. So all of these are part of our educational programming. In addition we’ve created an educational outreach kit. We work with the Long Beach Unified School District under a grant – created 25 kits for 25 classrooms to focus on 1840s California – very typical decade with the transition from Mexican Government to American Government, discovering the gold, and Statehood. We also have a kit on the 1870s with the sheep ranch and prior to the development of California.

So we do that kind of programming. And we do some outreach in the community with going into groups and youth speakers programs and so forth. So these are all part of our educational program.

**Wong:** I notice that you have internship during the summertime.

**Ellen Colomaris:** We have been privileged over 10 years to receive a grant from the Getty Foundation to fund a college student. And each year that student has either worked in tutorial or educational tasks. We also, though, have a real active teen docent program. It’s in its third year, and these teens volunteer their time, but work one day a week from October through June. These teenagers give tours and help with tutorial or education here on the property. And many of these teens come back in the summer to volunteer for other things.

**Wong:** So how many of these young people do you have?

**Ellen Calomaris:** There were 12 in the formal teen docent program year-long , and then this summer we have about 36 teens working with us on programs.

**Wong:** That sounds absolutely wonderful. Ellen, what do funding agencies look for? I know that you recently received a very prestigious award from the State of California.

**Ellen Calomaris:** A few years ago we received a \$680,000 grant from the California Cultural and Historical Endowment towards construction of our small Visitor Education Center building and we received a \$275,000 grant from the Rivers and Mountains Conservancy towards the restoration of the Arroyo. What those agencies and other

funders, be they private donors, foundations or corporations look for are a number of things.

The first thing they for is: What's our plan? The fact that we have a Master Plan, that we have done extensive planning here that been approved by the State, by preservationists, by the City Council shows them that we have done our homework. We know where we started, we know where we're going, and we have utilized all the tools available to us in good historical research - the Secretary of Interior Standards in shaping our plan. So they see us as serious and focused in our future goal. That's critical.

A second thing they look for is stability. Have we been around for awhile? Do we have a track record? When we've received small grants, they have been \$1,000 grants. Did we use that money well? Were we good stewards of that money? They look for how we serve the community. What is our programming – our education – many funders are always looking at educational programming. That's near and dear to their hearts and ours. They want to see what did we do, how many people do we serve, is it quality programming? How is it evaluated by teachers and students? What did they say? They look at whether or not we have the infrastructure to actually be able to implement what we say we're going to implement. I mean, yes, I want to build a Visitor's Center. Am I going to be able to raise that other money? Do I have the staff and the volunteer support and the board support to raise that other money? Do I have the City support to actually do the construction? Do I have a plan in place to operate that new building when it's constructed?

Some agencies may look at cultural diversity in terms of the CPAG grants. We receive that, I think, in strong part because the visitor center will enable us to launch our new interpretive living history program on a regular basis; and through that program we'll be able to tell some of the stories about people who lived and worked in California that aren't traditionally told. Stories of a Chinese cook that worked here, or the Mexican vaquero or the Basque sheep herder, or the \_\_\_\_\_ gardener who worked here in the 1930s. We'll be able to share their stories through the living history programming, and that was very important to CPAG and their guidelines--- that we were looking at new stories of California.

**Wong:** That's what you call public benefit. Do they also look at your evaluation procedures too?

**Ellen Calomaris:** Yes, as part of the grant process they will often say--how will you evaluate the success of this program? How do you see your audiences changing, and with this program? So being able to do the strategic planning for those aspects and share that with a grant funder is important.

**Wong:** Ellen, this is impressive. What are your major accomplishments during your time here at the Rancho?

**Ellen Calomaris:** I'm extremely proud of Adobe Days Re-visited, our fourth grade school program which has won recognition from other groups and is often counted by teachers in the area as the best school tour of experience that take their children on. It's a living history experience and it is entering its 21st year and going strong.

I am really pleased at the growth of our volunteer program. When I came here we had a fairly static Friends group that numbered 70 or 80. We're now over 250. We've brought in a lot of younger people. Teen volunteers as well as families who volunteer together. We have families who volunteer together. I think that that brings so much new talent and strength to the organization and certainly benefits the public with what they're able to offer.

I am obviously delighted with the Master Plan and the fact that we have been able to do extensive planning. When you think about it, Dorothy, we started thinking about where this Rancho should go in 1986. Our Master Plan wasn't completed until 1998. Twelve years of planning. Then we went through an EIR and a traffic study before we got counseled in 2002. So we did a lot of solid planning before we started implementing anything. I think that's critical and I'm proud of the results. And I'm actually honored and almost awe by the support we had in creating a non-profit foundation for the Rancho.

We've created a Graduates Foundation. It has, at various times, anywhere from 16 to 20 Board members. These are all community leaders who have stepped up to the plate to help us with fundraising for implementation of the Master Plan. They don't operate the site. They really have stepped onboard just to raise funds for the educational enhancements and physical improvements here. The work that they do – interest in fundraising and advocacy on behalf of the Rancho just impresses me enormously and I'm really proud to have their support.

**Wong:** Also, Ellen, I think you have many people and organizations coming to your site to study the preservation aspects of it too, like myself.

**Ellen Calomaris:** And delighted to share what we can – all of the staff here loves to share what they do. We don't go out and get involved in a lot of other organizations at any levels because we are such a tiny staff. We frankly don't have the time. I don't know if you're aware, but I'm full time, and our curator's full time, and everyone else is part time. So it really restricts how much outreach we can do, but when people come to us or when we do have that rare opportunity to participate in a conference or workshop, we're delighted to share.

I've met with other cities in particular who are interested in learning how we got our Foundation going because we had an unusual situation here. The City owns and operates the site, gives us operating budget, but the Foundation raises money for the enhancements and capital construction. And then we have a Friends group which is a 501C3 as well that provides the volunteer support. So we have two supporting entities. And how that all works together is somewhat complicated – requires absolutely excellent communication between all three entities. And other cities have come to us to see how that works because they're seeing the need to augment city funding with private support.

**Wong:** Ellen, thank you so much for telling us about these very important and impressive projects that have benefited both Rancho Los Cerritos and other communities.

**Ellen Colmaris:** Thank you for being interested ,and if we can help in any way, please let us know.

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