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# Presidential Address

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# **Front Cover**



## **Thavolia Glymph**

Peabody Family Distinguished Professor in History Duke University

> President of the American Historical Association, 2024



# 2024 Presidential Address

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## **Thavolia Glymph**

Thavolia Glymph is the Peabody Family Distinguished Professor of History, professor of law and of gender, sexuality, and feminist studies, and faculty research scholar at the Duke Population Research Institute at Duke University. She is the author of *The Women's Fight: The Civil War's Battles for Home, Freedom, and Nation* (Univ. of North Carolina Press, 2020), which won the American Historical Association's Albert J. Beveridge Award and Joan Kelly Memorial Prize; the Julia Cherry Spruill Prize from the Southern Association for Women Historians; the Tom Watson Brown Book Award awarded by the Society of Civil War Historians and the Watson Brown Foundation; the John Nau Prize awarded by the John L. Nau III Center for Civil War History at the University of Virginia; the Organization of American Historians' Civil War and Reconstruction Book Award, Mary Nickliss Prize, and Darlene Clark Hine Award; and was a finalist for the Gilder Lehrman Lincoln Prize.

Her book, *Out of the House of Bondage: The Transformation of the Plantation Household* (Cambridge Univ. Press, 2008), won the Philip Taft Book Prize and was a finalist for the Frederick Douglass Prize. She is coeditor of two volumes and author of over 40 articles and essays, including "Rose's War and the Gendered Politics of Slave Insurgency in the Civil War," which won the 2017 George and Ann Richards Prize for the best article published in the *Journal of the Civil War Era*. She is currently completing two book manuscripts: "African American Women and Children Refugees in the Civil War," supported by a National Institutes of Health grant, and "'Playing 'Dixie' in Egypt: A Transnational Transcript of Race, Nation, Empire and Citizenship."

Glymph held the John Hope Franklin Visiting Professorship of American Legal History at Duke Law School in 2015 and 2018 and won a 2017 Thomas Langford Lectureship Award at Duke. She is an elected member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, the Society of American Historians, and the American Antiquarian Society and a past member of the Gettysburg Foundation Board of Directors. She serves on several editorial boards. She is past president of the Southern Historical Association (2019–20), an Organization of American Historians Distinguished Lecturer, and was the 2023–24 Rogers Distinguished Fellow in Nineteenth-Century American History at the Huntington Library in San Marino, California.

## **In Her Own Words**

#### The Irretrievable Past?

#### From the President, Perspectives on History, January 2024

I have fond memories of childhood summers spent with my maternal grandparents in their home in the rural South. Among the most vivid of those memories is my introduction to the *Montgomery Ward and Co. Catalogue and Buyers' Guide*, the first mail-order catalog in the United States. I first encountered the catalog in the home of a family who lived nearby. The children my age were summertime playmates, and their teenage sisters were enthusiastic consumers of the catalog's offerings. They delighted in slowly perusing its pages, "trying on" dresses, and getting a long-awaited purchase in the mail. It was easy to appreciate its treasures, from the everyday to the mysterious.

From a catalog that had begun as a single sheet of paper in 1872 and grown within 10 years to 240 pages and 10,000 items, one could order clothing, dressmaking patterns and trimming notions, sewing machines, Lincoln Logs, farming equipment, and even a house or the drawings for one. By the 1960s, most mail-order catalog customers no longer lived in rural America, and both Montgomery Ward and its primary competitor, Sears and Roebuck, had opened retail outlet stores decades before. But the mail-order business remained an important feature of Black rural life in the segregated South. How much of one I do not yet know.

