

*The newsmagazine of the American Historical Association*

# PERSPECTIVES ON HISTORY

Volume 60: 4  
April 2022



## NEW DIRECTIONS

# A Best Book of 2021 by NPR and *The Washington Post*

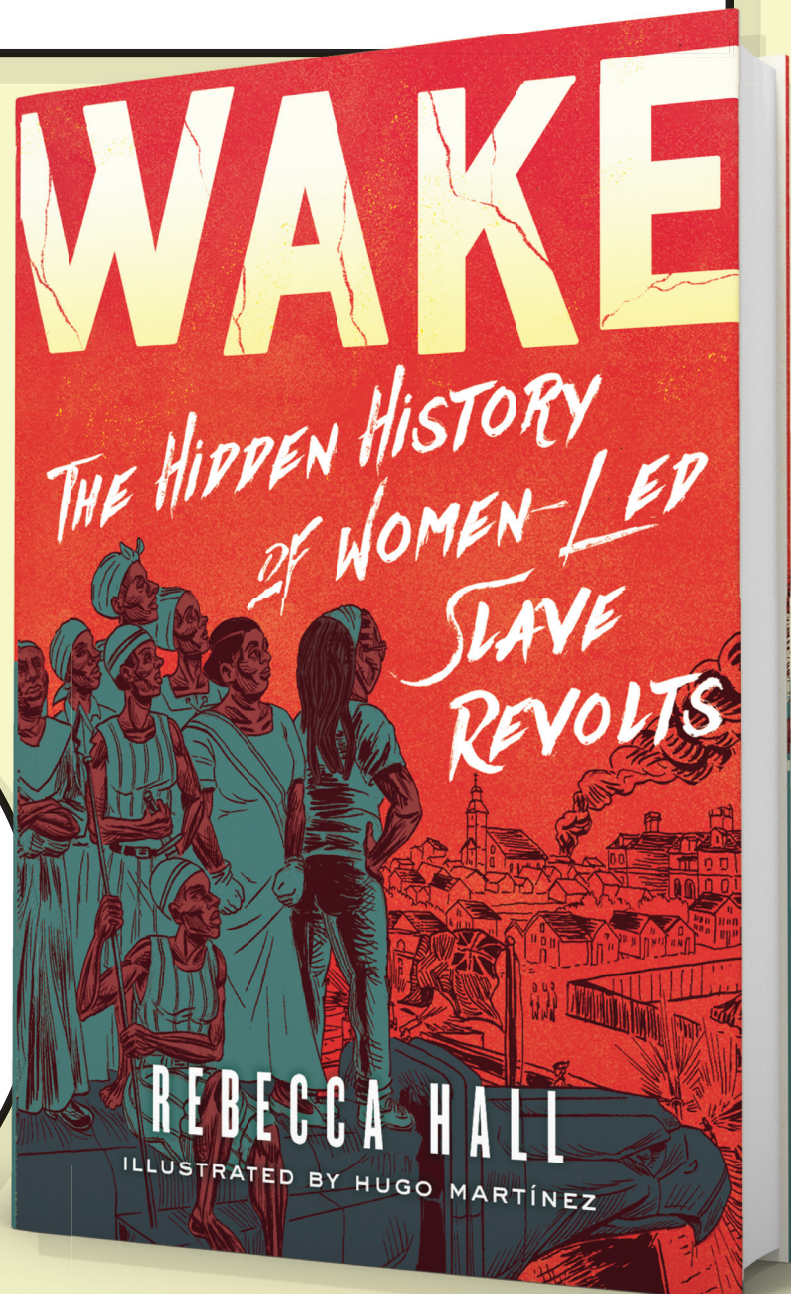
Part graphic history, part memoir, *Wake* is an imaginative tour-de-force that tells the powerful story of women-led slave revolts and a historian's efforts to uncover their stories.

"This book will haunt you the way that the legacies of slavery haunt this country."

—Trevor Getz, Professor of African and World History and author of *Abina and the Important Men: A Graphic History*

"Hall captures the fierceness of Black women's resistance."

