

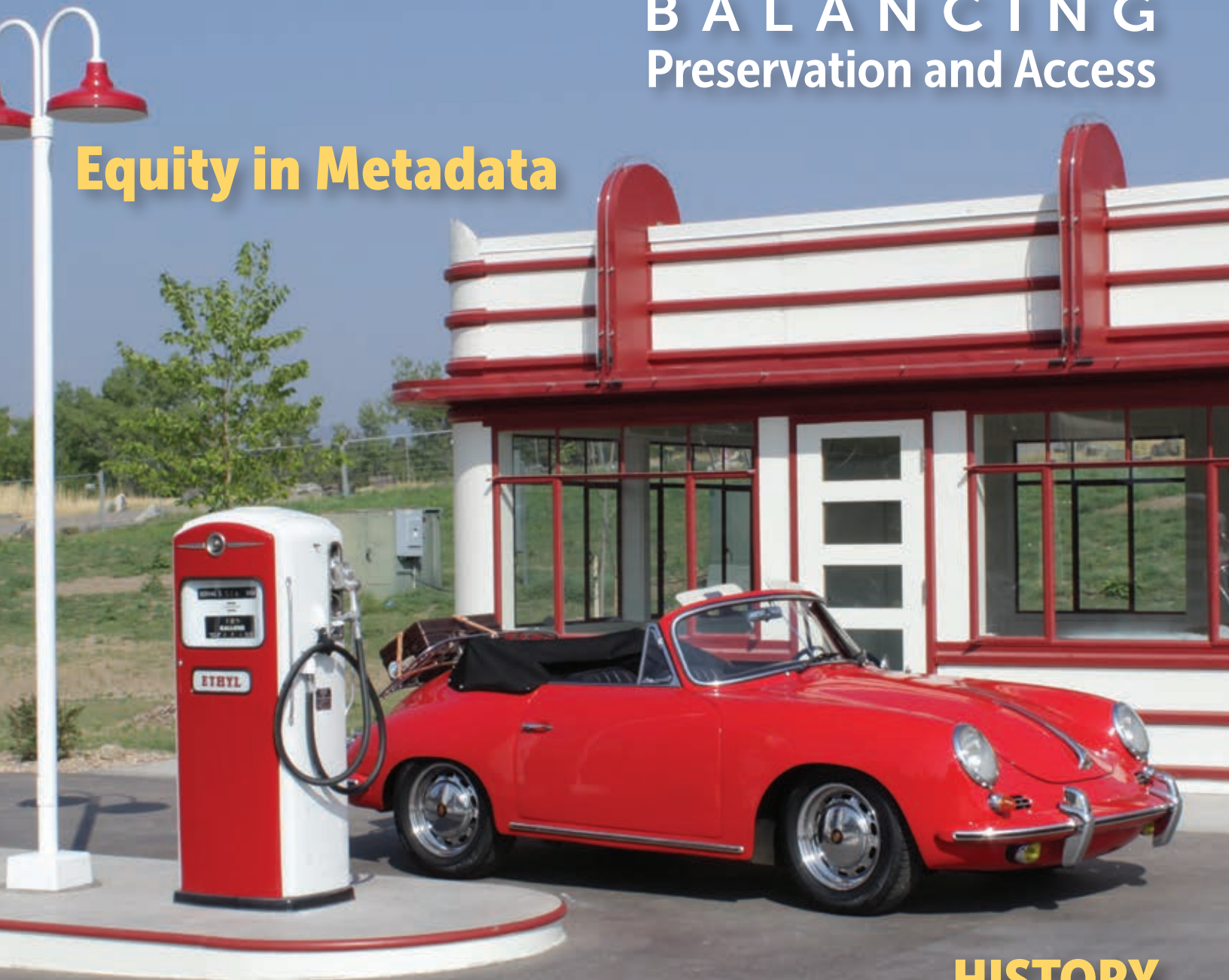
VOL. 79, #4, 2024

History News

The MAGAZINE of the AMERICAN ASSOCIATION for STATE and LOCAL HISTORY

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From the President & CEO

History and Democracy

BY JOHN DICHTL



Every history organization, at its core, is tied to democracy. Both collectively and individually, organizations represented in the AASLH membership help strengthen the very fabric of civic society.

This spring, AASLH is launching the History & Democracy Initiative—a new framework and programmatic focus area designed to support history organizations as civic actors. Through innovative projects, strategic partnerships, and original research, the initiative aims to help history museums and historical societies deepen their contributions to rebuilding America’s civic culture from the ground up.

History organizations already do essential democratic work, often without naming it as such. They preserve collective memory, grounding communities in a shared understanding of where we have been and what our choices mean. They cultivate critical thinking and information literacy, equipping visitors with the skills needed to weigh evidence, draw informed conclusions, and hold decision-makers accountable. They illuminate how decisions were made, which policies succeeded or failed, and why, drawing important lessons between past and present. They tell the stories of diverse groups—across lines of ethnicity, religion, class, gender, politics, and more—who have shaped and reshaped the nation, offering a broader representation and participation in our shared story. And, at their best, they foster belonging while helping bridge divides as part of a more productive civic discourse. One goal of the History & Democracy Initiative is to make these contributions by our field more visible—and more intentional.

The History & Democracy Initiative will encourage practitioners to see themselves as indispensable partners in civic life. It will offer tools and resources to help integrate democratic principles more fully into institutional practice, while also connecting the history field to a broader ecosystem that includes journalists, foundations, civic organizations, and other pro-democracy sectors.

While new in name, this direction builds on a strong foundation. The AASLH *Making History at 250* field guide (2021) emphasized themes such as “We the People,” “Unfinished Revolutions,” and “The American Experiment,” all underscoring the deep connections between history, civics, and democracy. Earlier efforts ten years ago around the History Relevance Campaign highlighted values like engaged citizenship, critical thinking, vibrant communities, and leadership. The History & Democracy Initiative extends and sharpens this trajectory.

In many ways, the initiative also returns AASLH to its roots. In the first issue of *History News* in July 1941, the association’s leaders identified “assistance to patriotic and civic organizations” as a central goal. From its founding through decades of work leading up to the nation’s 250th

anniversary, AASLH has consistently affirmed that historical practice is not only about understanding the past—it is about strengthening democracy in the present.

Importantly, this initiative does not claim to invent something new. Many institutions already explicitly connect history and civic engagement, and the relationship between history education and civic practice has rarely been more visible. The aim is to amplify these efforts—to lend our collective shoulders to the wheel.

There is urgency in this moment. Across the United States and around the world, democratic institutions face mounting challenges. Recent reports from organizations such as Freedom House, the Cato Institute, *The Economist*, and the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance point to declining measures of democratic health and freedom. In several assessments, the United States itself has shown signs of backsliding. Whether temporary or not, these trends are concerning—especially as the nation approaches the 250th anniversary of its founding, a milestone that invites both celebration and reflection on the durability of the world’s longest-lasting democratic experiment.

History organizations are uniquely positioned to meet this moment. By fostering informed dialogue, encouraging critical inquiry, inspiring broad participation, and connecting past to present, they can help communities navigate complexity and disagreement—core features of democratic life.

I invite you to join us in advancing this work. Consider how your institution already contributes to civic culture and how it might do so more intentionally. If there are tools, approaches, or collaborations you would find useful, I welcome your input.

The initiative’s first major convening will be a virtual summit on history and democracy May 27–28. There, you will hear from institutions all over the country as they showcase their role in strengthening democracy, especially at the community level, including: a small history center in Connecticut modeling the voting process through a mascot contest; a historic house in Rhode Island offering a civics program for adult immigrants learning English; a historical society in southern California boosting its membership while partnering with a regional journalism foundation; a history museum in North Carolina hosting naturalization ceremonies; and a county historical museum in Indiana that debuted an exhibition focused on critical thinking and other key parts of the historical process. I hope you’ll join us in May to hear from these speakers and to contribute your own thoughts.

We look forward to embarking with you all on this new endeavor to uplift the history field’s vital role in a thriving democracy.

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "John R. Dichtl".

John R. Dichtl
President & CEO, AASLH

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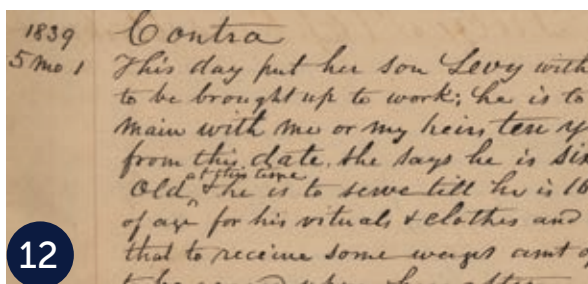
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History News Contents

VOLUME 79, #4, 2024



Features

- 6** Understanding the Public History Workforce: Using Data to Serve the People Who Power Our Field
By John Garrison Marks
- 12** Toward Equity in Metadata: How Sandy Spring Museum Adopted Restorative Cataloging Practices
By Allison Weiss and Lydia Fraser
- 20** Down the River of Time: The Dan River Queen and the Challenges of Local History
By Cody Dalton
- 26** Collections in Plain Sight: Balancing Preservation and Public Access
By Katy Lewis

Technical Leaflet

AI for Local History Organizations

By Steven Lubar

Columns

- 4** The Whole is Greater
By Audrey Horn
- 34** Award Winner Spotlight
- 36** AASLH News

On the Cover:

The restored Peerless Gas Station in Lakewood, Colorado.
Credit: Heritage Lakewood



The Whole is Greater

BY AUDREY HORN

History Demands Accessibility

Some of my favorite childhood memories were made at museums. I vividly remember going to Colonial Williamsburg and the Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History as a kid and being in awe at the past. The main reason I was able to access these spaces is because they were accessible to me as a wheelchair user, but unfortunately many museums and other cultural spaces are still inaccessible to people like me and to people with other types of disabilities. To remedy this issue, we need to consider multiple domains relating to transportation and virtual access, building and exhibit design, sensory and communication needs, and staff training. Most importantly, it is essential that disabled people are at the head of guiding these efforts.

We must address the issue of physically getting *into* places. For most people, this is simple; you hop in a car and drive somewhere. For many disabled people, myself included, this is a barrier. Some of us are unable to drive; our caregivers, guardians, and loved ones have conflicting schedules; some public transit options won't cross county lines; rideshares can feel unsafe because you're getting into a stranger's car and can be difficult if someone has a bulkier wheelchair that doesn't fold up. The solutions to this mainly lie in providing virtual and hybrid options like high-quality virtual tours or livestreaming lectures. This is not only for visitors; it can also help volunteer and paid staff access training they otherwise wouldn't be able to. Offering virtual and/or hybrid training options can allow staff with families or busy work schedules to join from wherever they are! Working with accessible transportation companies is also a

solution when it comes to tourist season when people are already in an area.

A secondary issue connected to the first is that some historical institutions are housed in buildings that were built before the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA); as a result, many lack the ramps, elevators, wide doorways, or level navigation routes that post-ADA buildings often have. This is complicated by the fact that there are preservation rules regarding historical structures that may conflict with accessibility needs. The solution to this issue is similar to the one presented previously in that creating virtual 3-D scans of a room with a virtual tour attached may remove a major barrier. Another interesting solution may be to recreate the room or building in question in an accessible area or with accessible features. In instances where the first two cannot be implemented due to cost concerns, reversible options like portable ramps,



platform lifts, and (if allowed) wider doorways should be implemented and made to accommodate larger power wheelchairs and devices as well.

A third issue related to accessibility relates to the accessibility of exhibits. In the case of physically disabled people like me, the main issue is that panels and touch screens can be too high up for us to reach. This can be remedied by simply lowering the panel. Providing seating for interactive stations is also an important accessibility feature. For those with sensory needs, such as autistic or photosensitive epileptics, exhibits or their associated films can be too bright, too loud, or too crowded, which can potentially cause meltdowns and/or seizures. Solutions for this include giving out sensory guides to guests so that they know what to expect, offering quiet hours, sensory safe rooms, and the option to rent noise-cancelling headphones and/or sunglasses, not unlike



American Sign Language fingerspelling the word "history."

what many museums already do for wheelchairs and scooters. Other groups that benefit greatly from exhibit accessibility are those who are deaf and/or hard-of-hearing or blind/visually impaired. The solutions that benefit these groups pertain mainly to presenting information in different ways, such as audio description, high-contrast and large print text, captions, videos with sign language, and access to interpreters.

