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Priscilla Lawrence announces retirement after nearly 40 years

President/CEO's tenure culminates with opening of THNOC's new exhibition center

New Orleans (June 3, 2019)—Priscilla Lawrence, longtime president/chief executive officer of The Historic New Orleans Collection, has announced she will retire at the end of June 2019.

Lawrence joined THNOC in 1980 and assumed the president/CEO position in 2000, during which time she has steadfastly led the organization in its efforts to preserve and share the art and culture not only of the Greater New Orleans region, but also of Louisiana and the Gulf South.

According to Lawrence, “My time at The Historic New Orleans Collection has been so much more than a job. It has been a central part of my life—even my identity—for nearly 40 years. I treasure every one of those years, especially the relationships forged and what we have accomplished together.”

Vision

THNOC was founded in 1966 by General L. Kemper and Leila Hardie Moore Williams, who amassed a substantial collection of Louisiana artifacts, which became the foundation of the institution’s holdings. With their deaths—hers in 1966 and his in 1971—the Kemper and Leila Williams Foundation was established, ensuring stable, long-term financial support for the organization and a central, accessible location for their life’s work.

Drew Jardine, chairman of THNOC’s board of directors, explained, “Priscilla’s vision has always been for The Historic New Orleans Collection to be a proper steward of the Williams’ Foundation, furthering the founders’ mission of making their collected materials available to the public for future generations. Under Priscilla’s leadership, the organization has grown exponentially, employed more staff and reached more audiences than ever before. The founders’ legacy lives on—indeed thrives—today because of Priscilla’s foresight.”

Growth

Under Lawrence’s direction, THNOC increased its physical space with the acquisition, restoration and renovation of several historic French Quarter properties to accommodate future needs. In April 2019, the newest star in THNOC’s crown, the Seignouret-Brulatour Building, opened to the public. A \$38 million project, this exhibition center at 520 Royal St. contains 36,000 square feet of space, an expanded gift shop, a visitor center and a museum café. The ambitious project marries 21st-century technology and a multi-purpose, contemporary rear wing with the historical appointments of the front building.

This space, former home of WDSU, complements the flagship location at 533 Royal St. and the Williams Research Center at 410 Chartres St., expanding THNOC's footprint in the French Quarter to 100,000 square feet.

According to Vice President/Deputy Director Daniel Hammer, "I have had the privilege of working side by side Priscilla for many years. Her unwavering dedication and tireless commitment to excellence are inspiring and have truly led The Collection to prominence not only locally, but also nationally and even internationally. We will miss her tremendously."

Besides its physical expansion during Lawrence's tenure, THNOC has also increased its staff to 130 and reports more than 60 volunteers to accommodate the ever-growing programs and services in three primary areas: exhibitions, research and publishing.

Milestones

A pivotal point in Lawrence's career was in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. Intent on protecting the rare museum objects, Lawrence and her team reached out to the Alexandria Museum of Art to relocate key items. In September 2005, just days after the storm, THNOC staff, with the help of Alexandria's Sheriff's Office and members of the Louisiana State Police, made two trips into a locked-down New Orleans. Manuscripts, library items and visual materials were securely transported for safekeeping to the Alexandria Museum of Art, where they remained until all municipal services were restored to THNOC's buildings in New Orleans.

In post-Katrina New Orleans, Lawrence focused on preserving the past for a brighter future. On October 11, 2005, The Historic New Orleans Collection became the first New Orleans area museum to reopen after the storm. Five months later, on March 14, 2006, THNOC unveiled the city's first major exhibition since the storm, "Common Routes: St. Domingue • Louisiana," which was supported internationally and included loans from public and private collections in North America and Europe.

In August 2008, Priscilla led the THNOC staff to host a sell-out New Orleans Antiques Forum, the first of its kind for the city, which is the second largest antiques market in the country. The annual event continues to attract nationally renowned speakers and typically sells out as soon as registration opens.

In 2015, THNOC presented the city's first exhibition exploring its legacy as the country's largest slave market. "Purchased Lives: New Orleans and the Domestic Slave Trade, 1808–1865" drew record attendance for the institution and furthered understanding of a painful and difficult aspect of local history. The exhibition went on to receive major grant funding from the National Endowment for the Humanities and the Louisiana Endowment for the Humanities, among other organizations, and recognition from the American Association for State and Local History. The full exhibition traveled to four sites and is currently on view at the Illinois Holocaust Museum and Education Center in Skokie.

John Lawrence, director of museum programs, stated, "Priscilla's keen strategy for The Collection has placed Louisiana's history in appropriate national and international contexts, and through cultural programming and travel, Louisiana's story is being told to a broader audience."

Community

One of the most sought-after and respected community influencers, Lawrence has served on numerous boards and commissions throughout her career, most notably co-chairing last year's Cultural and Historical Committee for the Tricentennial of the City of New Orleans with Sybil Morial. Together they strived to recognize the

diversity and complicated histories of the city's past through a variety of tricentennial initiatives, including a four-day symposium and the launch of New Orleans slave trade markers and a related app with a walking tour.

Mark Romig, president and chief executive officer of the New Orleans Tourism Marketing Corporation, remembered his collaborations with Lawrence fondly, particularly their work on last year's tricentennial events. Romig said, "Priscilla's legacy was founded in the past but will live on in the future. She has forged a safe and bright tomorrow for the history of New Orleans and the state of Louisiana. Because of her vision and capable hands, the story of New Orleans will be safe for years to come. I am one of those blessed to have worked with and learned from her."

Recognition

Lawrence has received the title of Chevalier in the Order of the Arts and Letters from the French Minister of Culture and Communication, three Woman of the Year awards from New Orleans City Business and was inducted into its Hall of Fame. She has won the Louisiana Endowment for the Humanities 2009 Award for Lifetime Contribution to the Humanities, and has led The Historic New Orleans Collection to receive a 2008 Community Arts Award from the Arts Council of New Orleans, the 2011 Attraction of the Year Award from the Louisiana Office of Culture, Recreation and Tourism, plus numerous accolades, grants, and honors for its architectural preservation efforts, published works, and exhibitions.

Vice President/Deputy Director Daniel Hammer will succeed Priscilla Lawrence as THNOC president/CEO effective July 1, 2019.

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About The Historic New Orleans Collection

Founded in 1966, The Historic New Orleans Collection is a museum, research center and publisher dedicated to the study and preservation of the history and culture of New Orleans, Louisiana and the Gulf South. For more information, visit www.hnoc.org, call (504) 523-4662, or follow THNOC on [Facebook](#), [Instagram](#), and [Twitter](#).