—Rose M. Brewer,  
Professor, University of  
Minnesota-Twin Cities

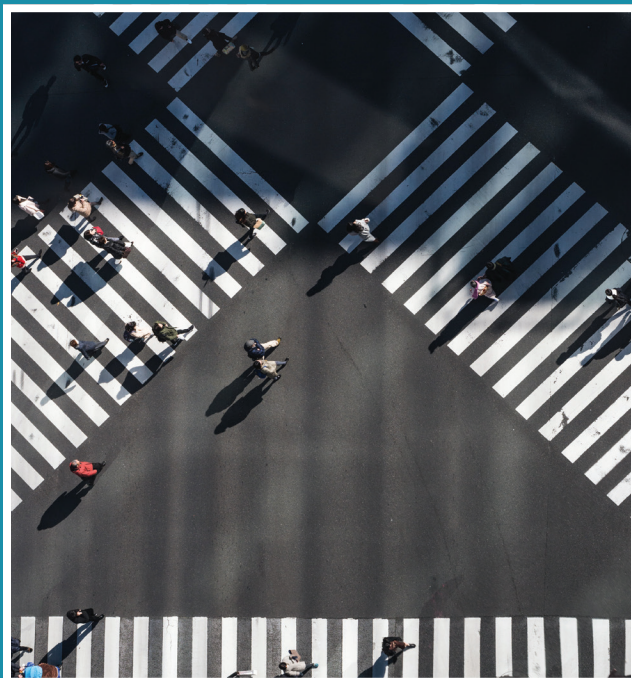


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MARY MANNING



## ON THE COVER

We are at a crossroads between the old standard and a new normal, forced to choose between paths whose endpoints we cannot see. Digital meetings are here to stay, a great leap forward in making scholarship more democratic and accessible, but their specific form is up in the air. This issue looks to that future. Leila Markosian, Kristen Shahverdian, and Alexandra F. Levy present a new program that addresses contentious issues in “Flashpoints.” The AHA staff gives an overview of several cutting-edge AHA22 Online panels. And Mary Manning’s “National History Day Unites a Community” introduces us to those who are, quite literally, the historians of the future. What other new frontiers await?

*Ryoji Iwata/Unsplash*

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LELAND RENATO GRIGOLI

## TOWNHOUSE NOTES

*Boring Is Good, Actually*

It's been a heck of a winter, what with the advent of the Omicron variant, trucker convoys, and war in Europe. As I write this, I've just moved 400 miles and three cultural zones from Providence, Rhode Island, to Washington, DC. Ominous and imposing fencing is once again being erected around the US Capitol, this time in anticipation of the State of the Union address. Russia is toying with nuclear holocaust. Loud machines are tearing up the street outside the AHA townhouse for pipe work.

It's all a bit much, frankly.

For those living through the period I usually study, Pyrenean Europe in the long 13th century, it was probably all a bit much too. The residents of Languedoc (the place where they say *oc* for yes), put up with constant warfare among local lords from the late 1090s to 1203, when this state of affairs was replaced by a full-blown, papally authorized crusade against “heresy”—a term as nebulous and ill used then as *terrorist* is today. To the region's woes, the crusaders added political instability, the occasional massacre (“kill them all; God will sort it out”), Dominican inquisitors, and, perhaps worst of all, French rule. And just as things started to finally settle back down in the 1310s following a final wave of “antiheretical” persecutions, wham: a continent-wide famine and then the Black Death.

I am interested in some of the most quotidian and regular aspects of life in what is now southern France: legal contracts for the sale of land. Peter Ponce gives Ponce Peter three units of land and the buildings on it, which is bordered by the land held by William Raymond and the land held by William Raymond's brother, Raymond William, and the land held by Raymond William's son, William Raymond, and the public road, for 10 shillings paid at every All Souls'. That sort of thing. I won't try to dissuade you from thinking that such items are incredibly banal—soporific, even. You would be right, even if I do occasionally stumble into a person named Arnold Prettybread (Panispulcher), Gerald Four-arms (Quatuorbrachia), Walter Dying-of-Love (Moriens-de-amore),

or Guy Fleshbiter (Mordenscarnem), or the juicy tale of the lady Marquisa, the young widow of Arnold Bastion, living in Arnold's old house with his attractive nephew (*Desperate Housewives of Languedoc*, anyone?). But I've been thinking a lot about the banality of such documents these days for the simple fact that they exist.