An overarching issue in all of this is staff training and policies. Staff may not receive training relating to disability etiquette or the protocols for seizures or overstimulated guests. Staff may not receive training related to communication with autistic, deaf, or blind visitors, leading to potentially unpleasant interactions on both ends. The solution to this would be training programs that are led and created by disabled people that provide this information and are regularly reviewed. A second part of this involves providing clear accessibility information on your website with both visual and text diagrams detailing parking, entrances/exits, sensory information, and who to contact for help. Providing alternate viewing options for your website such as a version in large print, muted colors, or adding audio description to the site can also improve accessibility.

Accessibility is not a one-size-fits-all approach or a box to check. Disabled people have always been a part of history as subjects, visitors, workers, and scholars and deserve to feel welcomed and accommodated in institutions where they can learn about the past. History is important for everyone to learn, whether they can physically be there or not. Practical solutions like virtual options, architectural solutions that balance both accessibility and preservation, and clear communication and providing staff training by disabled people for disabled people will help museums go beyond ADA compliance and make history truly accessible to all.



Audrey Horn is a passionate history buff in college who enjoys writing, researching, and playing video games. Her two favorite places in the world are museums and libraries. Contact Audrey at audreyhorn617@gmail.com.

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 By David W. Carmicheal

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—Kaye Lanning Minchew, co-author of *Managing Local Government Archives*, winner of the Christine Zanotti Award for Excellence in Non-Serial Publications, presented by ARMA International in October 2017

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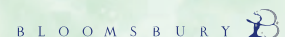
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UNDERSTANDING the Public History Workforce:



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USING DATA TO SERVE the People Who Power Our Field

By John Garrison Marks



Over the past several years, I've had countless conversations about labor issues in the public history field. Online and in person, at conferences and site visits, I've heard a growing number of practitioners at history museums, historic sites, and related organizations sounding the alarm about low pay, burnout, harassment, limited advancement, and the challenges of building truly inclusive workplaces.

What has struck me just as much as the frequency of these concerns is how rarely we've been able to translate them into any kind of sustained action. That's not because people don't care. It's at least in part because these conversations have lacked a key ingredient: data. We've been relying on anecdotes, individual experiences, and vibes—all of which are real and meaningful, but they're also all too easy for funders, policymakers, board members, executive leaders, and others to dismiss or explain away.

This lack of data was the motivation behind the National Survey of History Practitioners. In 2025, through the American Association for State and Local History's (AASLH) Public History Research Lab, we launched the first national effort to systematically understand who works in the history field, how they're compensated, and how they feel about their work. Between April and June that year, we heard from nearly 3,700 practitioners working in organizations of every size, at every career stage, and in all 50 states.

This article, drawn from our longer report "Understanding the History Workforce," shares some of what we've found. Some of the findings confirm what many practitioners already know from their own experiences. Others complicate the story in important ways. Together, the findings provide a picture of a field that is deeply passionate and committed, but also strained—by low pay, uneven workplace cultures, and systems that too often fail the people who make this work possible. By understanding the data behind these experiences, I hope this project will help us have a better-informed conversation about how we can collectively build a stronger field.

STUDY OVERVIEW

The National Survey of History Practitioners provides our field with the most comprehensive, up-to-date picture of the public history workforce in the United States that we've ever had. The survey collected voluntary responses from nearly 3,700 practitioners working in museums, historic sites, historical societies, archives, preservation organizations, and related institutions nationwide during the spring of 2025—a time of particularly acute upheaval and uncertainty for our field amid grant cancellations, censorship threats, and a wave of push-back against efforts to tell the full American story. Thus, our findings represent a snapshot of a very particular moment in our field, yet they nevertheless establish a critical baseline for understanding who works at public history organizations, how they are compensated, and how they feel about their work.

Overall, the data reveals a workforce that is passionate, skilled, and deeply invested in public service. History practitioners are committed to carrying out mission-driven work and they are motivated by the importance of doing history. Yet simultaneously, our findings reveal conditions that may threaten the field's long-term sustainability. Low compensation, inequitable advancement, uneven accountability, and hostile workplace environments collectively contribute to dissatisfaction, burnout, and potential attrition. These tensions



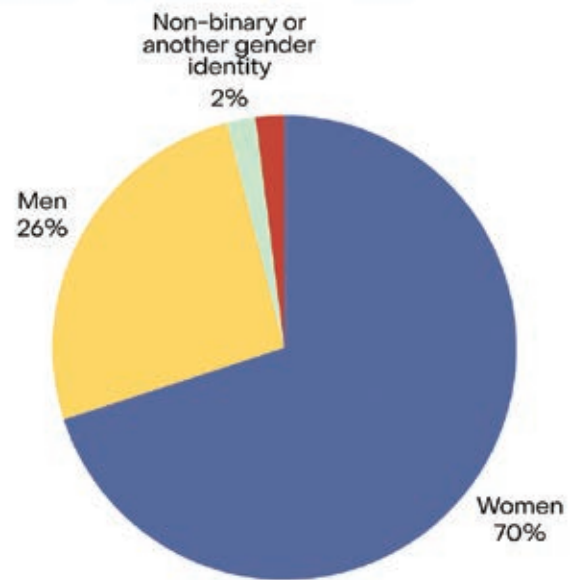
pose serious risks to equity and long-term capacity in the history field.

This research provides clear evidence that improving workforce conditions and building a stronger, more sustainable history community will require coordinated action by organizations, professional associations, funders, boards, and policy-makers. Addressing compensation, strengthening workplace culture, expanding pathways to leadership, and supporting the well-being of practitioners—especially those from historically marginalized communities—are not peripheral concerns. They are central to the future of the history field itself.

KEY FINDINGS

#1 Most public history practitioners are women, but they are underrepresented in some key leadership roles and experience pay disparity.

Nearly three-quarters of history practitioners identify as women.



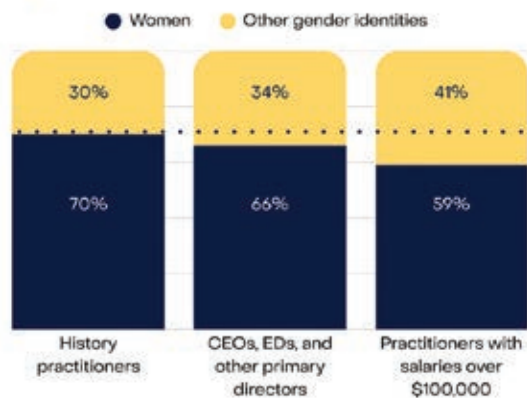
The National Survey of History Practitioners found that over two-thirds (70 percent) of practitioners identify as women, one-quarter (26 percent) identify as men, and a small proportion identified as non-binary or another gender identity (2 percent). This gender breakdown is similar to recent findings for art museum practitioners (66 percent women) and archivists (71 percent women).

While most public history practitioners are women, the survey results show statistically significant underrepresentation of women in leadership roles, such as CEOs, executive directors, or other primary director positions. For example, women represent 70 percent of all practitioners, but only accounted for 66 percent of CEOs, a small but statistically significant difference. Moreover, women are statistically less likely than

Together, the findings provide a picture of a field that is deeply passionate and committed, but also strained—

men to be paid over \$100,000 in annual salary, with women comprising just 59 percent of such earners. Thus, according to our data, women seem to be underrepresented in some of the field's highest profile, best-compensated positions.

Women make up 66 percent of CEOs/Executive Directors and 59 percent of practitioners with annual salaries over \$100,000.



These two factors align with women's two primary reasons for considering leaving the history field. When we asked survey participants who said they had considered leaving the field what prompted their thoughts about shifting careers, women commonly cited both low pay and a lack of opportunities for growth and advancement as their primary motivations.

These disparities are certainly not a problem unique to the public history field; indeed, gender inequity is a persistent issue in the labor market throughout the United States and the entire world. Yet it is concerning that, in a field otherwise dominated by women, leadership structures and compensation patterns do not reflect this reality. Importantly, this data establishes a baseline we can use to measure change and progress as a field.

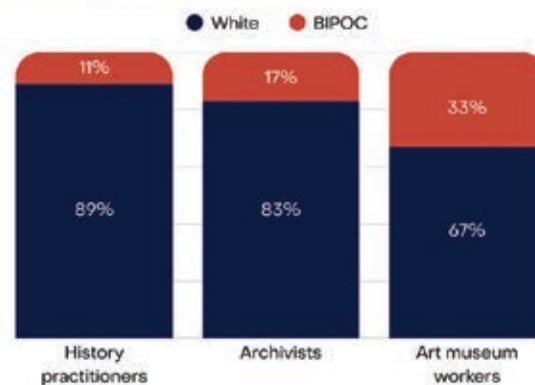
#2 Racial and ethnic diversity is lower among history practitioners than other similar fields; many factors could be at play, but two that arose in this study are workplace harassment and workplace culture.

Our survey also revealed persistent issues of racial and ethnic diversity and workplace inclusion. For example, our data shows that most practitioners (89 percent) identify as white, and 11 percent identify with other races or ethnicities or chose not to identify. Looking at workforce surveys in similar fields, the field of history practitioners is less diverse. Among art museum staff, 67 percent identify as white (a 22 percent difference). The history field is more aligned with racial and ethnic demographics among archivists, where 84 percent identify as white (a 5 percent difference). However, among the younger generation (ages 13–28) in history work, there is more racial and ethnic diversity—83 percent identify as white, compared to 89 percent among practitioners 29 and older—suggesting perhaps the demographics may be shifting.

This lack of racial and ethnic diversity may owe at least in part to the make-up of the field's institutions. In 2022, AASLH's National Census of History Organizations revealed

that the vast majority of private nonprofit institutions—as much as 80 percent—were run entirely by volunteers, who are more likely to be both older and include fewer BIPOC practitioners. Further research may help illuminate differences in racial and ethnic diversity between large institutions and small ones.

Respondents to the National Survey of History Practitioners overwhelmingly identify as white.



The public history field is less diverse than similar fields, such as archives and art museums.

The survey data also suggests that the lack of racial and ethnic diversity in our field is not just a recruitment pipeline issue. Instead, it suggests that workplace climate and culture play key roles. These workplace challenges specific to BIPOC individuals are worth paying attention to as the history field works toward building a more diverse and inclusive workforce.

For example, Black or African American practitioners and Latino/a/x or Hispanic practitioners were more likely to report experiencing discrimination or harassment from others at their organization and members of the public. Moreover, Black or African American participants were more likely to agree that they have to hide some of who they are in their organization. Latino/a/x or Hispanic practitioners were more likely to say that they are considering leaving the field in the next five years—over half (55 percent) said the reason they are considering leaving is low pay.



by low pay, uneven workplace cultures, and systems that too often fail the people who make this work possible.

Addressing these issues along with overlapping challenges with low pay and recruitment pipelines will be essential to developing a workforce that better reflects the racial and ethnic demographics of the communities our field serves.

#3 History workers are passionate and find deep meaning in their work. At the same time, they feel worried and frustrated about their work and the field.

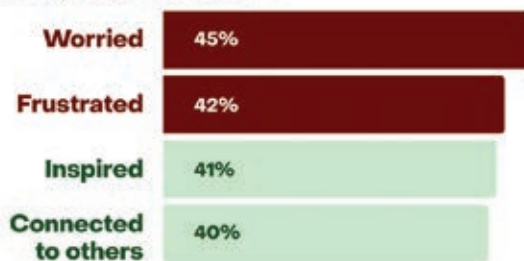
Many practitioners are drawn to the field by their passion for history. This is reflected in their perspectives about the personal value and meaning of their work. For example, 90 percent of practitioners agreed or strongly agreed with the statement “I believe what I do here is meaningful,” and 86 percent agreed or strongly agreed with the statement “I am excited by the work that I do.” Moreover, “inspired,” “connected to others,” and “hopeful” were among the top five emotions practitioners associated with working for history organizations in the prior twelve months. Together, this data suggests that in many ways, practitioners feel positive about the work they are doing at history organizations.

History practitioners agree:

- **90%:** “I believe what I do here is **meaningful.**”
- **86%:** “I am **excited** by the work that I do.”

