

Statement on Threats to Historical Integrity in Texas

Approved by AHA Council, July 2021

The American Historical Association views with alarm several provisions in Texas House Bill 3979 (An Act Relating to the Social Studies Curriculum in Public Schools), recently signed into law by Governor Abbott.

In addition to the educational focus indicated in its title, this deeply flawed legislation adversely affects state institutions that present history to the public. One provision hinders the professional development of curators, administrators, and other employees in facilities such as museums, libraries, parks, and historical societies. Another would impede essential fundraising efforts on the part of those facilities. As a result of this law, historical programming for the public throughout the state could be severely compromised. This makes no sense in a state that has created such world-class history institutions as the Bullock Texas State History Museum, and whose history provides important lessons to residents and visitors alike. Not all teaching about history takes place in classrooms. The citizens of Texas deserve to learn an accurate account of the state's history when they visit the many public venues that sponsor exhibits, offer signage for historical sites, and show documentary films, among other forms of historical interpretation.

As stipulated in the law, in the process of offering professional development training, state employees are prohibited from including any concept that would make an individual "feel discomfort." Professional development related to historical presentation is critical to the training and credentialing of historians and their colleagues in any venue where historical information is presented. To require that these individuals be shielded from any historical themes or events that cause them "discomfort" would be to outlaw the presentation of basic, incontrovertible facts related to the history of Texas (or the history of any state or nation, for that matter). If state employees who present historical information to Texans and visitors are not sufficiently knowledgeable about the less-admirable aspects of our history, they will not only offer flawed presentations; they also will be placed in the very uncomfortable position of not being able to respond to questions posed by thoughtful visitors.

Museums, historical societies, markers, and other venues of historical presentation enable members of the public to learn about and discuss difficult subjects. Professional development programs must help historians employed at these institutions follow historical truth wherever evidence leads them, regardless of the "discomfort" such a process entails. The integrity of our history is at stake.

The law further states that a state agency may not accept private funding for the purpose of "providing teacher training or professional development." This provision would seem to prevent museums from accepting grants, subsidies, or other financial support from corporations or other private businesses. Many museums rely on private interests to train curators, underwrite major exhibits, and expand educational programming; this law would deny a critical source of funding for those purposes. It would

also deny corporations the opportunity to make philanthropic contributions and participate in an important aspect of civic culture.

The American Historical Association is chartered by the United States Congress “for the promotion of historical studies” in the United States. Fulfilling this charge requires a commitment to accuracy, even when the facts might be uncomfortable. In the AHA’s *Standards for Museum Exhibits Dealing with Historical Subjects*, the first principle states, “Exhibits should be grounded in scholarship, marked by intellectual integrity, and subjected to rigorous peer review.” Museums should engage with community stakeholders from the beginning of the process and should keep the diversity of their communities in mind. Work on controversial subjects should include competing points of view. And museum administrators should support their curatorial staff in producing work according to these standards.

This legislation clearly violates these standards, which are the foundation of professional history programming in the United States today.

Free and open inquiry is the hallmark of a democratic society. We deplore the effort of the Texas legislature to determine which historical subjects can and cannot be taught and learned. By hindering the professional development of public historians and restricting funding, this law would prevent state-owned agencies and facilities from presenting accurate views of Texas history, and would hobble fundraising efforts crucial to the vibrant state-sponsored public history sector. In so doing, this legislation will adversely affect not only K–12 students, but all Texans and visitors who want to learn more about the state’s complicated past. As citizens in a strong, vibrant democracy, we should not be afraid to learn the hard truths that history teaches us.