Not only do these documents exist—they exist in the thousands, scattered in archives throughout Languedoc. The precise number in each place varies widely based on the whims of fate and fire, but their quantity and ubiquity suggest that there were hundreds of thousands more that did not survive. And so, despite it all being a bit much, despite war and inquisition and famine and plague, the quotidian nevertheless persisted. People continued to butcher pigs, soak their skins in lye, scrape them thin, and stretch them on racks to let them dry. They cut up the result—parchment—into pieces, mixed ink from eggs and lamp soot, sharpened a quill, all to perpetuate the collective delusion that the written word, if properly formulated, possessed an abstract, impersonal, juridical authority and that an individual, if properly trained, could direct that authority to a purpose of their choosing. That is, they continued to write out, collect, and preserve contracts for minor transactions even as the sky was, metaphorically speaking, falling.

Humans persist in the strangest endeavors (e.g., turning pigs into legal documents) in times of great upheaval, so long as those endeavors are socially and culturally regular or expected. That the banal continues through crisis is, I think, a comforting truth. The banal can even create moments of peace and stillness in chaos. And so although everything might end in an instant, that's no reason to change a routine, no matter where in history we find ourselves.

It's all a bit much, but we still must get on with it. **P**

*Leland Renato Grigoli is editor of Perspectives on History. He tweets @mapper\_mundi.*



# STATEMENT CONDEMNING RUSSIAN INVASION OF UKRAINE

The American Historical Association condemns in the strongest possible terms Russia's recent invasion of Ukraine. This act of overt military aggression violates the sovereignty of an independent Ukraine, threatening stability in the broader region and across the world.

Russian President Vladimir Putin's rhetorical premise for this brutal violation of Ukraine's sovereignty is anchored by a set of outlandish historical claims, including an argument that Ukraine was entirely a Soviet creation. In fact, Ukraine's distinct language and culture date back over many centuries. Ukraine has been a crossroads of the region, connected to countries and cultures to the west as well as Russia to its east.

Over time, Ukrainians have contested both Russification and Sovietization. President Putin grossly simplifies and distorts Ukraine's history, essentially erasing its distinct past and rendering it indistinguishable from Russia.

The AHA emphatically opposes this unprovoked act of military aggression; that the war is based on such a distorted and tendentious misreading of history makes it all the more deplorable. We vigorously support the Ukrainian nation and its people in their resistance to Russian military aggression and the twisted mythology that President Putin has invented to justify his violation of international norms. **P**

*Approved by the AHA Council on February 28, 2022. For a full list of signatories, please see the online version of this statement.*

*For a list of AHA resources related to Ukraine, Russia, and the Cold War and Its Legacies, visit [historians.org/ukraine-russia-resources](https://historians.org/ukraine-russia-resources). On March 4, the AHA hosted "Russia and Ukraine: History Behind the Headlines," a webinar conversation among historians of Eastern Europe that can be viewed on the AHA's YouTube channel.*

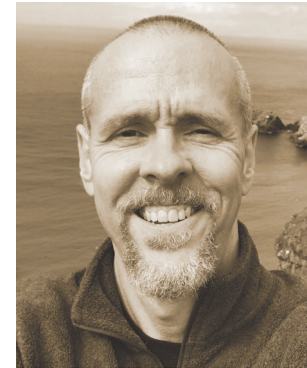


Gleb Albovsky/Unsplash, image cropped

JAMES H. SWEET

## FINDING OUR ROOTS?

*History and DNA*



In the summer of 2005, I received a phone call from a documentary filmmaker. The filmmaker explained that he was seeking historical insight on the results of a DNA test conducted on a celebrity who wished to remain anonymous; he had questions about African history, the slave trade, and Africans in the American South. If, during our conversation, I had interesting enough things to say, he might bring me to New York for an on-camera interview. All of these topics are in my wheelhouse, so I was excited and eager to participate.