However, the data also shows that these positive aspects are in tension with negative perspectives and experiences. When we asked practitioners which emotions they most associated with their work for history organizations, the top two responses were “worried” and “frustrated.” Again, practitioners expressed their frustration with low pay, burnout, and lack of opportunities for growth or advancement. These factors led 8 percent of practitioners to say they are considering leaving the field in the next five years, while 29 percent said they were “not sure” if they will. For comparison, half of practitioners responded that they do not plan to leave.

“Which emotions best describe your work for history organizations?”



The tension between these two sentiments—abiding belief in the importance of their work, coupled with frustration about the realities of the history workplace—creates a workforce dynamic that appears unsustainable. The field needs to think carefully about ways to address the drivers of worry, frustration, and potential attrition and shift the balance toward a more positive and supportive work environment.

#4 History practitioners are highly educated, but their pay is not commensurate to that of other U.S. workers with the same educational attainment. This has broad implications as well as specific barriers to BIPOC practitioners.

About one-third of history practitioners agree with the statement “I am paid fairly for the work I do.”



Over two-thirds (70 percent) of history practitioners have a master’s or doctoral degree. That education comes at a cost—nearly two-thirds of history practitioners (62 percent) took out student loans for their education, and one-quarter of practitioners (24 percent) still have current student loan debt to pay off. Student loan debt disproportionately affects BIPOC practitioners, with Black or African American, Latino/a/x or Hispanic, and practitioners who identify with multiple races and ethnicities more likely to still be paying off their student loans.

The ability to pay off student loans hinges in part on individuals’ compensation; this survey has revealed quite starkly the challenge of low pay in our field. In the United States, the median annual salary across sectors for workers with a master’s degree is about \$95,000. In the history field, the majority of practitioners with a master’s degree make an annual salary between \$40,000 to \$79,999, meaning history practitioners do not get the same financial return on their degree compared to other fields. This does not go unnoticed by practitioners. Only one-third stated affirmatively that they agree that they are paid fairly for the work they do.



With a master’s degree seeming to be the price of admission into the public history workforce, history organizations’ inability to provide better pay may threaten efforts to create a more equitable field, as well as to create long-term workforce sustainability. These findings should prompt questions about the ways AASLH, history organizations, funders, and practitioners might work together to address this and related issues.

#5 Survey data reveals that LGBTQ+ history practitioners are facing vast challenges.

In answering survey questions about their culture of their workplaces and their satisfaction with their jobs, practitioners

History practitioners are deeply committed to their work and motivated by a strong sense of purpose.

who identified as members of the LGBTQ+ community reported a number of negative experiences. In fact, LGBTQ+ practitioners were statistically more likely to hold negative views of their jobs and workplaces than their non-LGBTQ+ counterparts. LGBTQ+ practitioners reported significantly higher levels of burnout, negative effects on their well-being, and limited support within their organizations. They are also more likely to feel unheard, undervalued, and unable to express their full identities, and less likely to recommend their workplace or feel satisfied with their career trajectory and compensation.

The specifics are sobering, and point to the need for major changes around workplace inclusion. For example, LGBTQ+ practitioners were more likely than others to:

- Feel burned out
- Feel like they don't have a voice in decision making
- Feel like their workplace negatively affects their mental/physical health
- Feel that they have to hide some of who they are at their workplace
- Believe that diversity and inclusion are not celebrated at their workplace

Likewise, those same practitioners were also *less likely* than their peers to:

- Recommend their workplace to friends/family
- Agree that people in their organization are held accountable for discrimination/harassment
- Feel valued by their employer
- Feel satisfied with their career
- Feel satisfied with their compensation/salary

Collectively, these disparities point to clear issues in workplace culture, accountability, and support structures for LGBTQ+ practitioners that require further attention and action.

Looking Forward

The findings in this report paint a clear and complex picture of the history workforce in the United States. History practitioners are deeply committed to their work and motivated by a strong sense of purpose. Overwhelmingly, the people who work in this field report that they love what they do. At the same time, however, many are navigating low pay, uneven workplace cultures, burnout, and structural barriers that may present challenges for both individual well-being and the long-term sustainability of the field.

There are few simple solutions to the challenges outlined above. Indeed, these findings should be viewed as the beginning of a much-needed conversation within our field. There is more to do to contextualize this information to compare it to other sectors, place it in conversation with broader trends in



MAREK-STUDZINSKI-UNSPASH

the US workforce, and identify promising areas for institutional or field-wide interventions. Still, these findings establish a shared, evidence-based foundation for conversations the field has been having—often urgently, sometimes uneasily—for years. By grounding those conversations in data, this project provides a clearer basis for reflection, accountability, and action across organizations of all sizes and types. We hope readers will embrace this opportunity to consider how we

collectively can use this data to build a stronger, more inclusive, more sustainable field.

For AASLH, these findings will shape our work in the years ahead. We will use this research to inform professional development and leadership programming, support peer learning among history organizations, and guide conversations with funders, partners, and policymakers about what it will take to build a healthier, more equitable history workforce. The data will also help us ask better questions—about compensation standards, career pathways, workplace culture, and the systems that structure opportunity and exclusion in the field. That work will be challenging, and it is only just beginning.

Just as importantly, this survey marks the beginning of a longer-term research agenda. As a baseline, it allows the field to track change over time and to assess whether collective efforts are making a meaningful difference. Future research, deeper analysis, and continued dialogue will be essential as the history field navigates a period of significant social, political, and economic change.

In closing, AASLH views the publication of these findings not as the end of the conversation, but rather as the beginning of a more informed one. We see our findings as a tool: something practitioners can use to advocate within their organizations, leaders can use to benchmark and reflect, and our field can use for advocacy and policy development as we chart the way forward. We at AASLH look forward to continuing this work alongside you—turning data into dialogue, and dialogue into meaningful change for the history field. We hope the field will embrace this invitation—to practitioners, leaders, boards, funders, and allies—to engage with the data, reflect honestly on what it reveals, and participate in shaping what comes next.

The strength of the history field has always rested in its people. Ensuring that those people are supported, valued, and able to thrive is essential to the work ahead.



John Garrison Marks is Vice President of Research and Engagement for AASLH, where he leads the Public History Research Lab and directs field-wide research initiatives about the public history community. Reach John at marks@aslh.org.

For more information about this project and to view our full report, visit aslh.org/history-workforce.

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TOWARD EQUITY IN METADATA: How Sandy Spring Museum Adopted Restorative Cataloging Practices



By Allison Weiss and Lydia Fraser

Established in 1980, Sandy Spring Museum (SSM) in Maryland, about 30 miles west of Baltimore, is a triumph of devotion from local residents who were troubled by the disappearance and lack of dissemination of the community's material history. Though Black and white residents numbered almost equally throughout the nineteenth century in Sandy Spring, the museum's interpretation long perpetuated the fallacy that only the town's white residents had stories that could be told through primary source materials. Duly, the town's history has largely been told from the perspective of its most prolific white chroniclers. Over time, racially biased cataloging practices in our archives cemented this white-centric narrative, making authentic Black voices accessible only by chance or through laborious, page-by-page searches.

In the decades since its founding, the museum's mission has transformed. We've moved beyond a traditional interpretation that focused solely on the community's founding history and its dominant white Quaker culture. Today, we're dedicated to dynamic, participatory cultural heritage engagement that embraces the stories of *all* community members.



Top left: Early Sandy Spring's white families relied on Black labor.

To redress the historic inequities in our collecting and cataloging practices, we launched *Equity in Metadata*, a restorative cataloging initiative.

Equity: freedom from bias or favoritism

Metadata: data that describes and provides context for digital items, which in turn helps users find and discover these resources.

Our mission today is to connect diverse communities and advance social equity. To redress the historic inequities in our collecting and cataloging practices, we launched *Equity in Metadata*, a restorative cataloging initiative that centers the stories of the area's historic Black residents to facilitate a more holistic discovery of Sandy Spring's socially segregated yet economically interdependent community history.

Sandy Spring: A Community of Contradictions

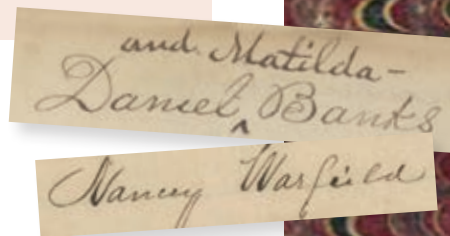
In the small town of Sandy Spring, events took place that held significant local and national historical importance. Its early Quaker settlers were a paradox, a mixture of both enslavers and vocal abolitionists. Some freed the people they held in bondage roughly 50 years before the Civil War, or risked being “read out” of the Meeting. Others maintained their enslaved workers, who were emancipated upon the death of the enslaver. Sandy Spring is also renowned as home to a large, prominent, and well-established free Black population dating back to at least the early 1800s. Rumored to be a place through which enslaved people passed on their journey to freedom, this site is also associated with Dred Scott, who is said to have been housed here during the 1857 *Dred Scott v. Sandford* case, in which the Supreme Court ruled that the Constitution did not extend citizenship to people of African descent.

The term “Sandy Spring” refers to a region beyond the actual town itself. Local lore stated that if you could travel on horseback to the Quaker Meeting House and return home before dark, you were residing in Sandy Spring. Thus, the region of Sandy Spring was defined as any population area that was located within 6 miles of the Sandy Spring Meeting House, the physical location where members of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) met on a monthly basis.

Sandy Spring's Black population, comprised of both free-born individuals and formerly enslaved people, established many independent thriving communities in the area. These included communities such as Cincinnati, Holly Grove, and Mount Zion, and totaled about fourteen distinct communities in northeastern Montgomery County.

While the white and Black communities were socially segregated, their economic lives were deeply intertwined. Our archives reveal that Sandy Spring's white families, whether enslavers or not, relied

almost exclusively on Black labor for their farms, homes, and various goods and services. These interactions are preserved in nineteenth-century documents found in archives across the Eastern Seaboard, including dozens of relevant store, farm, and medical ledgers housed in the museum's own archives.

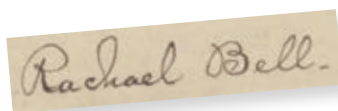


The Road to Equity

The groundwork for *Equity in Metadata* began in 2019, when a generous benefactor anonymously provided the funds necessary to digitize the museum's historic archival collection. With this support, Sandy Spring Museum digitized nearly our entire archives and partnered with Digital Maryland—a collaborative, statewide digital preservation program of the Enoch Pratt Free Library/Maryland State Library Resource Center—to host our collection in its digital content management platform.

The process of digitization led to the realization that there existed a depth and breadth of Black community history within the archives that was previously unrecognized and unacknowledged by the museum. Historically, racially skewed cataloging practices in heritage institutions have perpetuated white-dominant narratives. As we digitized SSM's archives, staff became acutely aware of various forms of inequity.

- 1. Difficulty in finding Black history:** Information on Black history was far harder to locate than that on white history. By cataloging resources only based on the name of the white author, Black history was unfindable if we adhered to standard cataloging practices.
- 2. Biased cataloging language:** Conventional vocabularies often failed to represent Black lives with accuracy and respect. Metadata specialist Shel Burton worked with a local African American Descendant Advisory Committee to refine language. For example, “African American” proved inadequate for pre-1868 records, leading to the more historically accurate term “Free People of African Descent.”



This project mined the archives for evidence of the area's extensive Black history.



3. Unfindable historic inequities: Crucially, historical inequities detailed within the documents themselves remained undiscoverable due to existing cataloging practices.

To redress the racially skewed cataloging practices that buried the stories of the underrepresented yet equally integral and present Black men and women in Sandy Spring’s history, the *Equity in Metadata* project evolved. Under the direction of Archives and Collections Manager Lydia Fraser, staff became intimately familiar with the content of nearly 100,000 pages of digitized materials, which include minutes for some of the oldest continually meeting social clubs in the United States, holdings from the first rural hospital established in the country, manumission papers documenting the

release of enslaved people, and many other items of local, regional, and national significance. Within these documents, staff discovered, were thousands of references to the Black men and women who lived in Sandy Spring, living socially segregated lives but interacting constantly with their white neighbors, and contributing to our town’s history in ways that deserve to be chronicled and remembered.

To be clear, it is not that this information on Black history was hidden; we just were not looking for it. For four decades of the museum’s existence, we were satisfied with telling the story of only part of the community—the ancestors of the people who founded the museum, whom we aided in crafting

a story that was favorable to their side, leaving out the complexities of living in a community in which enslaved people, free Black people, white enslavers, and non-enslavers lived side by side. Over time, the town became regionally renowned for this dominant story, which centers on the narrative that Quaker residents freed those they enslaved several decades before the Civil War, earning the community a reputation for tolerance and progressive thought. While not untrue, this was a partial truth that deliberately excluded crucial nuances that painted a much more complex story, and one that was less favorable to the Quaker town founders.

