

AMERICAN OPTICAL COMPANY

A Southbridge Story

A community-based proposal
to honor the Town's heritage
with monumental public art



Southbridge, Massachusetts
Eye of the Commonwealth

Summary

The Quinebaug Valley Council for the Arts and Humanities, acting as fiduciary for a volunteer committee of community activists, requests support to design, construct, install, landscape and maintain a sculptural landmark pair of eyeglasses memorializing the enterprising talent of the American Optical Company and the people of the Southbridge area.

Please refer to the enclosed freehand representation of the large scale work of art, which, when realized, would stand on the AO Common, across from the Company's executive entrance. The drawing and documents confirming this project's sustained viability appear immediately following Page 14.

Rationale

Still known as the Eye of the Commonwealth, Southbridge, for generations and today, is home to imaginative and hardworking people.

The sculpture will stand as a lasting symbol of the living tradition of the townspeople's hardy work ethic. It can serve as inspiration in this moment of the community's budding revitalization.

Background

AO: BILLIONS OF HOURS OF PRODUCTIVITY

Craftsmanship, technological mastery, creativity, resourcefulness and managerial expertise made the American Optical Company the global leader in ophthalmic, military, scientific and consumer applications in the optics industry, for generations. Indeed, AO drew to the area many of today's top employers, who originally served as AO suppliers.

Productivity added up. For many years, three shifts totaling 7,000 workers, each of whom worked a 40-hour week, tallied 280,000 hours each week, week after week after week. In peacetime and, especially, when the nation went to war, worker productivity eventually totaled billions of hours in Southbridge and at other American Optical Company locations across the country and around the world.

Today's newcomers join a community whose way of life was largely shaped by "the AO." Indeed, many businesses of varying size

opened their doors in the area to serve as suppliers to the American Optical Company, which magnified and widened the AO economic impact for generations.

Many of the good works of the American Optical Company's founders, the Wells family, continue adding to the locale's economy and quality of life. Among these are Old Sturbridge Village, in neighboring Sturbridge, and the Capen Hill Nature Sanctuary, in next-door Charlton.

Some local traditions live on. For example, local financial institutions offer Thursday evening hours nowadays because, many decades ago, that practice coincided with AO's payday.

**COMMUNITY CITIZEN, NATIONAL DEFENSE LEADER
AND TECHNOLOGY INNOVATOR**

To understand the importance of the American Optical Company and the Optical Museum to the Town of Southbridge and the Tri-Community area, think back to the formation of the company after the Civil War. Assorted wooden structures housing craftsmen, mechanics and office workers sprang up at George Washington Wells's direction when employees eagerly left farming as the Industrial Revolution gathered force in Central Massachusetts.

Mr. Wells's American Optical Company was on its way to full-fledged status as an industrial powerhouse. But wood buildings needed replacement. The young dynamo arranged the construction of one of the late 19th century's hallmark brick buildings to accommodate his juggernaut. The site that Mr. Wells chose remains a productive workplace that satisfies 21st century ambitions while it preserves the pastoral vistas that characterized this landscape generations ago. Of course, it is today's Southbridge Business Center.

The origins of the Wells family and the American Optical Company date to 1869 when young George Washington Wells began manufacturing and selling spectacles in the Southbridge area. Over the next 20 years, the company developed the first U.S.-based optical machinery, which reduced America's dependence on foreign lens manufacturers. During World War I, AO furnished American troops with eyeglass lenses, bomb sights, secret signaling apparatus and protective goggles to support the war effort.

In 1925, AO introduced the Tillyer Lens, which converted both astigmatism and magnification power and continued to expand its workforce from 5,000 to 7,000 during the Great Depression. The

company supported the World War II effort, and military application represented 45 percent of the company's business at that time.

In the 1950s AO forayed into the commercial world with designers such as Madame Elsa Schiaparelli and the invention of Todd-AO, which was the first seamless parallax-free wide-screen motion picture projection system. The 50s saw the development of fiberoptics and patents for an ultra high-speed camera lens and a variety of other applications in medicine, photography, television, nuclear energy and the military.