The celebrity claimed that her DNA test showed she was Zulu. I knew that Oprah Winfrey had recently announced that she was Zulu, but I remained silent. Was the celebrity's family a recent arrival from South Africa? Or was she claiming descent from enslaved people who were Zulu? The producer insisted it was the latter. I told him that the result was highly unlikely. Fewer than 2 percent of enslaved Africans who arrived in British North America and the United States hailed from Southeast Africa. Moreover, the biological fact of an individual's DNA did not easily map onto historical social realities: a cohesive Zulu identity didn't emerge until King Shaka's empire in 1816, drawing together what had once been a confederation of disparate clans. The legal slave trade to North America had ended in 1808. It was almost impossible for the celebrity to be descended from enslaved Zulus transported to North America since "Zulus" didn't even exist when the slave trade ended.

The documentary producer was first unhappy and then exasperated. Clearly, I wasn't giving him the answers he wanted. He pushed and prodded and asked whether I was sure. I assured him that I was. After an hour, we ended our conversation, and I never heard from him again. One year later, Oprah Winfrey appeared on a PBS documentary, where updated DNA evidence suggested that she had a shared ancestry with the Kpelle people of present-day Liberia.

My close encounter with Oprah left me fascinated with the potential promises and pitfalls of DNA testing as a means of

accessing ancestry and identity. Several years later, I helped organize a yearlong symposium through the University of Wisconsin–Madison's African Studies Program focused on genetics, genealogy, and the African diaspora. We invited geneticists, anthropologists, sociologists, historians, and interested UW community members to take part in this project. In addition to shared readings, documentary film screenings, and scholarly research presentations, we included a "participant observation" component to the symposium. Early in the fall semester, participants drew names out of a hat. Five lucky winners earned the right to learn their supposed African origins from one of the commercial DNA testing companies. The participants took their cheek swabs in front of us, we sent off the samples, and then we awaited the reveal day in the spring.

### DNA does not easily map onto historical social realities.

By the big reveal in the spring, I thought that the participants understood that DNA did not provide the straightforward historical and ethnographic conclusions that geneticists frequently claim. In fact, such conclusions are often downright misleading. The company we chose claims that they "find identical matches" for 85 percent of those they test, revealing both an African "country and ethnic group of origin." However, the proprietary databases of genetic samples used in these evaluations are small, especially for Africa. Moreover, as in Europe or anywhere else, African countries and ethnic groups have histories. Like "Zulu," they are neither static nor primordial. Historical migration means that a genetic sample found in one place today was not necessarily the place of origin for the person producing that sample, let alone the place of origin of their ancestors.

Nevertheless, it became apparent fairly quickly that our volunteers were taking the testing seriously and were anxious to learn about their African ethnic pasts. The first to

reveal was a white professor who predictably showed that his origins resided in western Europe with no African ancestry. A graduate student who identified as mixed race likewise demonstrated an expected mixture of ancestry from all over Europe and several places in West Africa. A professor who identified as African American was excited to learn that her closest genetic markers came from the Kpelle people of Liberia (like Oprah!), and the company provided an elaborate celebratory certificate of attestation for her to frame and put on her wall. Another African American professor was crestfallen to learn that she had no African DNA and that all her ancestry came from Europe. Finally, our “control” subject was a Nigerian, born and raised Yoruba, one of the largest ethnic groups in Africa. Surely that’s where he would match.

### Even when limited to tracing familial relations, DNA evidence can be misleading.

When our Yoruba subject read the result, he roared with laughter. On his certificate of authenticity, alongside his very obvious Yoruba name, was affirmation that he was in fact descended from the Fang people of Gabon, more than 1,200 miles southeast of Yorubaland. I can speculate why a Yoruba person’s DNA might match someone’s in Gabon, but there is no way to know how long ago movements that might have allowed for such a match occurred. All we know is that a person suffused in Yoruba history, language, and culture—a person who is Yoruba—shares a fragment of genetic ancestry with someone today living in Gabon. Meanwhile, the DNA company’s interpretation of this genetic fragment completely occludes his real Yoruba identity.