Mining the Metadata

While digitizing the archives expanded online access, it did not automatically make Black history more discoverable on its own. Take, for example, the 1851 Brookeville Store ledger, a record of commercial purchases from a local store, which shows that in a single day, customers included two free Black residents of Brookeville, seven white enslavers, and six white non-enslavers. We also know that some customers who were listed by first name only were enslaved at the time of making their purchases.

However, if you visited the museum’s digital archives, the only way to find information on these individual customers would have been to track down the document and search page by page, line by line. That’s because the standard way to tag this kind of digital content is with descriptors based on the perspective of the item’s creator. (In the case of the store ledger, that would be “Brookeville Store.”) This effectively rendered the stories of Black men and women almost undiscoverable, burying them in the pages of ledgers, journals, and daybooks of white landowners, doctors, and business owners.

Recognizing this, Fraser sought a new approach to cataloging that would make Black history as easy to access as white history. The system she conceived involves identifying the pages on which the individual Black histories are recorded and grouping these pages by the person’s name to create new virtual archival items. In creating these new digital items, SSM can then apply the same depth of descriptive metadata for an individual free Black laborer as for the white Quaker landowner for whom he labored, thus the project’s name, *Equity in Metadata*.

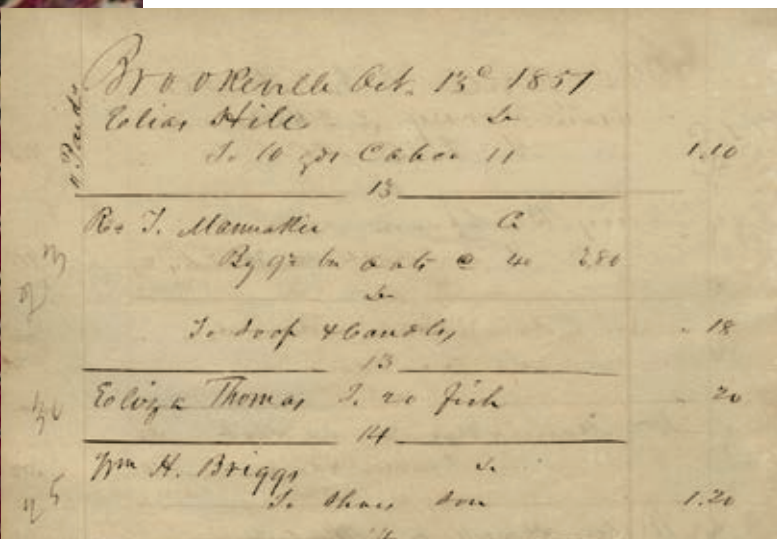
To implement this practice, we received permission from Digital Maryland staff to create new digital items from content already existing on their platform. As it turned out, they not only supported us in doing this, but suggested sharing our process with other institutions, recognizing the potential impact on discovering Black historical narratives.

Allen Dorsey

Margaret Brown

John Cole

1884 Charlotte Dettler



Example ledger entries documenting Black residents and commercial interactions.

Before and After

Imagine this research scenario before the *Equity in Metadata* project:

In 2021, you visit SSM's digital archives looking for information about your ancestor, William Bowen. You enter "William Bowen" in the Digital Maryland search bar but no matches turn up. You contact SSM's staff because you are certain that Mr. Bowen, a Black man, lived and worked in Sandy Spring in the mid-1800s. SSM's staff asks you if you know who William Bowen worked for because the museum's archives are cataloged according to the white landowner/property owner/store owner and not according to the names of laborers. In fact, this is standard descriptive practice, cataloging items according to the "owner" or author. Staff advise you to try your search again if you can determine who Mr. Bowen worked for.

As luck would have it, one of your relatives remembers that Mr. Bowen worked for Joshua Peirce. You revisit SSM's digital archives, type "Joshua Peirce" in the search bar, and discover that there are two Joshua Peirce ledgers, totaling about 600 pages. To find information on William Bowen, you will need to scroll through 600 pages in hopes of finding a mention of him.

There is no mention of William Bowen in the catalog record seen below. This metadata belies the ledger's documentation of the labor of many Black men employed by Joshua Peirce, the majority of whom were paid not in cash but through material equivalencies set by Mr. Peirce. This standard cata-

loging practice perpetuates the oft told, yet skewed narrative of the supremacy of the white Quaker role in Sandy Spring's origin stories.

This scenario resulted because almost everything in SSM's collection was authored by a white person and, therefore, cataloged with terms associated with the item's owner, a white person. The catalog record says nothing about Mr. Peirce employing Black laborers. Because standard cataloging practices for this kind of digital content privileges the perspective of the item's creator, in effect it makes the stories of underdocumented people all but undiscoverable, burying them in the pages of ledgers, journals, and daybooks of white landowners, doctors, and business owners. Because you do not have time to peruse 600 pages of information to search for William Bowen, you decide to put this research project off until retirement.

Now, imagine this research scenario after the *Equity in Metadata* project has made its impact:

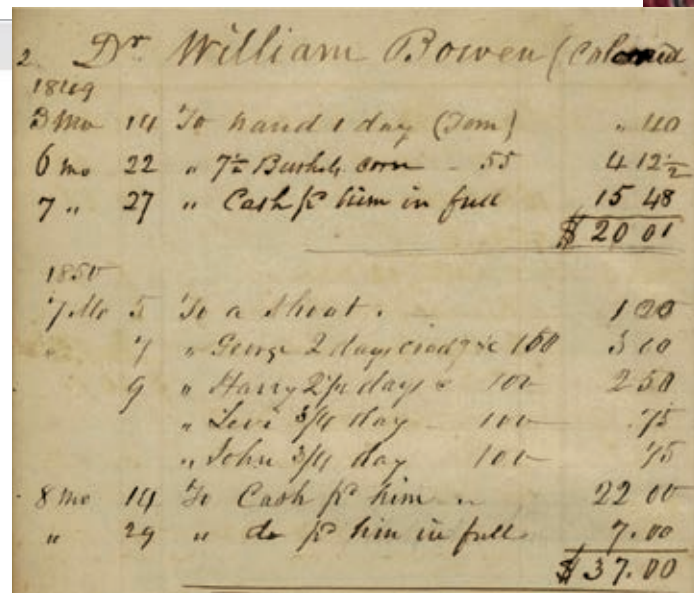
You return to SSM's digital archives after reading about their *Equity in Metadata* project and skeptically type "William Bowen" into the search bar of Digital Maryland. The first three matches that appear are your William Bowen, describing work that he performed for Joshua Peirce and also George Ellicott Lea. The first match shows information from one of Mr. Peirce's lengthy ledgers that stymied you before, but now you can jump right to the page referencing William Bowen. You've discovered more about Mr. Bowen's life and have a new research lead in Mr. Lea.

Object Description

Identifier	smpa_82-02-27
Title	Ledger: Joshua Peirce and Edward Peirce, 1849-1885.
Creator	Peirce, Joshua, 1781-1863; Peirce, Edward, 1820-1916
Subject	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Peirce family Peirce, Joshua, 1781-1863--Archives Peirce, Edward, 1820-1916--Archives Riverton (Brookeville, Md.) Fairfield (Brookeville, Md.) Farms--Maryland--Montgomery County--19th century Farmers--Maryland--Montgomery County--19th century Farm management--Maryland--Montgomery County--19th century Farm management--Records and correspondence Finance, Personal--Maryland--Brookeville--19th century Brookeville (Md.)--History--19th century Farms Farmers Farm management Finance, Personal Agriculture Brookeville (Md.)

Description Accounting ledger dated from 1849 through 1885 and kept by Joshua Peirce and his son, Edward. Entries pertain the management for their properties Brooke Black Meadow (subsequently known as Riverton) as well as Fairfield (built by Edward in 1856) in Brookeville, Maryland. Ledger shows names of suppliers, customers, tenants, laborers, items or services traded, purchased and sold, and prices.

Holding Institution Sandy Spring Museum - 1982.0002.0027 (Gift of Deborah Iddings Willson)



Catalog record for Peirce ledger, and the ledger entry for William Bowen.

Partnering with Descendants

As we embarked on our work, we quickly realized we had overlooked an element of bias in our project. During the first public meeting after the project launched, a meeting attendee named Natalie Thomas, who traces her ancestry to some of the first Black residents in Sandy Spring, expressed that she did not want her ancestor's nineteenth-century medical records available through Digital Maryland. Prior to her voicing this concern, we hadn't understood the capacity for harm that sharing this information publicly could present for descendants. In retrospect, it's clear that personal medical information is inherently sensitive, especially when it could be misused by those with their own agendas. Indeed, the nineteenth-century medical ledgers of Dr. Caleb Edward Iddings are filled with racially biased descriptions of his patients' health, using different terms depending on whether the patients were white or Black.

To proactively identify such issues, Ms. Thomas agreed to establish the Sandy Spring descendants Advisory Committee. This committee, composed of community mediator and social activist Rachel Watkins, PhD, and about ten women whose families have resided in Sandy Spring for generations, provided the invaluable perspective that we were lacking, addressing questions like: How do Black descendants want to use the museum's archives? What terms would they use to search for informa-

Acknowledgment

This statement, crafted by descendants, appears in catalog records containing medical data.

In this country, medicine has a long history of abusing Black people without their knowledge and often against their will, sometimes under the guise of furthering science. Dr. Caleb Edward Iddings treated many Black people in the Sandy Spring, Maryland community between 1879 and 1904. His account ledgers provide valuable information of interest to a broad public. The ledgers also contain harmful language that compromises dignity and privacy when describing Black people. As descendants of Dr. Iddings' patients, we have identified and redacted the harmful content on this publicly accessible platform. Permission to access the original, unaltered documents will be reviewed on a case-by-case basis by the Sandy Spring African American Descendant Committee.

tion about their ancestors? Are there circumstances under which SSM would allow a researcher access to sensitive documents that we would not otherwise publicize? Will any information in the archives be traumatizing to readers? If so, should that information be redacted, or should we precede it with a warning statement?

The Descendant Advisory Committee prepared the following statement that provides truthful and necessary context when viewing our digital archives:

While our Black ancestors living in Sandy Spring, Maryland in the late 18th and 19th centuries were unable to leave the same prolific documentary evidence of their lives as could their white counterparts, they were equally active in shaping the story of Sandy Spring. They tilled, planted, and harvested the land and kept the houses of whites; they owned property, ran businesses, and paid taxes; they built a socially and intellectually active community celebrated beyond its boundaries. Despite racism and discrimination, they persevered and liberated themselves and others while living under the shadow of slavery surrounding them here in Montgomery County. Buried in the tens of thousands of pages of documents in Sandy Spring Museum's digital archives of historic documents mostly authored by white males are whispers and echoes of the unheralded but equally significant Black stories and contributions.

With an estimated 7,000 pages from relevant documents to go through, contained in about 43 collection items, this is very much a work in progress. But to date, we have identified 450 Black men and women whose stories are now easier to discover in the museum's archives. We are also seeking funding to expand our archives by digitally connecting to other institutions that own items relevant to Sandy Spring, so we can digitize their records and apply the same process to create new cross-institutional digital items centering Black histories and applying the same degree of descriptive metadata that the white creators of documents have.