We do know from the work of scholars and autobiographies and biographies that mail-order catalogs like Montgomery Ward's played a transformative role in the lives of rural people. In the South, the catalogs gave Black people greater freedom to choose their purchases and access to goods otherwise unavailable—or only at exorbitant prices at plantation stores or stores in the nearest country town, where buying on credit came with usurious interest rates. Rural dwellers seldom had cash. Montgomery Ward offered more favorable credit terms, and buying on credit did not lead to a lien placed on your crop. Catalog shopping offered freedom from the performance of humiliating rituals of deference to white supremacy that often accompanied in-person shopping in white-owned stores. In the privacy of their homes, Black people were freed from the surveillance of white storekeepers and their white customers and from interference with a decision to buy a pretty dress or a ribbon to adorn a child's hair. This did not prevent white people from contesting the right of Black people to make such private decisions when they encountered Black people on the streets attired, to their minds, inappropriately. The catalogs also had more practical uses. In *An Hour before Daylight: Memories of a Rural Boyhood* (2001), Jimmy Carter recalled that like many poor rural dwellers, his family repurposed old newspapers and "pages torn from Sears, Roebuck catalogues" as toilet paper.

My childhood memories of the mail-order catalog are an entry point for thinking about the larger economic and social lives of rural Black Southerners and what they learned from catalogs about the wider world and themselves. Did Black women, for example, imagine that in dressing in the latest fashions—modeled by white women and girls in the catalog they were engaged in freedom-making? Ready-made clothing, even for urban dwellers, Ruth J. Simmons notes in *Up Home: One Girl's Journey* (2023), symbolized a "freedom and power" that white people claimed exclusively for themselves.

I wonder where Black women documented their desires and sense of freedom and power. Did they take pictures of themselves in a new dress from the catalog, write about their purchases in letters to family or friends, or compare notes in meetings of Black women's clubs? Did they, like the formerly enslaved woman who spoke of her joy in purchasing a blue guinea dress when she became a free woman, speak of their purchases in oral histories? I wonder if evidence might show up in a letter from a wife, sister, or partner to a Black soldier in training camp at Fort Bragg (now Fort Liberty) or in the trenches in Europe during World War II, enclosing a picture of her wearing a new dress from the catalog. Or perhaps in a photograph mailed to a relative who had joined the migration from the South to Aliquippa, Pennsylvania, for a job at J&L Steel, or enclosed in a letter from a relative in Chicago during the Great Migration touting the city's attractions. I study photographs of rural women in church and at revival meetings as well as urban Black women, like that of a woman on the dance floor of the Big Apple Night Club in Columbia, South Carolina, taken by Richard Samuel Roberts. Did she buy that pretty dress from the catalog?

These questions and musings become fodder for thinking about possible archives that might provide the documentation I seek. My longing for sources is, at base, a longing for documents that can act as moorings for memories seemingly unanchored by the kind of archival evidence I am trained to look for and that it sometimes seems I can only wish for. They help me to imagine archives yet to be uncovered or yet to be seen whether through the fault of the creators or the custodians. A colleague reminds me of Marc Bloch's notion, following François Simiand, of "tracks" and "residues" that can act as guides to sources. Paraphrasing Bloch in *The Historian's Craft* (1954), she notes that while "we cannot reproduce the person or animal or event that left the tracks," the tracks often remain. I

consider that my memories and musings—imaginings—may lead to "tracks" and "residues" of the ideal sources I would like to find. That is not promised, but my remembered joy in the Montgomery Ward catalog, the colleague also reminds me, is itself one such track.

Historians recognize that there are limits to what we can know about the past that are attributable in part to how archives and collections of papers were established and maintained for decades. We know that the lives of some are lovingly preserved, while that of others survive despite deliberate or unthinking efforts aimed at their records' destruction, if at all. This matter has been the subject of much scholarly discussion, but I am more interested here in thinking about processes by which we can get to stories that we can imagine exist but seemingly cannot document. How as a historian can I know and not know what happened in the past? How can I move beyond the anecdote—my experience encountering the Montgomery Ward catalog—to writing a history of people for whom my experience was not extraordinary in the sense of rare, but a daily lived one, but now seemingly suffused by silence?

Put differently, how did one explain to a child the everyday indignities of the Jim Crow South? It was that daily lived experience that sent rural people to the refuge of mail-order catalogs. When I was a toddler, my mother would sometimes trace an outline of my feet on a brown paper bag or a sheet of stationery and take the tracing to the department store downtown to buy my shoes. She did not explain why she did this, nor do I know what thoughts ran through her mind as she performed this task or when the time came to pull out that piece of paper at the store whose white owners saw only the prospect of racial contamination in the actual foot of a Black person. As Traci Parker notes in her book, *Department Stores and the Black Freedom Movement* (2019) while department stores signaled equitable access and fair treatment, holding "out tremendous possibilities," they remained "enforcers and symbols of white supremacy." I imagine garbage cans filled with the discarded tracings of the feet of Black people.