So what are we to make of the ambiguities in using DNA testing to trace lost histories? Are the companies dealing in artifice or fraud? The search for ancestral roots can be empowering, especially for African American and diaspora peoples violently alienated from their homelands and denied “history” through generations of enslavement. The possibility of connecting to even one distant African relative promises a passageway to a people, a culture, a history, transcending slavery and America’s racist past. At the same time, this kind of genetic testing tells us almost nothing about history. Herein lies the contradiction. We want to believe that the people in white lab coats with their beakers and pipettes can provide scientific *and* historical truths, when they can’t even offer us the former. To say that two people share a single strand of DNA with one common relative (among thousands), deep in the indeterminate past,

is not an “identical match.” Instead, it is a random fragment elaborated into kin, country, and ethnicity by for-profit companies with no ethnographic or historical expertise.

Even when limited to tracing familial relations, DNA evidence can be misleading. Around five years ago, I received a commercial DNA test as a gift. Despite my skepticism, I was curious to see how the company would chart my ethnicity. Predictably, my DNA matched to regions in England and Germany. But then, last year, something strange happened. I received an email informing me that I had a new DNA match with a “1st–2nd cousin” whose name I didn’t recognize. When I went to “explore” the match, I learned that we share 14 percent of our DNA, slightly above the average of 12.5 percent shared by most first cousins. I was stunned. How could I possibly have a first cousin I never knew existed?

My father was adopted in Florida in the mid-1940s. We never knew his birth parents or anything about their history. Family legend held that his birth mother was a teenaged American who’d had an affair with a German man. The man to whom I matched had a rather uncommon German surname, so I started researching to see whether I could find him. The search has been eventful, if mostly fruitless. However, in the course of my digging, it became apparent that I wasn’t necessarily looking for a “first cousin.” Companies assume lineal connections based on traditional families when they report DNA relationships. They would not, for example, report to me that the man with whom I share DNA might actually be my half uncle (i.e., that he and my dad are half brothers). Yet the relational percentage shared with a half aunt or half uncle is nearly identical to that shared between first cousins. The DNA can only narrow the lineal possibilities; it can’t always tell you exactly how you are related to another person. And the commercial DNA companies have no interest in selling potential infidelity!

I’m still as fascinated with DNA testing as I was in 2005. I love watching *Finding Your Roots* with Henry Louis Gates Jr. And I still hold out hope that I will figure out the mystery of my long-lost “genetic cousin.” But I look on the interpretive results of DNA testing companies with healthy skepticism. Using the objective cloak of “science,” commercial DNA firms sell individuals and television producers what they so desperately want: evidence to reveal new and lost histories. DNA may have the potential to unlock historical secrets, but only if it is subject to deeper conceptual and methodological scrutiny, just like any other subjective shard of evidence. **P**

*James H. Sweet is the president of the AHA.*

JAMES GROSSMAN AND ANDREW K. KOCH

## GATEWAY TO CHANGE

*The AHA and Gardner Institute*

This column represents an experiment. It focuses on History Gateways, the AHA's attempt to reconsider, rethink, and redesign introductory history courses in the interest of equitable student outcomes, from coursework through graduation and careers. I wrote the first half—a background to a collaboration between the AHA and the John N. Gardner Institute for Excellence in Undergraduate Education—and then I handed the baton to my friend and colleague Drew Koch, chief executive officer of the Gardner Institute.

### James Grossman:

Like other scholarly associations, the AHA has escalated its role as a change agent in higher education. I am already hearing objections from readers who quite reasonably question the priority of such efforts on a long roster of crises. There are legitimate differences of opinion as to how we measure the breadth and depth of issues against our available resources and other factors that influence what we can and cannot accomplish. Differences of opinion arise not only about the focus of our work but also about the level of energy to give any one issue. We cannot go full bore on everything, and in some cases our leverage is such that the magnitude of our capacity is not commensurate with the magnitude of a problem to be solved. In such cases, it can be a matter of where we think our entry points are and where different levels of decisions are made.