While many archivists are engaged in equity projects, including reparative metadata and cataloging (i.e., using terminology that no longer favors a white, colonial perspective), we are not aware of others who are extracting Black history that is dispersed throughout white documents in this way. Nor are we aware of others creating new digital items by extracting pages that reference specific people. We were able to come up with this approach because we were singularly focused on centering and providing access to the Black stories by leveraging all the tools afforded us on a digital platform without

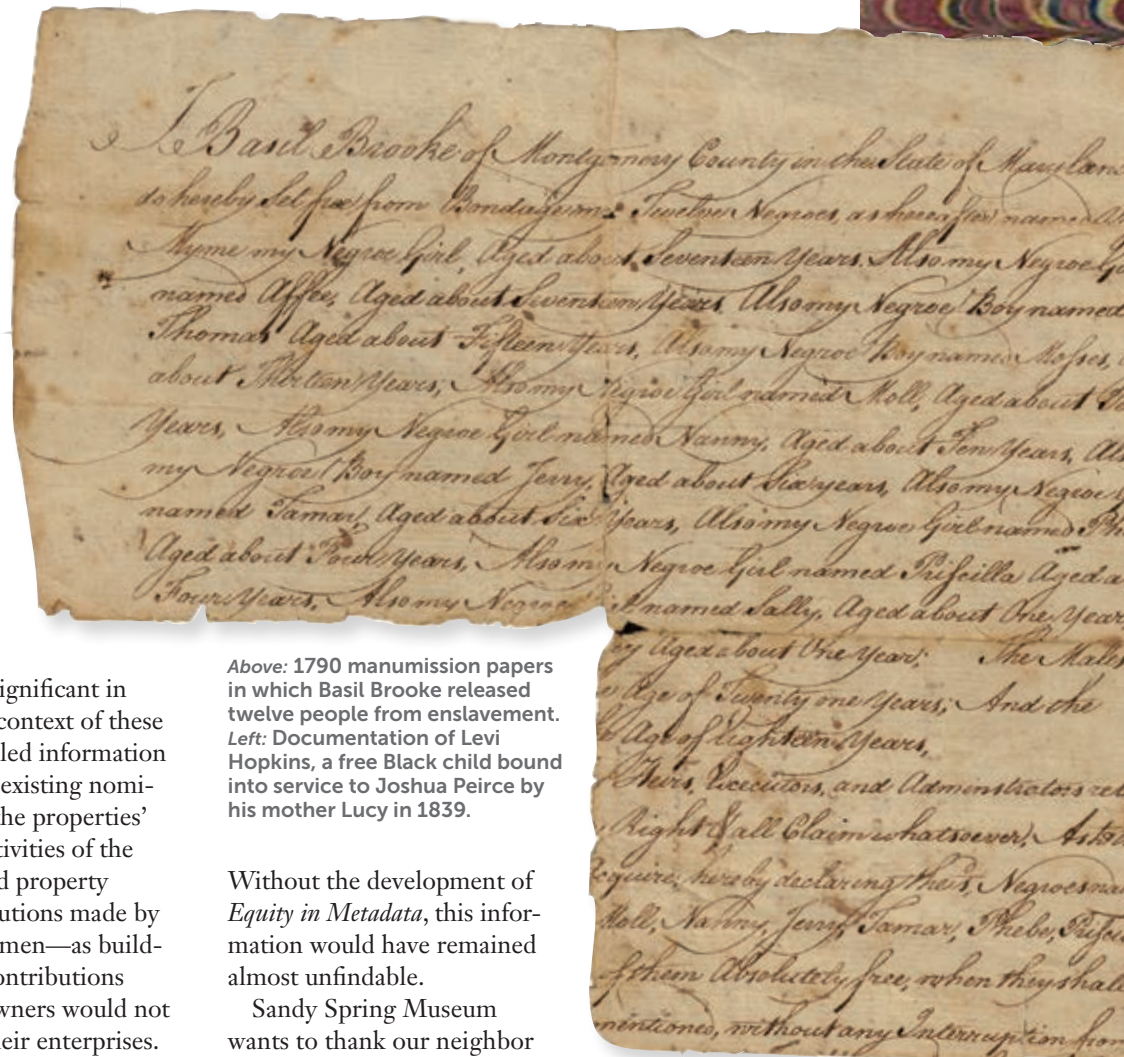


1885 Eliza Green

being encumbered by “standard archival practice.” It also helped that our collection is limited in scope, both geographically and numerically.

Implementing *Equity in Metadata* has revealed information about local Black history that can benefit everyone’s understanding of the region’s built environment as well.

For example, we are currently developing addendums to the National Register of Historic Places Nomination Forms and/or Maryland Historical Trust State Historic Sites Inventory Forms for local properties previously identified as historically significant in order to enhance the socio-cultural context of these sites by incorporating recently revealed information about local Black history. While the existing nominations focus almost exclusively on the properties’ architectural significance and the activities of the white property owners, the enhanced property descriptions will include the contributions made by free and enslaved Black men and women—as builders, laborers, and housekeepers—, contributions without which the white property owners would not have been able to successfully run their enterprises.



Above: 1790 manumission papers in which Basil Brooke released twelve people from enslavement. Left: Documentation of Levi Hopkins, a free Black child bound into service to Joshua Peirce by his mother Lucy in 1839.

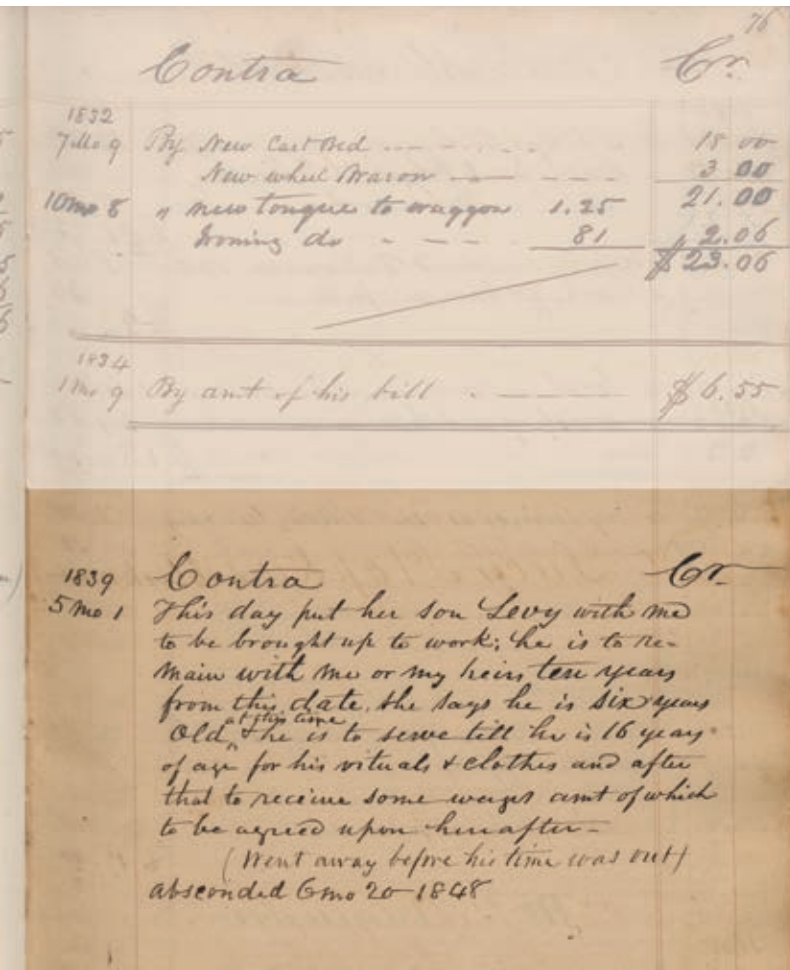
Without the development of *Equity in Metadata*, this information would have remained almost unfindable.

Sandy Spring Museum wants to thank our neighbor and Olive Branch

Community Church elder Jefferi Lee for planting the seed for our work. When we shared with him that we wanted to make information about Black history as accessible as information about white history, he commented on the importance of simply recognizing that “we were there, too.” To us, that recognition starts with ensuring that every person of color who is mentioned in the museum’s collection, no matter how briefly, deserves their own records, with their own points of access. For forty years, Sandy Spring Museum and archival practices were unconsciously overlooking half of the community’s history, but this project demonstrates the possibilities and rewards of taking action to restore these essential stories.



Allison Weiss is Executive Director of Sandy Spring Museum. She sees museums through the lens of a community builder and has made a career of transforming local museums into centers of community engagement. Contact her at aweiss@sandyspringmuseum.org.



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By Cody Dalton

DOWN THE RIVER OF TIME:

The *Dan River Queen* and the Challenges of Local History

ESCHENA



Top: The ca. 1885 Cockram's Mill.
Above: The *Dan River Queen* in the late 1960s.

On a humid summer afternoon in 1967, visitors to Meadows of Dan, Virginia, were presented with an extraordinary, even baffling, sight. There, moored on a modest seventeen-acre lake that drew its water from the headwaters of the Dan River, floated a genuine, twin-decked paddlewheel steamer. The vessel, christened the *Dan River Queen*, was fifty-two feet long and seemed dramatically out of place, better suited to the languid, muddy currents of the Mississippi River than a quiet, three-thousand-foot-high mountain community nestled along the Blue Ridge Parkway. This incongruous spectacle was the brainchild of a local magnate, Shirley H. Mitchell, a man whose ambition vastly outstripped the modest scale of the surrounding landscape. Mitchell was a trucking tycoon whose vision extended far beyond the winding mountain roads. He aimed to transform this quiet corner of Patrick County, Virginia, into a regional tourist destination, and the *Dan River Queen* was the grand, floating centerpiece of that audacious dream.



View of the Dan River.



Mitchell's project was far more than a single boat on a pond; it was a comprehensive leisure complex designed to capture the growing economic current of postwar American tourism. He paired the *Queen* with the extensive Circle M Zoo, which housed a surprising collection of over one hundred animals, an operational miniature train that circled the grounds, and a gift shop, all housed near the historic Cockram's Mill site. The planned expansions of the complex spoke volumes about Mitchell's over-the-top, theatrical approach to history and entertainment. Future additions were slated to include a frontier-style "Indian Village," and, playing into Appalachian stereotypes, a working, albeit faux, moonshine still.

The riverboat itself was decorated with a theatrical flair befitting a showboat. Its interior and exterior bore the graphic motifs of playing cards, hearts, spades, diamonds, and clubs, lending an air of Southern Gothic elegance and backroom gambling to the enterprise. Above the decks, an old locomotive bell clanged a greeting to boarding visitors, while a salvaged ship's wheel guided its course around the small lake. A steam calliope, a signature sound of the great American riverboats, piped cheerful, often slightly off-key, tunes that echoed across the water and into the surrounding mountains, drawing

*Dan River Queen* postcard.

families to gather on deck for the thirty-minute cruises. Local reporters, who descended on the scene with astonishment, uniformly marveled at the sheer incongruity: a Mississippi-style showboat, a product of river culture and lowland grandeur, floating improbably three thousand feet above sea level, miles from any truly navigable water. It was a spectacular example of cultural transplantation and theatrical ambition.

A Crafted Vision of the Past

The *Dan River Queen* was not merely an amusement; it was a carefully and deliberately crafted vision of the American past, a stage set for commercial nostalgia. Mitchell drew heavily upon popular cultural images: the romanticized river narratives of Mark Twain, the high-stakes drama of Hollywood's gambler's riverboats, and the idealized, sanitized notion of the American frontier. The visitor experience was designed to immerse guests in this curated history. They walked through a faux saloon, peered into glass cases displaying antique slot machines, and were encouraged to spin a brightly painted roulette wheel, experiences that evoked a distant, often fictionalized, era of risk and glamour. Like so many roadside attractions that blossomed across the United States in the mid-twentieth century, the *Dan River Queen* promised a compelling and digestible blend of sentiment-laden nostalgia, spectacular showmanship, and diversion tailored for the nuclear family. For the residents of Patrick County, a rural community generally overlooked by the larger currents of commerce, the *Queen* quickly transcended its role as a mere tourist draw. It became a local landmark, a tangible emblem of audacious ambition, and a symbol of their community's eager desire to catch the surging economic current of the Blue Ridge Parkway tourism boom. For a brief, shining moment, the boat represented the potential for transformation and prosperity.

The launch of the *Dan River Queen* on August 1, 1967, was greeted with significant fanfare, and for the better part of a decade, the combined draw of the riverboat and the Circle M Zoo fueled Mitchell's vision. At its zenith, the complex was a formidable draw, attracting as many as 5,000 visitors on a busy summer weekend. The sheer novelty and family-friendly environment made it a regional sensation. For generations of schoolchildren across southern Virginia and northern North Carolina, a field trip to the *Dan River Queen* became



Daily Press (Newport News, VA), Aug. 23, 1970 newspaper article.

High along the eastern slopes of the Blue Ridge at Meadows-of-Dan in Southwest Virginia, the Dan River has its modest beginnings as a narrow mountain stream. A few miles eastward at Cockram Mill, these headwaters have been dammed to form a 17-acre lake some 3,000 feet up in the highlands of Patrick County.