The residue and tracks that remain as guideposts in my search for a path forward may be, in the words of Natalie Zemon Davis, "in part my invention," but for me, they must be "held tightly in check by the voices of the past." I will doubtless always feel what James Baldwin termed "something implacable," obstinate, unrelenting, unpacifiable, blocking my efforts to recover the history of the region in which I was born. But it is not an "unspeakable South" to which I turn. Much of what I wish to know is utterable and retrievable, in its ugliness and its beauty. W. E. B. Du Bois taught me that much.

### **Archives of a Different Sort**

From the President, Perspectives on History, May 2024

In June 1862, Confederate forces raided a refugee camp on Hutchinson's Island in South Carolina that housed people who had escaped nearby plantations. Some they "murdered in cold blood," according to the report of a US naval officer who arrived on the scene afterward. Among the survivors, he found a "man literally riddled with balls and buckshot (since dead); another shot through the lungs and struck over the forehead with a clubbed musket, leaving the bone perfectly bare; one woman shot in the leg, shoulder, and thigh; one far gone in pregnancy, with dislocation of the hip joint and injury to the womb, caused by leaping from a secondstory window, and another with displacement of the cap of the knee and injury to the leg from the same cause." This is what a Civil War battlefield sometimes looked like.

Today, Hutchinson's Island bears no hint of the battle that took place there in 1862. This is true of many Civil War battlefields, but that has never been a deterrent to marking and studying them. Many years ago, in a paper I presented at the 2012 AHA annual meeting honoring the work of Civil War historian James M. McPherson, and more recently in a forthcoming essay, I wondered aloud about how different the history and remembrances of the Civil War might look if we considered the sites of the slaves' wars as battlegrounds. They are different in many important respects from places like Vicksburg, Antietam, and Gettysburg. But what insights into war and war casualties or combatants and noncombatants might be gained if historians studied and walked battlefields on plantations or in refugee camps as they do Gettysburg, or if officers who lead the US Army War College's Strategic Leader Staff Ride took their clients to plantations or the former sites of refugee camps? Army staff rides are designed to provide lessons in leadership and decision-making for military personnel and are marketed to corporations as opportunities to study leadership. What can corporate executives, for example, learn from rides over Antietam Creek about decision-making or risk-taking?

These thoughts were on my mind during a visit many years ago to the Middleton plantation on the Ashley River in the low country of South Carolina. More than two dozen large plantations were built along the Ashley River between 1670 and 1861. As I walked Middleton plantation, now known as Middleton Place and carrying a National Historic Landmark designation, I imagined a staff ride on this ground where enslaved people helped effect their own emancipation. That war—the slaves' war—is invisible today. A reenactor at the site narrated a different story. After the war, he said, former slaveholders took in Black people who had foolishly believed in something called "freedom" and struggled to take care of them. A brochure featured a small plot of land planted with rice and Sea Island cotton. A photograph in the brochure depicted Black women working the rice crop today. I asked whether the people depicted in the photo were professional models or if they actually worked the crop. They were models, I was told; the crops were grown by volunteers. I still wanted to know if the volunteers are Black women. In the end, Middleton plantation continues to be billed as a site of pleasure and beauty. This accounts for it being a leading tourist attraction in the state of South Carolina, not its history as a battlefield.

I think, too, of the Combahee Ferry Raid, remembered today primarily for the rescue of more than 700 enslaved people by Harriet Tubman and US soldiers. It is rarely mentioned that it was also a battlefield—and a mappable one—even though US forces that included Black soldiers burned several plantations, mills, and rice crops, and enslaved people fought Confederate soldiers who tried to prevent their escape. And even though an officer admitted that Confederate forces had allowed "the enemy to come up to them unawares, and then retreated without offering resistance or firing a gun, allowing a parcel of negro wretches, calling themselves soldiers, with a few degraded whites, to march unmolested, with the incendiary torch, to rob, destroy, and burn a large section of the country."