The 1960s were marked by ongoing development of lasers and fiberoptics for the military, including optical lasers for space communications, sun-powered lasers and the manufacture of the first fiberoptic endoscope.

In 1983, the Optical Heritage Museum was opened in Southbridge to celebrate the 150th anniversary of the American Optical Company. The museum displayed, with artifacts and documents, the history of the company as a community citizen, national defense leader and technology innovator.

TRACING THE AO TRADITION

Community Citizen, National Defense Leader and Technology Innovator

- 1826 William Beecher, born in Southbury, Connecticut, in 1805 and having learned the jewelry craft and trade in Providence, Rhode Island, opens a jewelry and watch business in Southbridge, Massachusetts.
- 1833 William Beecher and apprentices R. H. Cole, Liberty Phelps and Billings Farrington make silver eyeglass frames in the business that was to evolve into the American Optical Company.
- 1843 William Beecher, using his own revolutionary machinery and processes, produces America's first steel spectacles, which remain in vogue for the next 60 years.
- 1864 George Washington Wells, age 17, apprentices at the unheard-of salary of \$3 per day, 60 hours a week, and, adept with his hands, learns to make eyeglass frames of gold.

- 1869 George Washington Wells becomes a partner in forming the American Optical Company "to manufacture and sell spectacles of gold, silver, steel and such other articles as the company from time to time desires to make." The business was capitalized at \$50,000.
- 1883 The American Optical Company invents, designs and builds machinery that ends the nation's dependence on foreign lens manufacturers.
- 1884/1889 The American Optical Company introduces the industry's first set of trial frames/first set of trial lenses.
- 1898 The United States Bureau of Standards accepts American Optical power lenses as the official industry standard.
- 1917 During World War I, the American Optical Company furnishes 2,500,000 lenses to the government, telescopic sights for 37 mm. cannon, rifle sights, bomb sights for planes, sextant lenses, secret signaling apparatus, protective goggles, look-out glasses, small telescopic sights and mobile eyeglass manufacturing units for combat troops.
- 1925 The American Optical Company introduces the revolutionary Tillyer Lens, which corrects for both astigmatism and power.
- 1936-39 Despite the Great Depression, the American Optical Company increases employment from 5,000 to 7,000 while assuring that at least one member of each family among its work force would remain on the payroll.
- 1941 The American Optical Company establishes in Putnam, Connecticut, a 66,000 square foot Industrial Eye Protection Department.
- 1942-45 The American Optical Company produces 18,500,000 pairs of lenses for the war effort as well as gun sights and anti-reflective glass. 45 percent of company sales volume is for the war effort.

- 1945 Working with Fritz W. Jardon, the U.S. Army and the U.S. Navy, AO perfects methyl-methacrylate resin, which made possible the Monoplex eye as an acrylic prosthesis. In the 1950's and 1960's AO furnishes to practitioners fitting sets featuring 120 prosthetic eye examples. AO specialists design the prosthesis so that plastic can be added to it to accommodate a patient's growth, and the object can now be worn for prolonged periods.
- 1946 The American Optical Company's Lensdale facility is the world's largest lens manufacturing plant.
- 1955 Madame Elsa Schiaparelli designs her distinctive platinum, diamond-studded frames for the American Optical Company.
- 1955 At the request of Hollywood producer and director Michael Todd, the American Optical Company invents Todd-AO, a system of seamless, parallax-free wide screen motion picture projection.
- 1959 The American Optical Company develops special equipment for the Sidewinder Missile.
- 1959 The American Optical Company establishes a fiberoptic department with patents for an ultra high speed camera lens, intravenous measurement of oxygen saturation in human blood and a variety of other applications in medicine, photography, television, nuclear energy and the military.
- 1961 The American Optical Company develops optical lasers supporting United States Air Force space communications.
- 1963 The American Optical Company develops a sun-powered laser transmitter enabling the United States Air Force to communicate with satellites.
- 1964 The American Optical Company develops and manufacturers the world's first fiberoptic endoscope.
- 1983 The Optical Heritage Museum opens to celebrate the 150th anniversary of the American Optical Company.