Travelers from Tidewater bound for the Blue Ridge Parkway have certainly left all thoughts of ships and sailing far behind by the time they find themselves driving along Route 88 westward from Martinsville. But here, on occasion, they can scarcely believe their eyes—ears, too—when, having surmounted the steep climb to Lovers Leap beyond the village of Stuart, they suddenly spy the sparkling lake. For, cradled on its bosom, is none other than the colorful paddle-wheel steamer Dan River Queen.

This seemingly unlikely mountain vessel undoubtedly has the distinction of plying the loftiest navigational route in all the eastern seaboard states. For the unsuspecting, however, it is a distinct shock suddenly to round a curve in the road and hear calliope music and the shrill notes of a steamboat whistle high amongst

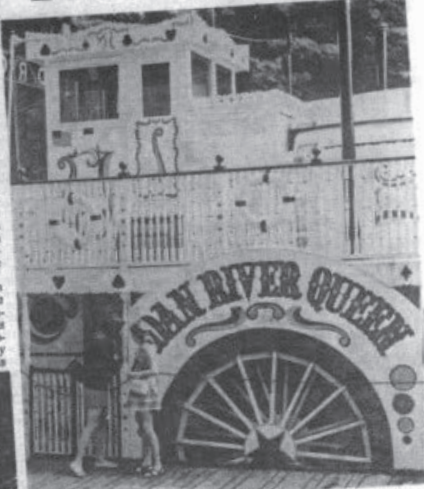
the erstwhile haunts of Daniel Boone.

The noble Dan River Queen, a 35-foot imitation of a Mississippi River steam packet of yesteryear, makes a mile-long trip on summer weekends to an enthusiastic clientele of both veteran mountaineer sailors and others who, like us, just dropped in and were flabbergasted when they saw the boat!

Appropriately encrusted with gingerbread, the gaily-painted Dan River Queen's decor suggests old time riverboat gambling days with playing card decorations and appropriate signs requesting passengers to look out for card sharps and to use the spittoons provided by the management. Notices also advise that marriages performed by the captain on board are invalid for more than the one trip. Meanwhile, a steam tractor engine is turning a pair of six-foot diameter paddle-wheels to provide a sedate pace for the half-hour excursion.

This mountain navigation idea is part of a tourist enterprise which, according to a "Commonwealth" magazine article, is the development of North Carolina businessman and property owner Shirley H. Mitchell. His

Steamboat In The Mountains



Old fashioned paddle wheels propel the boat. (A. C. Brown photos)

package of attractions also includes the nearby Circle M Zoo, a renovated Cockram Mill which provides water-ground cornmeal; and the Good Luck Country Store with traditional cracker barrels, hard by the steamboat wharf.

According to the story, the Dan River Queen is Mitchell's pride. She was built right there on the lake in 1967, being christened

jointly by Mitchell's then two-year-old granddaughter and Delegate W. C. (Dan) Daniel of—naturally—Danville, the well-known and enterprising mill town farther along the river's course.

Long may the gracious Queen sail her lofty route and long may her unexpected steamboat whistle resound high in the beautiful Blue Ridge Mountains of Virginia.

ALEXANDER C. BROWN



Dan River Queen at her dock at Cockram Mill.

a cherished, almost mandatory, rite of passage. The memories, the slightly tinny sound of the calliope music echoing across the still water, the singular thrill of boarding the bright, white-painted steamboat, the feeling of the paddlewheel thumping the water, would linger in their collective consciousness long after the boat itself had vanished. The *Queen* became an anchor point for countless childhood memories.

However, Mitchell's expansive empire, built largely on the foundation of his trucking business, proved tragically fragile. By the mid-1970s, the economic tide had turned. The trucking magnate's core business began to collapse under mounting debts and financial mismanagement, and his ambitious leisure ventures, the *Queen* and the zoo included, were dragged down with it. In 1977, creditors moved in, liquidating his vast assets in what the *Roanoke Times* declared to be one of the most spectacular and devastating personal bankruptcies in the history of Virginia. Auctioneers descended upon the tranquil mountain property, selling off everything that Mitchell had amassed: not only the remnants of the zoo and the centerpiece riverboat,

but also his extensive antique car collection, multiple homes scattered across the region, and over 2,000 acres of prime mountain land. The scale of the collapse was so stunning that a contemporary reporter noted with clear astonishment, "sixty million dollars, a trucking fiefdom, a dozen homes, 116 antique cars, a 2,000-acre Virginia mountain retreat complete with a zoo and a riverboat were all gone."

The community of Meadows of Dan and Patrick County felt the loss of the enterprise deeply and in complex ways. While many remembered the *Queen* and the zoo with undiluted joy and nostalgia for the boom times, others carried a deep-seated bitterness. Mitchell's bankruptcy was far from clean; it left a wake of financial devastation, with local contractors unpaid for their work, suppliers facing ruin, and loyal, dedicated employees suddenly and brutally out of work. The brief, intense life of the *Dan River Queen*, launched

with almost intoxicating grand hopes, celebrated for a glorious decade, and then abandoned just as quickly, mirrored the predictable, yet still painful, cycle of many local tourist attractions of the postwar American era. These enterprises often



The boat was abandoned and left to the elements.

For many people who grew up in the region, the *Queen* was not simply an external tourist attraction; it was a deeply embedded marker of community identity, a touchstone, a story they still tell their children and grandchildren.

bloomed quickly, fueled by postwar optimism and easy credit, but they frequently proved structurally unsustainable once the inevitable economic winds shifted or the founder's personal fortunes declined. The *Queen's* demise was a local tragedy that played out a national pattern.

Memory and Local Meaning

Today, the *Dan River Queen* no longer floats. Its presence on the lake has been erased, but its legend endures powerfully in the realm of collective memory. Local newspapers frequently run nostalgic columns and retrospectives about the boat and the zoo, while social media groups dedicated to regional history overflow with fervent, detailed reminiscences. One long-time resident, articulating a feeling shared by hundreds, wrote that riding the *Queen* was “one of the greatest experiences of our childhood,” a sentiment echoed by dozens of others who shared their own photographs and anecdotes. For many people who grew up in the region, the *Queen* was not simply an external tourist attraction; it was a deeply embedded marker of community identity, a touchstone, a story they still tell their children and grandchildren about growing up in Patrick County during a fleeting golden age.

Yet this memory is far from monolithic; it is fragmented, contested, and complex. Alongside the pure, rosy nostalgia, there are inevitably recollections of disappointment and genuine hardship: the sudden layoffs, the unpaid debts, the broken promises, and the quiet financial ruin left behind by Mitchell's collapse. Community history is rarely a single, coherent narrative, and the *Dan River Queen* is certainly no exception to this rule. For one contingent of residents, it represents a lost innocence, a reminder of the best of times and the high-water mark of local ambition. For others, particularly those who were financially harmed, it stands as a clear, cautionary tale of unchecked personal overreach and spectacular, irresponsible collapse.

This emotional and historical duality is a clear illustration of a truth that historians of memory and public history constantly emphasize: the past is never a single, agreed-upon story. It is, instead, a perpetual conversation, an ongoing negotiation shaped and reshaped by the specific experiences, present interests, and emotional needs of those who actively remember it. The *Queen* was simultaneously a source of unbridled joy and a symbol of profound financial failure, both cherished as a spectacular landmark and bitterly resented as a source of broken trust. To interpret its history honestly and fully requires the difficult, but necessary, task of holding these profound tensions and contradictory narratives together, acknowledging the whole picture, not just the fondest parts.

Preservation Challenges

Physically, little remains of the majestic *Dan River Queen*. Following the auction and Mitchell's bankruptcy, the vessel was simply abandoned, left to the harsh elements and the slow deterioration of time on the edge of the mill pond. Visitors in the 1980s could still observe the once-proud hull, its bright white paint faded, cracked, and peeling, and the large paddlewheel motionless. By the 2000s, nature had completed its work, and the boat had collapsed into splintered fragments, which lay scattered and decaying along the shoreline and partially submerged in the mud. The grand showboat had been reduced to detritus.

The adjacent Cockram's Mill itself, a durable structure built in the nineteenth century and representing authentic industrial heritage, fortunately fared better. It was eventually listed on the National Register of Historic Places, a designation that afforded it significant protection and eventually paved the way for complex but necessary restoration efforts. The riverboat, however, a product of the comparatively recent year of 1967, was summarily deemed too modern, too ephemeral, and too strictly commercial to merit the rigorous,

expensive preservation that its mill-site neighbor received.

This fundamental distinction highlights a persistent and complex dilemma in the field of historic preservation. The mill was easily recognized as “authentic” industrial heritage worthy of government protection, while the *Queen*, despite being intensely and emotionally beloved by the local community, was summarily dismissed by preservation bodies as mere kitsch, a temporary, decorative spectacle. Yet for the people who lived there, both the functional mill and the fictional steamboat carried deep, irreplaceable local meaning.



What's left of the *Queen* resting on land.

Historians and public history professionals face a genuine paradox: how does one interpret a site that was never intended to be authentic, but which nonetheless succeeded in shaping an authentic and deep-seated community memory?

The struggle over the site continued well into the twenty-first century. Developers eventually purchased the land, proposing various ambitious plans, first to convert the historic mill into a high-end restaurant and later into a microbrewery. Because the mill retained its National Register listing, any development was subject to strict guidelines requiring the maintenance of its historic character. The presence of the *Dan River Queen's* scattered, decaying remains only added layers of complication, as significant parts of the boat were determined to lie within a protected floodplain. Development plans stalled and then failed for years as the competing interests of historic preservation guidelines, economic feasibility, and modern development ambitions clashed endlessly. This localized struggle reflects a national pattern: local landmarks often survive or vanish not because of the depth of community sentiment, but because of the complex, often unpredictable, intersection of available legal protection, cold economic feasibility, and the institutional will (or lack thereof) to save them.

Nostalgia, Heritage, and Storytelling

The narrative of the *Dan River Queen* also sheds essential light on the politics of interpretation and how communities choose to present their history. From its very inception, the *Queen* was not intended to be a faithful, accurate representation of Meadows of Dan's actual past. Instead, it was an explicit, self-aware performance of a generic American history. The planned "Indian Village" Mitchell envisioned echoed unfortunate, simplistic, and often offensive stereotypes of Indigenous culture. The moonshine exhibit played directly into convenient, popular Appalachian caricatures and simplified regional identity for outside consumption. And the steamboat itself, with its grand, Southern-style design, belonged emotionally and architecturally far more to Twain's Mississippi than to the clear, rocky headwaters of Virginia's Dan River.

This highly mediated approach was characteristic of its time and place. Mid-century roadside attractions across the South and Midwest routinely packaged the American past into entertaining, simplified, and easily consumed narratives. They were, in essence, selling history as easily digestible heritage, a product crafted primarily for tourist consumption rather than historical accuracy or scholarly critique. Yet, over the course of time, these very attractions, the original places of artifice and performance, have themselves inevitably become historical artifacts. Today, historians and public history professionals face a genuine paradox: how does one interpret a site that was never intended to be authentic, but which nonetheless succeeded in shaping an authentic and deep-seated community memory?

The *Dan River Queen* compellingly demonstrates the way that historical myth and cultural memory intertwine. The boat was an invented past, a theatrical backdrop. But for the gener-

ations of children who rode it, the singular experience became an indelible, authentic part of their personal history and collective consciousness. Public historians must now grapple with a crucial question: Do we dismiss such powerful, joyful stories as inauthentic because their physical setting was artificial, or do we recognize these stories as valuable cultural artifacts in their own right, deserving of interpretation? The evolving answer, increasingly, is both. We can and must critique the foundational stereotypes and the commercial exploitation of history while simultaneously acknowledging the genuine joy the attraction brought and the profound role it played in shaping local identity and regional self-perception.

A Microcosm of National Challenges

The ultimate fate of the *Dan River Queen* mirrors, on a small, localized scale, much larger national struggles over the critical issues of the value, funding, and interpretation of the American past.

First and foremost, there is the persistent, brutal issue of funding. Across the entire United States, small local museums, community archives, and grassroots historical programs face constant, crippling financial strain. As historian David Darlington chronicled in *Perspectives on History* in 2003, state history programs across the country were "struggling to cope" with severe budget cuts, often eliminating services that were central to the very task of preserving community heritage. The *Dan River Queen* was not saved because, in the wake of the bankruptcy, no single institution, local, state, or private, could afford to maintain its decaying presence or finance its restoration. This is the repetitive, tragic story of countless beloved local landmarks: they are cherished, but they fall tragically beyond the reach of limited municipal and nonprofit budgets.