We are talking here about a battlefield where Confederate cavalry used "negro dogs" to prevent Black people from escaping, where a Confederate officer stated in his report of the affair that a "negro girl" had come within yards of reaching a US boat and making it to freedom but that he ordered her to stop and, when she refused, shot her; she got up and ran back to the others who had also been thwarted in their attempt to board the boat. Despite the bungled Confederate response to the US raid, the vast majority of Black people on the Combahee River plantations remained enslaved. Some 30 people from Charles Lowndes's Oakland plantation were captured by a company of Confederate soldiers as they tried to make their escape. At Field's Point, the Confederate commander "discovered a good many negroes standing in the edge of the swamp, commanded by one white man" and "ordered the artillery to fire into them," which it did "several times." At the Heyward plantation, Confederate forces fired on the "stolen negroes" fleeing to the US gunboat *Blake*. In the aftermath of the

raid, Confederate pickets in the area were reinforced, a move slaveholder Mary Elliott praised. "I am very glad to hear of the new picket arrangement for guarding the negroes and trust it may arrest desertion on their part it would be ruinous to have more of such raids as the [Combahee]," she wrote.

We generally do not talk about the site of the Combahee Ferry Raid as a battlefield, the parties that fought there, the casualty rate, the location of the skirmishes, the territory gained and lost, the property destroyed. *Combee*, Edda L. Fields-Black's new book, represents an important and rare exception. But what if we mapped this site as a battlefield? Battlefield maps aid commanders in understanding the land armies will march over and fight in—its cultural and topographical features—and aid in planning troop deployment and in the aftermath of battle, assessing victories and defeats. The work of military cartographers is indispensable. The topographic knowledge of enslaved people was also essential to the victory of the US armies. And when we turn to the official maps of the war, we turn in many cases to maps informed by Black people's knowledge of the cultural and topographical features of the land. Or, in the case of refugee camps, we have after-battle reports that make it possible to map this landscape of war.

I imagine a staff ride along the Combahee, where rice fields made profitable by the labor of enslaved people once stood. I imagine that there will come a time when the battleground on which Black people fought will be seen as hallowed ground not for magnolia and mint julep fantasies but for understanding the part they played in the making of a new birth of freedom, an idea that a review in the *Georgia Historical Quarterly* in 1939 termed "an absurd bit of propaganda, based on a perversion of historical facts."

I want to suggest that we need more walking and riding of battlefields, just different ones, that consecrated battlefields include the places and spaces on the home front and the battlefields where enslaved people fought and died. These battlegrounds are largely invisible today, literally and figuratively. They do not appear on Civil War battlefield maps or, for the most part, in Civil War history books. They are not the subjects of staff rides. But they are as mappable as Gettysburg. One can take a tour of a former plantation and even get married on one, but there are no tours of wartime battles that took place on plantations or in refugee camps. Yet they, too, are archives of slavery's destruction.

### **Artificers in a Most Honorable Trade**

From the President, Perspectives on History, November 2024

Look where your hands are now.

-Toni Morrison, Jazz

The trade which of all manual trades has been most honoured: be for once a carpenter.

-John Ruskin, The Stones of Venice

My father was a carpenter. On washday, a week's worth of his work uniform, carpenter's overalls, hung side by side on my family's clotheslines. As was typical of the time, laundry was sorted and hung according to its use or purpose—bed linen, towels, blouses, shirts, pants, skirts, dishcloths, and so forth, all in their place. There was a beauty to this arrangement, intentionally so. In those days, clotheslines also telegraphed a sense of order and a household's wealth or poverty to the community at large—in my family's case, the proud occupation of a working man and a veteran who had served three years in Europe during World War II and used the GI Bill to further his education.

In the pockets of my father's overalls were some of his most valued tools—a hammer; a carpenter's folding ruler, with a sliding carpenter's scale on one side; pencils; and a nail puller—each in its place like the laundry on the clothesline. I carry an image of my father jotting down numbers and measurements calculated in his head on pieces of lumber that had to be cut, joists that had to be just right, walls that had to be timbered or sheet rocked. There were no calculators or computers, but pencils and rulers brought houses, office buildings, and bookcases into being.

