June 26, 2023

Scott Stephenson, President
Museum of the American Revolution

Dear Dr. Stephenson:

The American Historical Association requests that the Museum of the American Revolution (MAR) reconsider its decision to rent event space to Moms for Liberty as part of that organization’s Joyful Warriors National Summit.

The AHA understands that legal obligations might make it impossible to undo the rental agreement, but we hope that the museum will consult with legal counsel to explore options for canceling the rental. We also recognize that this is a business relationship rather than a museum program, and that it is unusual for a scholarly association to intervene in such a transaction. But this is an unusual situation: the MAR is a museum dedicated to professional historical work and the AHA is an organization of historians; Moms for Liberty is an organization that has vigorously advocated censorship and harassment of history teachers, banning history books from libraries and classrooms, and legislation that renders it impossible for historians to teach with professional integrity without risking job loss and other penalties.

The AHA is cognizant of the complexities of this situation. Like the museum, the AHA often encounters difficult decisions involving a tangle of mission, ethics, standard procedures, financial contingencies, legal obligations, professional commitments, and more. In this case, the AHA’s responsibility is to the integrity of history education and the ability of all historians to conduct their work free from censorship, harassment, and threat of termination. Indeed, we have been especially active on this front, under the broad umbrella of Teaching History with Integrity. This work has included an extensive investment of time and effort to apprise state legislators and the general public of the dangers of “divisive concepts” legislation—an organized attempt to limit what can be taught in history classes at public schools and universities.

The AHA would not be making this request if it was only a matter of disagreement over content or interpretation. Moms for Liberty has every right to argue for an approach to history education with which we disagree. However, Moms for Liberty has crossed a boundary in its attempts to silence and harass teachers, rather than participate in legitimate controversy. Moms for Liberty promotes legislation that censors honest and accurate history teaching, and even threatens teachers with termination for no offense other than teaching history with professional integrity. In New Hampshire, it put a bounty on teachers, offering $500 to any individual who reports an educator for violating such a law, a promise immediately “condemned” by Governor Sununu. Moms for Liberty has demanded that local school boards inappropriately interfere with the professional work of social studies/history teachers and has encouraged parents to call teachers at home.
For the AHA, this isn’t about politics or different understandings of our nation’s past; it’s about an organization whose mission is to obstruct the professional responsibilities of historians. We encourage you to reconsider whether this organization should be granted the legitimacy of holding a major event at a museum with the reputation and professional standing of the Museum of the American Revolution. Our institutions, like others in our discipline that care about helping the public engage and grapple with the past, share a responsibility to resist efforts to undermine that important and essential obligation. This can include refusing to collaborate with or even grant legitimacy to organizations that vigorously and unethically seek to eviscerate the work of our staff, colleagues, and members.

The AHA is aware that this event is merely a three-hour portion of a larger program centered elsewhere in Philadelphia. Considering the superb historical scholarship at the Museum of the American Revolution, including challenging exhibitions that thoughtfully contradict the narrow and bigoted historical misinformation that Moms for Liberty advocates, some education is likely to take place. We are confident that if the museum is unable to cancel the rental it will continue to do the good work of ensuring that all visitors have access to the facts and ideas that Moms for Liberty finds so threatening to its vision of the American past and will convey to them the museum’s deep commitment to the professional integrity of history educators.

Sincerely,

James Grossman
Executive Director