Second, the *Queen's* story reflects national debates over historical legitimacy and merit. For decades, academic historians in the United States often prioritized national events, grand narratives, and elite figures, while smaller, more localized attractions and ephemeral enterprises like the *Queen* were often dismissed as trivial or unworthy of serious study. But in recent years, organizations have argued persuasively for a broader, more inclusive view of history, one that embraces local stories as essential, non-negotiable threads of the national fabric. The story of the *Dan River Queen* belongs squarely within this interpretive shift. It may not have shaped foreign policy, determined military history, or influenced great literature, but it tells us fundamental truths about American tourism, regional self-identity, the mid-century appetite for leisure, and the complex, often commercial ways that ordinary Americans engaged with and consumed imagined pasts.

Third, the case highlights the enduring politics of public memory. Should the *Queen* be remembered with a formal marker at all? If Patrick County chose to erect one, what



View of the mountains in Patrick County, Virginia.

specific message should it convey? A purely nostalgic marker might celebrate the joy it brought to children, while a more critical one might emphasize the ensuing bankruptcy, the debts, and the cultural stereotypes it employed. The choice of language and focus is paramount, because it signals precisely what kind of history the community collectively values and chooses to project. This localized tension is the very same tension visible in national debates over the removal or retention of Confederate monuments, or the contentious battles over curriculum standards in public schools: whether history should be used to comfort or to challenge, to simply celebrate or to complicate. Public historians, such as Abby Curtin Teare, have repeatedly noted that sustained philanthropy and robust public support are absolutely crucial in resolving such dilemmas. In a 2020 working group on public history, she emphasized that without consistent, sustainable investment, communities simply cannot adequately maintain their own heritage, no matter how much genuine affection and sen-

timent that heritage inspires. The *Dan River Queen* is a potent, visible example of what happens when that crucial support is entirely absent: the memories endure, vibrant and complex, but the material culture, the tangible evidence of the past, inevitably decays and vanishes.

Why Small Stories Matter

The *Dan River Queen* never sailed a great American river, but the currents of her story run deep in the local and national consciousness. Her narrative is a perfect miniature illustration of how communities create, transmit, and ultimately remember history; how the processes of preservation succeed or tragically fail; and how the complex politics of memory play out in small, forgotten places as intensely as they do on national stages. Her spectacular rise and her precipitous, heartbreaking fall are a microcosm of the broader American struggle over how we value the past, whether that valuation is expressed through the gentle filter of nostalgia, the rigorous demands of preservation, or the challenging work of critical reflection.

The American Historical Association has long maintained that history is defined not just by what factually happened, but fundamentally by what we collectively choose to remember and, most critically, how we choose to interpret it for the future. In this essential sense, the fragile, fictional riverboat in the mountains belongs to the same grand conversation as towering monuments in Richmond or the great museums in Washington D.C. She is an enduring, poignant reminder that history truly lives not only in dusty archives and on distant battlefields, but also in humble roadside zoos, in the fleeting, cheap thrill of a steamboat ride on a mountain pond, and within the often-fragile vessels of community memory.

The *Queen* no longer floats on the pond at Cockram's Mill; her grand decks have long since collapsed into the water and mud. Yet her calliope still echoes faintly in the cherished stories of those who rode her, a simple, unforgettable tune that speaks to the enduring, universal challenge of sustaining the past. Preserving such stories, in all their conflicting complexity, remains the historian's and the community's essential task. And in the very act of telling them, we affirm a foundational truth: that even a forgotten riverboat in a small mountain town matters profoundly to the larger, complex American story.



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The choice of language and focus on a potential historic marker is paramount, because it signals precisely what kind of history the community collectively values and chooses to project.



Collections in Plain Sight: Balancing Preservation and Public Access



PHOTO CREDITS: HERITAGE LAKEWOOD



By Katy Lewis

Long-term preservation of artifacts is key to museum collections management. But are there additional practices you can incorporate if your artifact is, for example, a historic structure, a large textile, or a vehicle? If your artifacts are too big to be tucked away in collections or displayed behind glass, or if you just want to offer more up close and personal engagement with them to your visitors, how can you safely and meaningfully offer access to these items?

Clockwise: Restored Peerless Gas Station; Heritage Lakewood Visitor Center; inside the gas station; young visitor on a tractor ride.

This article explores options for offering experiential learning and public access while keeping artifacts safe. Heritage Lakewood Belmar Park's experiences offer three instances of current practices to incorporate public interaction with artifacts at a municipal history museum, as well as some methods to apply similar activities at organizations that may have a variety of different strengths and abilities. The examples include historic preservation of a 1954 gas station and its use as a display and tour space; restoration and operation of a vintage tractor for event and rental programming; and an open storage concept for an exhibition during which large textiles were cataloged, cleaned, and photographed with the assistance of volunteers while on public view.

Heritage Lakewood Belmar Park is a twentieth-century municipal museum, history park, and festival experience that celebrates the community of Lakewood, Colorado. The site features a glimpse into the past by presenting stories of early agriculture in Lakewood, mid-century growth driven by the development of transportation thoroughfare Colfax Avenue, and how this land that once belonged to a rich heir became a much-loved local park. Heritage Lakewood hosts exhibits, programs, and events that keep area history engaging and alive.

Heritage Lakewood's Master Plan from 1996 included an option to bring a historical structure on-site that spoke to the importance of transportation history for locals and tourists in Colorado. Fifteen years ago, while attending a Rockies baseball game at Coors Field, a City of Lakewood Planning Department staffer saw a slightly rusty red and white metal building that he recognized as a vintage gas station. He brought it to the attention of Heritage Lakewood staff, who worked with the owner to move the building to the museum park. It was maintained in place until 2024, when rehabilitation of the gas station was completed. Originally built in the 1930s and 1940s as determined by its architecture, the structure was rehabbed and furnished as a 1954 gas station to highlight the importance of that time period for economic growth along the nearby West Colfax Avenue and feature the 1954 Bennett gas pumps that were restored and placed out front. (It's important to note that the museum and City of Lakewood's preference now is to preserve historic structures in place as much as possible, rather than move them to another site.)

While the above is a very specific example of a rehabilitated gas station, we believe similar takeaways to those listed below could be applied to any construction project or, on a smaller scale, any new exhibition that is occurring at your site to keep audiences engaged as the project takes shape.

Social media: If your organization uses social media, provide regular updates on the progress of your project. Any behind-the-scenes aspects are of great interest to many people!

Hard hat tours: Safety first and small groups are a necessity, but people love seeing a sneak peek. Social media posts are a great backup option here for updates if you can't physically bring people into the space.

Volunteer rehabilitation: This can be an effective way to engage your volunteer corps if they have the necessary back-



Volunteer labor and expertise was essential to the restoration.

ground, equipment, and direction. Our volunteers often participate in painting and woodworking projects on-site. We did work with a volunteer to restore the 1954 gas pumps. With this specific volunteer's background in managing Colorado gas stations from the 1950s to the 1970s and his own shop, and the fact that we could still purchase parts and pieces for the pumps if anything was broken, he was an appropriate choice for us and a huge help and inspiration for the project. Since this building itself was more complex as an older metal structure with lead paint, old window glazing, neon attachments, and an interior with specialty surfaces, volunteers and staff did not participate in this particular rehabilitation, and a local company with a background in historic preservation was hired to complete all building-related work.

Requests for artifact donations during and after rehabilitation: At our public events, we displayed foamcore panels covered with paper, set up on easels, near the entrances of the events. We provided markers so that people could make notes of what they remembered about the 1950s, their experiences at gas stations during that time, and which items they thought should be included in an exhibition about the topic. We left a couple of display shelves empty in the space during the grand opening event to emphasize that we were looking to collect and so visitors could imagine their own items in that space. In the past year, we have received numerous inquiries about donating artifacts for display in the gas station.



Auto maintenance artifacts from the 1950s.

Programming around a theme: Especially focusing on the year of the rehab and the year following, we provided programming built into the activities we already offer about the gas station: tours, Sneak Peeks & Snacks behind-the-scenes presentations, historical luncheons, and Saturday Showcase open houses. This was also a good opportunity for a special preview of the space, which was scheduled for earlier on the day of the opening. Future ideas include some hands-on elements and sensory baskets.

Grand opening. 10/10 recommend! We scheduled the opening event for the restored gas station for a time when the weather was likely to be good (mid-September in Colorado) and offered snacks popular in the 1950s, swing dance music and performances, short presentations by the City Mayor and city staffers, and photo opportunities with a vintage car. While the event needed planning and set-up by staff, the price tag was not extravagant and the pay-off was huge—we saw hundreds of people attend this event and had a fabulous time!

The second example relates to the restoration and operation of a vintage tractor for event and rental programming. Your site doesn't have a tractor, you say? This could relate to any sort of space or object that could be usable for programming or, if revenue generation is a key component of your business model, rentals. If you have duplicate items such as an apple peeler or a laundry agitator or antique books, consider using an extra as a hands-on example piece.

That said, it is important to consider options for display versus education. If this is the only tractor (or other similar item) your museum owns, or if it is a unique example, you may not want to use it for educational purposes in this way. In addition, before considering restoration, it is important to evaluate the artifact provenance and donor intent related to the items, ensuring that public trust is kept intact.



Peerless Gas Station grand opening, featuring 1950s music and dancing.



For our institution, we display fifteen working vehicles on-site, so we can spare a couple of the more generic and reliable types to use for programs such as tours, summer camp hayrides, and event rentals. We have also started to include our 1929 Model A truck as an option for wedding photo opportunities. If it is a large item or a mechanical item you are using, you do need to ensure there is a staff person who

can safely care for and operate it, as well as ensure the safety of the visitor. Our site was able to hire a part-time tractor mechanic both to safeguard our large moving artifacts and provide more immersive connections with visitors. This role is an interesting and unique one that redefined our collections care to a certain degree, requiring forethought, reworked protocols, and good communication between staff to ensure



Our 1929 Model A truck is a hit for wedding photo sessions.



that the vehicles are still preserved in an appropriate manner while being used for educational purposes. Lastly, and this is the case for all exciting new programs, you have to determine how to effectively include this opportunity in promotional material for your site.

Finally, we recently closed an exhibit in our rotating gallery, “On a Roll: Preserving Textiles,” that sprang out of necessity more than anything else. The back wall of our collections storage building had recently started to develop mold (yes, even in Colorado!) due to issues with drainage around the exterior of the building. Due to the diligence of our conscientious staff, we caught the problem before it reached any of the artifacts. Just a quick word of encouragement here: store your artifacts up off the floor, regularly check in on your collections storage, and create a disaster preparedness plan!

Storage was needed due to construction occurring in the textile storage area of the building for approximately three months. We had not yet fully cataloged and photographed the large textile collection because we needed more space than was available in storage for unrolling and photographing the large textiles. We decided to create a dynamic display around the large textiles, focusing on how and why we were preserving them, and including different features of history about each one we were working on that changed every week. Over one hundred oversized textiles were successfully unrolled, cleaned, described, condition reported, measured, and photographed during this four-month period, while the public watched. This method could be applied to any type

of larger artifacts that need care that could also potentially be framed as an exhibition—quilts, chairs, posters, vehicles, TVs, anything!

The open storage style does seem to intrigue people and draw them in, as it offers a bit of a behind-the-scenes look. One downside we discovered was when staff and volunteers worked in the gallery space, people were sometimes less likely to come in because they thought they were disturbing our work, so clear signage encouraging visitors and questions is important here. But there were also those who were more likely to come in and ask questions if they saw people, which is what we wanted! We had transparent conversations



Textiles laid out for cleaning and cataloging while remaining visible to visitors.

in person and on our social media sites about provenance, preservation, and local history that we otherwise might not have had. This opportunity also opened the door to starting dialogue with other local museum personnel, swapping ideas about best practices for storage and processing. The changing display encouraged people to visit more often since the textiles were switched out every week.

It is worth stating that objects are at greater risk during the cleaning, documentation, and digitization process in a gallery than they would be in a secure storage location. We did leave artifacts out overnight and when we were not in the building working, although the museum does have a front desk staff member, cameras, and locked and alarmed doors at night. This process might not be right for very fragile or rare artifacts. I will say our stanchions did prevent anyone from coming into the workspace but that may not be true for all locations. However, for our organization, the benefit of knowing that these very large artifacts would not need to be removed from storage for research purposes as much as in the past, now that they were better cataloged and processed, was worth it for us. We are considering a similar project for our map and large archival collection next year.