I inherited little of my dad's mathematical brilliance, but from his example I gained an idea of what genius looked like, and what mind linked to hand could produce. The pencils and ruler that protruded from the pockets of his overalls left a deep impression, and I came to see them as among the most valuable of the legacies he left me. I give pencils to friends and colleagues. I find joy in writing with a pencil (and similarly with a fountain pen when sending a card or letter to a dear friend). My children gift me pencils and writing pads on special occasions, and pencils remain important items in my writing toolbox.

I still begin most new articles, essays, or book projects writing my thoughts out in pencil. It could be a few pages or as little as a paragraph. Yet in the face of the prominent place my laptop has in every aspect of my

work, penciling is now more a ritual than anything else. At the same time, it is a valuable one and something more than ceremonial. It is also terribly demanding, and properly so. There is something about writing out a word, sentence, or paragraph on paper, erasing it, and starting over again that the delete, copy, and paste functions of the computer cannot replicate. Something that seems to force the brain to work a bit harder but in a way that is pleasurable. Typewriting captures some of this—the inserting of paper and physical movement required to move the page forward or make a correction, for example. When I'm writing with pencil on paper, my thoughts are not interrupted by the intrusions of spelling suggestions or predictions of what word I will or should use next. There is also the tactile pleasure that comes from writing by hand but is about more than touch. Most importantly, I can better see my mind working. I can better capture a word and sense when it's not the right one, even when I don't readily know what is the right one. To paraphrase Toni Morrison, I can see where my hands are.

My father's carpenter's ruler helps me see where my hands are. I keep it close by on my desk at home. It is a constant reminder of the importance of precision. It reminds me, too, that like my father, I measure things, just different things, where the stakes are different but arguably no less important. His measurements had to be precise lest a building lean where it should stand straight, a roof fail to connect with the wallboards that rise up to meet it, or a wall collapse due to poor measurement of the timbers that frame it and lives be hurt or lost.

Historians measure not wood but words. Because of the demands of the trade and our reading audiences, we literally count them. But it's another form of measurement that we deem more important. It matters to us that a word means what we say it means, that it measures up to the job we give it, even as we acknowledge that all of us sometimes slip, sometimes dangerously. I am certainly never fully successful at avoiding the slippage. I use words that do not convey the meaning I attribute to them, but my father's carpenter's folding ruler is a constant reminder that precision matters in writing history.

The joy I find in writing with a pencil is of a piece with the satisfaction I find in archival research. There is something about touching a document written by hand a hundred or more years ago—which I know for colleagues who study ancient, or even medieval, times is very recent history—in all its legibility and illegibility that never ceases to excite my imagination. I have other antiquated writing crutches, or writing companions as I prefer to call

them, like my decades-old two-volume copy of the abbreviated *Oxford English Dictionary* and hard copies of dictionaries and thesauruses. It is undeniably easier to use the computer to search the meaning of a word or its etymology, and I take this route on most occasions now, I dare say. But I still find it a great deal more pleasurable to turn to hard copies. It's a bit like using old cabinet card catalogs versus online ones or going to the stacks to get a particular book only to be reminded of the riches to be found in the adjacent and nearby volumes, as historian Charles McKinney reminded us in a recent Facebook post.

As historians, we each have our own way of researching and writing. I have the deepest admiration for my colleagues who write the most splendid, brilliant prose from the start on their computers and even mobile phones. But we are also each in our own way, like my father the carpenter, skilled craftsmen, artificers in words rather than wood. Whether with computers or pencils, the frameworks of words that we craft into narratives are essential to understanding the past and present. We are members of a guild that has evolved over time and become more specialized; in many respects, historians are better than ever at what we do. The results are truly astounding. My figurative carpenter's bib overflows with new knowledge from the many books, articles, essays, podcasts, documentaries, history labs, databases, and other forms in which historical scholarship appears. This work has never been more important. Nostalgia has its place, but in the end, what excites me more is my membership in a craft that for all its imperfections continues to produce valuable and exciting new knowledge.

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