History Gateways is one experiment in generating change in undergraduate education, particularly in the introductory history course. As a disciplinary association, our leverage generally lies in the spaces either where decision-making takes place at the level of the academic department or where our legitimacy as setters of disciplinary standards can be invoked in negotiations with administrators.

Although meaningful resource allocation takes place beyond the authority of a department chair, much can be done within the scope of departmental authority and resources.



Photo: Sophia Germer



Moreover, many historians, like their counterparts in related disciplines, lack deep reservoirs of faith in higher education administration: “If the provost wants us to do it, there must be a catch.” And this is our opening: where top-down initiatives are greeted with skepticism, a discipline-based initiative might enter with greater credibility. Moreover, the same AHA legitimacy that enables faculty to convince colleagues that an issue is worth considering enables department representatives to get a hearing in the provost’s office. From the perspective of both faculty and administrators, the AHA brings knowledge and authority without hidden institutional agendas.

History Gateways is one experiment in generating change in undergraduate education, particularly in the introductory history course.

This approach has proven effective in our work on the undergraduate history major (Tuning the History Discipline) and graduate education (Career Diversity for Historians). Reasonable observers from different perspectives will disagree on how much these initiatives have accomplished, but whatever *has* been accomplished owes its realization in large measure to this department-centered strategy.

Five years ago, we decided to complement our sideways-in methods with the demonstrated effectiveness of an organization that combines top-down and bottom-up approaches. The Gardner Institute generally executes contracts with top administration and then works directly with faculty on a classroom-centered approach, often across disciplines. They are deeply rooted in education research, pedagogical theory, and quantitative analysis—not the traditional stuff of AHA activism.

That quantitative analysis is what drew our attention—indeed riveted us—to a particular data set: introductory courses in seven disciplines, history among them, had disproportionately high rates of low grades, incompletes, and withdrawals among first-generation students and students of color. Equally troubling were data indicating that students who passed their introductory history course with low grades had low rates of eventual graduation. Clearly we were doing something wrong. The Gardner Institute had some ideas.

#### **Drew Koch:**

The Gardner Institute launched Gateways to Completion (G2C) and opened communication with the AHA in 2012. By collecting almost 10 years of evidence on aggregate rates of failure in foundational gateway courses, the institute sought answers to such questions as: Who does or does not succeed in gateway courses? What are the implications of success or failure in a gateway course? What can be done to help more students—especially students of color and students experiencing economic hardship—succeed in gateway courses and the academic programs of which those courses are a part?

### Failure rates in a single gateway course—including history courses—were highly predictive of attrition.

Neither the Gardner Institute nor the AHA realized initially that the questions we explored together would get to the heart of our respective purposes and goals. Those questions would also help both organizations assist and learn from the educators we jointly serve, especially during the pandemic and within the current sociopolitical context.

By 2016, the Gardner Institute had collected evidence from over 50 institutions. The G2C data collection process draws on student-level data provided by institutional research staff, allowing us to disaggregate course grades by a student's race, ethnicity, and family income. What we learned was both enlightening and deeply concerning.

Students of color—especially Black, Latinx, and Indigenous students—as well as students from low-income families were failing gateway courses at rates more than 100 percent higher than their more affluent and/or white counterparts. In addition, failure rates in a single gateway course—including history courses—were highly predictive of attrition. Our data left little doubt that race, ethnicity, and income were the best

preenrollment predictors of who succeeded in gateway courses specifically and at university in general.

The AHA's leadership not only encouraged the Gardner Institute to disseminate these disturbing data but also provided a vehicle for distribution: the May 2017 edition of this magazine. The information shared in that *Perspectives* issue was crucial to the AHA's subsequent proposal to the Mellon Foundation to fund an experimental redesign of introductory history courses. History Gateways is, in part, a form of mutualistic symbiosis: a jointly beneficial relationship between two scholarship- and teaching-focused organizations aimed at helping both entities better support educators and their students.