The juxtaposition between preservation and visitor access is common to almost all museums and archives. The concerns and ability to address them vary widely depending on the type of organization and collections involved, the size of the museum and staff, funding, and many other factors. If all of these factors allow, experimenting with different practices to interact with the public can create a richer experience for the visitors while still safeguarding museum artifacts for the long-term.



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Award Winner Spotlight

The Hustle: Celebrating Detroit's Unsung Entrepreneurs



In AASLH's awards program, History in Progress (HIP) awards are special additional awards for Award of Excellence winners whose nominations are highly inspirational; exhibit exceptional scholarship; and/or are exceedingly entrepreneurial in terms of funding, partnerships, or collaborations, creative problem solving, or unusual project design and inclusiveness. HIP awards are granted at the discretion of the Awards Committee to 5 percent or fewer of that year's total winners, with a typical year having two or three HIP winners. Two winners earned HIP honors in 2025, both spotlighting Black history and culture.

The Hustle: Celebrating Detroit's Unsung Entrepreneurs from the Detroit Historical Society (DHS) showcased inspiring Black Detroiters who rose to success in unexpected industries by uncovering, documenting, and preserving the stories of 34 men and women whose work has made everyday life in Detroit special. The honorees, nominated by hundreds of community members and selected by an independent panel of evaluators, represented an intentionally diverse array of business and services in categories that included shopkeepers, artists, entertainers, helpers, caregivers, foodies, fixers, and more.

DHS shared their stories through a series of five quarterly exhibitions at the Detroit Historical Museum, which were complemented by public events, student workshops, a day-long resource summit, and a festive black tie gala. To produce the exhibitions, DHS's curators researched the industries of the honorees, positioning them within Detroit's history and mining the society's collection for connected arti-

facts to link the contemporary business owners to the pioneers who set their course. DHS also worked directly with nominees, collecting their artifacts and oral histories, and commissioned large-scale photographs of each individual to use as the building blocks for engaging exhibitions to tell the stories of these remarkable entrepreneurs and the important role they play in Detroit's history.

The Hustle was enriched by extensive public and education programming designed to leverage the most significant content presented in the exhibitions. Between October 2022 and April 2024, 73,086 people visited the exhibitions and thousands more participated in the project's virtual programs and events. On the strength of an effective community engagement effort that included extensive

collaboration with community partners, a cross-platform marketing campaign and the distribution of 4,000 paper ballots in every neighborhood in Detroit, DHS received almost 800 nominations for entrepreneurs during the 60-day nominating period, demonstrating incredible community enthusiasm. To ensure *The Hustle* lives on, DHS created a virtual exhibit featuring film, images, and artifacts from each exhibition; produced a podcast, and published a commemorative exhibition catalogue highlighted by photographs and profiles of all honorees.

The Hustle aimed to recognize the deep roots and history of Detroit's Black entrepreneurs, and to celebrate the city's small business leaders, merchants, and industrialists who provide a rich array of products and services to their communities



Visitors to a *Hustle* exhibition.



JENNY RISHER

The Thomas family, owners of Sweet Potato Sensations restaurant and *Hustle* honorees.

today while maintaining long-standing traditions. The project offered a historical perspective for contemporary Black entrepreneurs by providing new insights on the evolution of the role of business in the African American community, the remarkable continuity and diversity of Detroit's Black businesses over time, and the legacy of Detroiters' innovative hustle and entrepreneurial spirit that has been passed down through generations.

At the heart of the *Hustle* project is the inclusion of diverse voices. The exhibitions and supporting programs showcase the portraits, personal recordings, and artifacts of Detroiters who represent different ages, backgrounds, and socio-economic segments of the population. Their narratives brought to life the social justice and civic rights challenges Black entrepreneurs have confronted along their path to success, and offered inspiration and context for conditions today. Visitors to the Detroit Historical Museum gained an understanding of the strategies past entrepreneurs employed to succeed despite challenges, and learned how their determination and fortitude continues a tradition of empowering their families and communities, now and in the future.

The Detroit Historical Society's mission is to tell Detroit's stories and why they matter. DHS advances its mission by curating award-winning exhibitions that

chronicle 300 years of the city's history at the Detroit Historical Museum, and exhibitions that explore Detroit's role in maritime history at the Dossin Great Lakes Museum; by collecting, preserving, and sharing the City of Detroit's collection of nearly 300,000 historical artifacts; by educating learners of all ages through school tours, enrichment activities and programming; and by serving as the convener for inspiring conversations and important explorations about Detroit through

wide-ranging community engagement and outreach.

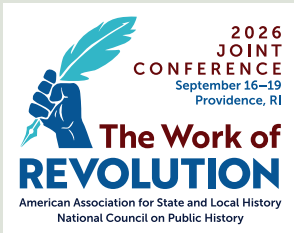
The Hustle: Celebrating Detroit's Unsung Entrepreneurs supported DHS's mission and exemplified a commitment to ensuring that their museums are reflective of the city as it is today, with exhibits and programming that tell all of Detroit's stories. The city's inimitable character and deep-rooted identity was forged by hardworking forebears and refined daily by the dedicated and creative people who fuel it today. Nevertheless, the stories of Detroit's successful Black entrepreneurs had never been celebrated either in this museum or in other cultural institutions around the city. This omission prompted DHS to create a multi-year, one-of-a-kind celebration to tell these important narratives and to build an expanded constituency for this work. *The Hustle* lifted voices from communities often underserved by humanities scholarship, recognizing inspiring Black Detroiters whose work has helped to create a deep sense of hometown pride.

Building on this successful foundation, DHS launched the second round of the project in February 2026. This time around, *The Hustle* will feature Black, Indigenous, and entrepreneurs of color amongst its honorees who will be celebrated in six exhibitions, new public programs, two resource summits, digital products, and celebrations. Visit detroithistorical.org/hustle to learn more. ●



DETROIT HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Orson Porter of Orson's Collision & Auto Repair, a 2022 *Hustle* honoree.



Looking Forward to Providence

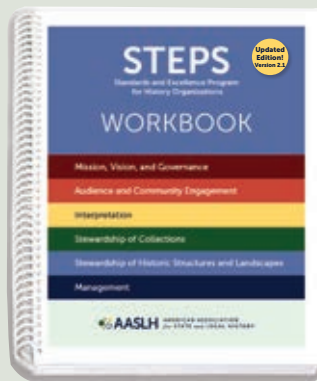
The 2026 Joint Annual Conference with AASLH and the National Council on Public History will be held **September 16–19** in Providence, Rhode Island. Sessions have been chosen, hotel room blocks are listed, and tours and events are being scheduled to open registration in early summer. Four days of workshops, tours, sessions, and networking with our sister organization commemorating America's 250th anniversary year will be an unforgettable experience, and we hope you can join us! Visit aaslh.org/annualconference/2026-annual-conference to learn more.

Opposing Censorship

On February 17, AASLH and a coalition of parks, science, and design groups filed a lawsuit in federal court challenging U.S. Department of the Interior Secretary's Order 3431, "Restoring Truth and Sanity to American History." This order, like the identically named 2025 executive order it was designed to implement, promotes an incomplete and deceptive vision of American

history and has resulted in the removal of content at National Park Service sites across the country. The orders are also casting a chilling effect over the broader history field, as organizations nationwide face pressure to change content for fear of political backlash.

AASLH is joined in the suit by co-plaintiffs the National Parks Conservation Association, Association of National Park Rangers, Coalition to Protect America's National Parks, Society for Experiential Graphic Design, and Union of Concerned Scientists. This coalition is represented by Democracy Forward. Read more on our blog at aaslh.org.



Join a STEPS Discussion

If your site is enrolled in our STEPS (Standards and Excellence Program for History Organizations) program, we want to invite you to join us for a special series of discussions this year. Each STEPS webinar will focus on a specific section of the book, with a presentation from a partic-

ipating site that used STEPS to make positive change, followed by discussion amongst attendees on their own challenges and opportunities. The series kicked off **March 3** with staff of the House of the Seven Gables in Salem, Massachusetts, discussing their site's experience with the Historic Structures and Landscapes section.



On **April 30**, we'll hear from the Kinney Pioneer Museum in Mason City, Iowa, on how the Management section helped them modernize and improve their financial procedures.

The Standards and Excellence Program for History Organizations (STEPS) is a self-study, self-paced assessment program designed specifically for small- to mid-sized history organizations, including volunteer-run institutions. Through a workbook, online resources, and an online community, organizations enrolled in STEPS review their policies and practices and benchmark themselves against national museum standards. Trusted since

2009 to help smaller sites assess needs, prioritize projects, educate board members, and chart an achievable path forward, STEPS can help your site get back on track or organized for the first time. Learn more at aaslh.org/professional-development/steps.

Equity and Workforce Summit

Join us **April 13–14** for the latest AASLH virtual summit on "Strengthening the History Workforce." This two-day event will bring practitioners, leaders, and stakeholders together to reflect on the results of the 2025 National Survey of History Practitioners and chart a path forward. Through keynote discussions, thematic panels, and small-group conversations, participants will explore what the data mean for their own careers and institutions, consider strategies to address systemic challenges, and identify ways the field can build a more inclusive, resilient workforce. The summit aims to transform research into action, sparking conversations and collaborations that will help us build a stronger, more sustainable field. Register now at learn.aaslh.org.



After Commemoration, Now What?

On **June 11**, join your public history peers for a new webinar, **Sustaining Engagement After Commemorations**. Commemorations and anniversaries are powerful tools for raising awareness, building partnerships, and generating community excitement. Particularly in 2026, the 250th anniversary of 1776, many sites are planning exhibits, events, and projects focused on this date. But what happens after the anniversary when the spotlight fades? Without intentional planning, organizations often experience post-commemoration fatigue as partnerships dissolve, exhibits sit unused, and public attention shifts elsewhere.

This webinar explores how museums, heritage areas, and community partners can transform commemorative moments into long-term engagement strategies. Speaker Heidi Glatfelter Schlag helps museums, cultural organizations, and tourism partners align marketing, interpretation, and community storytelling to

create meaningful visitor experiences and stronger regional connections. Register at learn.aaslh.org.

Textile Workshop in CT

Our in-person textile workshop is scheduled this summer in Hartford for those wanting to learn more about preserving textiles such as historic clothing, quilts, and other items. On **June 22–23**, we'll gather with instructor Karen DePauw at the Connecticut Museum of Culture and History to learn about storing, displaying, identifying, and caring for historic textile collections. Learn more and register at learn.aaslh.org.

Summer Online Course Registration

Instructor-led courses beginning in June

are open for registration **March 23**. These courses are between four to eight weeks long and offer students a chance to engage deeply with subject material over an extended period of time. With accessible readings and assignments, regular video chats with faculty and other students, and access to online forums, these courses combine the flexibility of self-paced work with the power of discussion with peers from around the country.

Courses happening this summer are Introduction to Financial Management, Introduction to Project Management for History Professionals, Developing Exhibitions: Planning and Design, Caring for Museum Collections, and Basics of Archives. Registration closes on **June 8**. See all the listings and register at learn.aaslh.org.



Annual Report

The 2025 year was a busy one for AASLH, with an office move, fieldwide survey, virtual and in-person events, bringing the History Leadership Institute to a new location, preparing for the 250th anniversary of the U.S., and a highly attended annual conference in Cincinnati. Amid difficulties, our community found solidarity, solace, and support in one another. Read our 2025 Annual Report at aaslh.org/2025-annual-report.



AASLH LEGACY SOCIETY MEMBERS

AASLH would like to thank our Legacy Society members who have generously decided to include AASLH in their estate planning to help leave a lasting legacy for the history community. If you would like to know more about the AASLH Legacy Society or if you are interested in joining, please contact John Dichtl at dichtl@aaslh.org.

- | | |
|--------------------------------------|----------------------------------|
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| Mr. Bob & Ms. Candy Beatty | Mr. Dennis A. O'Toole |
| Ms. Melissa Bingmann | Ms. Ruby Rogers |
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| Mr. Stephen & Ms. Diane Elliott | Mr. Max and Ms. Mary van Balgooy |
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