- 1986 The Optical Heritage Museum, Inc., is recognized by the Internal Revenue Service as a tax-exempt, non-profit organization under Section 501(c)(3), a private foundation under Section 509(a), and a private operating foundation under Section 4942(j)(3).
- 1996 The Optical Heritage Museum, Inc., is renamed The Optical Museum of America, Inc.
- 2008 The 175th anniversary of the founding of the American Optical Company
- 2008 The 25th anniversary of the founding of the Optical Heritage Museum, Inc./Optical Museum of America, Inc.
- 2008-09 *Southbridge residents and friends of the American Optical Company, led by Janina and Nancy Swiacki, bring about the creation, design, production and installation of a super-scale sculptured pair of eyeglasses, on the AO Common, as a lasting tribute to the vision, energy and character of the community.*

Site of the Sculpture

Please refer to the attached photograph, which is marked with a green X to indicate the site of the sculpture. From the standpoint of sightlines, and pedestrian and motorist safety, the Southbridge Chief of Police has approved the location.

Description of the Sculpture and Artist's Statement

This iconic piece, a giant pair of eyeglasses, pays homage to the American Optical Company and the AO community of Southbridge.

Mild steel will be used to hand forge and fabricate the sculpture. Finish will be galvanized. The piece will be constructed in the studio of local sculptor and master metalsmith Michael J. Saari, by him, using his equipment, including tig welder, mig welder, power hammer, gas forge, traditional hand tools (hammers, anvil, tongs). Some materials will be acquired from a Southbridge supplier.

Please refer to the attached measured drawing. A model was created in May 2008 by the artist, was purchased by, delivered to and is in the possession of the sculpture committee. The committee may make the model available for "view studies." It was decided by committee that a site visit will be made with the artist to determine final location and precise dimensions for optimal position and scale.

Final wording on the plaque for the sculpture will be decided by the artist and sculpture committee, together, with the wording expected to include:

"Spectacular AO" 1869-1975
Created by Michael J. Saari (date), Woodstock, Connecticut
Dedicated to the people of Southbridge, Massachusetts
[Recognition of philanthropic support]

[Special Note: The pedestal text will be reproduced
in Braille at the site]

Artist Statement

In the history of eyeglasses and optics, AO was a world leader and giant in the field. Thus, creating a giant eyeglass frame celebrates this achievement—it will appear as if a giant person came along and just now set down a pair of eyeglasses. The horn-rimmed style, popular in the 1950's and 60's, were worn by such prominent figures as Senator Barry Goldwater and President John F. Kennedy. And it was during the 1950's that AO reached its peak in size and production. Craftsmanship and precision are important to this sculpture, which is a tribute to the skilled workers who manufactured frames and lenses. May future generations note with appreciation the spirit of Southbridge and scope and scale of AO's importance in the world, thanks to this monumental piece of public art.

Resume of Michael Saari

256 Childs Hill Road, Woodstock, CT 06281 USA
tel/fax: 860 928 0257
web: www.michaelsaari.com

EDUCATION

1996 Master of Fine Arts, Southern Illinois University at
Carbondale, Carbondale, IL

- 1991 Baroque & Renaissance iron work study in Belgium, France, German, Switzerland, Luxembourg: study at the School of Art & Design (Brussels)
- 1986 International Teaching Center for Metal Design, Aachen, Germany. Studied under direction of Manfred Bredohl. Specialized in contemporary metal design.
- 1983 Philadelphia School of Art, Samuel Yellin Studio. Study with Donald Streeter in Early American iron work.
- 1979 Bachelor of Arts, Nichols College, Dudley, MA

PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE

- 2001 - present
Professor of Art, Nichols College, Dudley, MA
Adjunct faculty.
- 1981 - present
Owner, Michael J. Saari Metal Studio & Workshop, Woodstock, CT
Specializing in architectural hardware and sculptural metal work
- 1995 - 1996
Southern Illinois University, Carbondale, IL - Art Department
Graduate Assistant, instructor and studio manager for wood and metal sculpture
- 1975 - 1979
Old Sturbridge Village, Sturbridge, MA
Interpreter; Early American Crafts (blacksmithing, tinsmithing, coppersmithing, post and beam building, brick kiln construction)