The Gardner Institute regularly works with academic administrators, researchers, and other administrative staff to facilitate its efforts with institutions. Though the institute also works with faculty in pedagogical redesign initiatives, it does not have the AHA's standing with history educators. Collaboration with the AHA has enabled the Gardner Institute to complement its top-down connections among senior administrators with the AHA's sideways-in pathways to department chairs and faculty.

Indeed, the institute's prestige among senior administrators and institutional research and information technology staff make valuable research available to the AHA and its members. Through no fault of their own, history educators rarely have this kind of access to these institutional resources. History Gateways is changing that.

#### **James Grossman and Drew Koch:**

The Gardner Institute offers the AHA effective resources and contacts, such as institutional research staff. Meanwhile, the AHA has given the Gardner Institute access to other disciplinary organizations and efforts. None of this would have been possible had either organization attempted to do this work on its own. Perhaps more important, over time, is what we've learned from each other and the foundation we've established for continued cooperation. Too often we look to organizations that resemble our own for collaboration; it's comfortable that way, and we don't have to learn a new vocabulary or listen to criticism of our assumptions and methods. We hope that History Gateways provides both a mechanism and a model for change. [P](#)

*James Grossman is executive director of the AHA; he tweets @JimGrossmanAHA. Andrew K. Koch is chief executive officer of the Gardner Institute; he tweets @DrewKochTweets.*

GRACE ARGO

## HELPING THE TIRED, THE POOR, THE HUDDLED MASSES

*Community-Based Learning in the Immigrant Justice Lab*

**Imagine yourself as a child. At the age of 12 or 13, how well would you have been able to articulate your daily experiences—at home, at school, walking down the street—as they relate to your country's history and politics? Though some of us may have understood ourselves as historically situated subjects more clearly than others at that age, we would still have critical gaps in our perception. And if our lives depended on our ability to perform this analysis in a court of law, we would need help.**

Unaccompanied migrant children seeking asylum in the United States need precisely this help. To obtain asylum, they must show US Citizenship and Immigration Services that they have a credible fear of persecution in their home country on the basis of race, religion, nationality, political opinion, or membership in a particular social group. Immigration attorneys provide this help for free to children referred to them by the Office of Refugee Resettlement. In recent years, however, their efforts have been spread thin as more children seek asylum than ever before.

The University of Michigan's Immigrant Justice Lab represents one local effort to improve the quantity and quality of resources available to unaccompanied migrant children and their attorneys. Co-founded in 2018 by Jesse

Hoffnung-Garskof, professor of history and American culture, and Rebeca Ontiveros-Chávez, supervising attorney at the Michigan Immigrant Rights Center (MIRC), the lab conducts research to support children's asylum claims. "The initial idea was simple," Hoffnung-Garskof explained. "Rebeca and her colleagues at MIRC had an exploding caseload. My undergraduate history students had a wide array of skills that were a good match for some of the areas MIRC needed the most help—finding out about local conditions in the societies that asylum seekers had fled. We decided to experiment with workshops and seminars designed around teaching

students to do this work." Piloted as an end-of-semester project in Hoffnung-Garskof's undergraduate Immigration Law course, the Immigrant Justice Lab is now a stand-alone course that offers undergraduate history students and law students the chance to partner with immigration attorneys on complex cases. "The lab always borrowed from the model of clinical instruction, and there are tasks involved in this work that even the best undergraduates cannot learn to do in a semester," Hoffnung-Garskof said, "so bringing students and instructors from the Law School into the project made sense. We were lucky to recruit Amy Sankaran



Students in 2019 work together in the Immigrant Justice Lab to draft legal briefs rooted in immigration history, in consultation with faculty and attorneys.

*Gregory Parker/University of Michigan Department of History*

and Jessica Lefort, law faculty who value interdisciplinary work and who see the value that our undergraduate students bring to the project.”