AWARDS & SCHOLARSHIPS

- 1997 - Danbury Hospice Art Exhibition & Auction (Bronze)
- 1995 - Honor Society, Phi Kappa Phi, Southern Illinois University
- 1993 - Artist-Blacksmith's Association of North America (ABANA) Scholarship
- 1991 - 2nd World Congress of Artist-Blacksmiths, Gold and Silversmiths, Aachen (Silver)
- 1979 - Zeta Alpha Pi award for Outstanding Achievement, Nichols College

PUBLIC COLLECTIONS

Southwest Finland Institute for Craft and Design, Mynamaki,
Finland
"Bridge of Friendship, Handwerkskammer, Aachen, Germany
National Christian Church, Washington, DC
Mount Vernon, Alexandria, VA
Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, Williamsburg, VA
National Ornamental Metal Museum, Memphis, TN

SOLO EXHIBITIONS

2001 - Ironwood Gallery, "Saari + Saari" exhibition of sculpture
by Michael J. Saari & Cynthia Liebler Saari
2001 - Conant Library, "Man of Metal" exhibition, Nichols College
1996 - University Museum, Southern Illinois University at
Carbondale

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

2001 - "Contemporary Ironwork: The Artist Blacksmith", Brookfield
Craft Center, Curator & Exhibitor
2001 - "25 Year Faculty Retrospective", Brookfield Craft Center
2001 - California Blacksmiths Exhibition, Sacramento, CA
2000 - "In and Out the Garden" art furnishings, Silo Gallery, New
Milford, CT
1998 - ABANA 25th Anniversary Conference Exhibition, Asheville, NC
1997 - "Metal and Light", International competition exhibition of
sculptural lighting, Handwerkskammer Koblenz, Galerie
Handwerk, Germany
1993 - "Fire and Steel", Hamburg, Germany
1992 - ABANA Conference Exhibition, California State University,
San Luis Obispo, CA
1986 - First World Congress of Artist-Blacksmiths, Aachen, Germany
1985 - "Traditional Crafts Today", Wadsworth Athenaeum, Hartford,
CT
1980 - "Metalsmithing 1980", University of California, Santa Cruz,
CA

TEACHING EXPERIENCE

Nichols College, Dudley, MA
Brookfield Craft Center, Brookfield, CT
Guilford Handcraft Center, Guilford, CT
John C. Campbell Folk School, Brasstown, NC

Peters Valley Craft Center, Layton, NJ
Southern Illinois University, Carbondale, IL
Touchstone Center For Crafts, Farmington, PA

VISITING ARTIST AND CONFERENCE PRESENTATIONS

- 2001 - California Blacksmiths Conference, Sacramento, CA. Featured demonstrator.
- 2001 - Restoration New Orleans, New Orleans, LA. Featured speaker.
- 1998 - ABANA 25th Anniversary Conference, Asheville, NC. Featured demonstrator and presenter.
- 1997 - Southwest Finland Institute for Art, Craft and Design, Mynamaki, Finland. Visiting Artist.
- 1997 - Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge, MA. Guest Instructor (Metals)
- 1991 - Second World Congress of Smiths, Aachen, Germany. Featured demonstrator.

WORKSHOPS/COURSES/CONFERENCES ATTENDED

- 2001 - Advanced Woodworking Course, Worcester Center for Crafts, Worcester, MA
- 1997 - The First Studio Furniture Conference, SUNY Purchase, Purchase, NY
- 1991 - Baroque and Renaissance Iron Workshop, Belgium School of Art, Brussels
- 1986 - Forging Stainless Steel at the Kauko O. Mason Studio workshop, Helsinki, Finland

PUBLISHED ARTICLES

- 2001 - Winter ANVIL'S RING, Curator's Review of "Contemporary Ironwork" show
- 1988 - Spring ANVIL'S RING, "Forging in Finland"

PUBLICATIONS

IRONWORK TODAY: INSIDE & OUT
(2005, D. Meilach, Schiffer Design Books, represented artist)

FINE HOMEBUILDING
(January 2002, "Finishing Touches")

ANVIL'S RING
(Fall 2001, Interview with Michael Saari at the California Blacksmith's meet)

AMERICAN CRAFT
(August/September 2001, Gallery Section)

BY HAND
(2001, Lark Books, represented artist & contributor)

DECORATING PORCHES & DECKS
(2001, Lark Books, represented artist & contributor)

THE METALCRAFT BOOK
(2000, Lark Books, represented artist & contributor)

THE CRAFTS REPORT
(11/99 Marketing Metals Issue, Featured Artist Internet Interview-
-see www.craftsreport.com)

THIS OLD HOUSE MAGAZINE
(9/99 "Peak Chic" weathervane feature)

NEW YORK CITY LANDMARKS CONSERVANCY
(1999 Directory of restoration professionals qualified listing)

BRITISH BLACKSMITHS (6/90)

PROFESSIONAL ORGANIZATIONS

Artist Blacksmiths of North America (ABANA)
Brookfield Craft Center Advisory Board

Fiduciary

The Quinebaug Valley Council for the Arts and Humanities, which is headquartered in Southbridge, has agreed to serve as this project's fiduciary and as the custodian of all project funds.

Town of Southbridge Approvals

Please refer to the set of documents enclosed after Page 14, specifically the Southbridge Town Manager's letter and item #9 in the minutes of the Town Council Meeting of December 22, 2008.

Project Underwriting

Total Project Costs

Sculptor's fee	\$50,500
Sculpture materials, including memorial plaque	8,950
Site preparation and landscaping	7,250
Administrative/legal	3,500
Memorial plaque in Braille	3,500
Lighting	2,000
Police detail	500
Contingency	4,000
Fundraising	5,300
Total	<u>\$85,500</u>

Note: Fundraising costs for this project are less than one-third of the rule-of-thumb national nonprofit fundraising proportion of 21% of total project costs.

Cash and In-Kind Contributions

Cash on hand	\$ 8,500
Claire Birtz Trust Fund	20,000
Memorial plaque, courtesy of the sculptor	5,500
Fundraising, courtesy of Larry Morrison	5,300
Sculpture materials, courtesy D&D Welding	5,000
Excavation and site preparation, courtesy Lazo	6,500
Construction, Bertin Engineering, Gabriel McCarthy	
Southbridge Cultural Council, for the Massachusetts	2,500
Cultural Council	
Sculpture scale model, courtesy anonymous donors	1,750
Ameriprise matching grant, courtesy Irene Garand	1,000
Massachusetts Cultural Council grant	1,000
Lighting, courtesy Garon Electric	1,000
Plantings, courtesy Gabriel McCarthy	300
Printing, courtesy Colonial Copy & Graphic Center	100
Staples in Sturbridge	50
Total	<u>\$58,500</u>

Total project costs	\$85,500
Cash and in-kind contributions	<u>-58,500</u>
Project balance to be raised	\$27,000

Underwriting Role

There are donor naming opportunities. So, too, the formation of a consortium of like-minded companies, individuals and foundations can be arranged.

After the Massachusetts Cultural Council awarded \$1,000 to the project, it provided a further \$2,500 through the Southbridge Cultural Council.



Public contributions will be sought.

Press/media relations will be undertaken, always mindful of donor sensitivities.

Community Involvement

Please see the documentation following Page 14.

Compliance

The site will comply in full with all relevant provisions of the Americans With Disabilities Act, including a plaque in Braille.

Next Steps

Please know that we stand ready to meet with you about the concept and details.

We will stand by for word from you as you move through the evaluation process in your decision-making cycle.

Thank you.

Project Committee

Janina Swiacki, Co-Chair
Nancy Swiacki, Co-Chair
Cassandra M. Acly
Paul E. Daoust
Irene Garand
Jacqueline Hemeon
Gabriel McCarthy
Alexandra McNitt
Laurance S. Morrison
Margaret Morrissey
Donna Silverberg
Richard Whitney

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