## Students learn about the factors that drive many migrants to seek asylum in the United States.

The Immigrant Justice Lab asks students to consider how history shapes people’s lives in the present. As the Immigrant Justice Lab coordinator over the last nine semesters, I have helped students collect and interpret evidence that connects children’s personal stories to their political, historical, and cultural contexts. For example, when a child from El Salvador flees to the United States to escape abuse at home, students

must show how institutions like family, medicine, and the law have been destabilized over time by the Salvadoran Civil War (1979–92), displacement, and the rise of gangs. These historical factors increase children’s vulnerability by normalizing certain kinds of violence, isolating them from extended family, making authorities reluctant to intervene for fear of gang retaliation, and forcing victims to navigate a legal system that is at best inefficient (and at worst corrupt). Mechanisms for international protection kick in when states are unwilling or unable to protect children from private-actor violence.

Students also learn how the history of US immigration law shapes children’s experiences of the asylum application process. The criteria used to define a refugee in immigration law emerged in the aftermath of World War II, opening a small escape hatch for displaced European Jews and political dissenters fleeing

communist states without fundamentally challenging the restrictive quotas created to curb European immigration in the 1920s. That definition maps imperfectly onto unaccompanied migrant children, as most are displaced not by state-sanctioned genocide or political activism but by a lack of protection from gangs and domestic violence. Children must demonstrate their asylum eligibility by satisfying narrow and exacting legal tests intended to show that their experiences are analogous to those for whom the term *refugee* was created. Drafting a brief for such a case can feel like cutting a key to fit a lock not designed to open it. “Our current realities of the immigration system are a direct result of this country’s history of exclusive nationalism,” said Carolyn Chen, a current research assistant and recent graduate. “From the very first immigration exclusion acts in the 19th century, we’re able to see how those in power can use the idea of borders and exclusion to maintain their position. Through the lab, we’re exposed to the tangible ways our nation’s history still impacts people today.”

By conducting research for asylum briefs, students learn about the factors that drive many migrants to seek asylum in the United States. As they research the histories of the children’s countries of origin, they can see the impact of US immigration law and policy on a global scale and comprehend how the histories of the United States and other countries are intertwined, giving them particular insight into these cases. “The hands-on experience is crucial to promoting cultural competency,” said Yezeñia Sandoval, a former lab student. In her view, class discussions became more “productive and informed” after she and her peers were able to see immigration law from the perspectives of refugee children.

Students know the stakes are high. Chen said that her research team “spent

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hours together reading our briefs line by line,” anxious to perfect every detail. Students receive guidance and feedback directly from immigration attorneys on their briefs, and every draft undergoes a round of peer review by classmates. The political and legal landscape of immigration law shifts rapidly, however—deadlines can change on short notice, and sometimes students need to change strategies even after putting significant time and effort into a brief. Even though attorneys request help with cases long before they are due to US Citizenship and Immigration Services, they cannot predict sudden changes to immigration law. Students therefore must adapt under pressure. Former student Isabel Zuñiga emphasized that this work “required passion as well as flexibility.” Although dealing with such rapid changes could be frustrating, Sandoval said it also made her “more aware of political movements and actors tied to the immigration system’s evolving nature.”

Despite the harried pace at which students work, it may be years before an immigration judge decides the outcome of a case. Nicole Tsuno helped draft nine asylum briefs during her two and a half years in the lab but only knows the outcome of one. The brief, written for a 15-year-old girl, succeeded in a court with some of the country’s highest denial rates. While students count such successful cases as victories, they know that sharing the most traumatic experiences of their lives and then waiting years for relief can be extremely difficult for children. “Our clients are traumatized and dealing with a retraumatizing immigration system,” Tsuno said. “I am lucky to never have to go through that.”

One challenge of a partnership between a busy legal aid agency and a university is the way time is organized differently in each domain. Major changes to the asylum application process are often announced in July and December, when

students are on break or preparing for exams. The lab therefore retains students as research assistants during summers and holiday breaks. Keeping the lab running year-round is crucial for maintaining strong relationships with immigration attorneys. These students also perform tasks critical to the lab’s functioning, such as maintaining its national research database for immigration lawyers.

## Community-based learning means that students aren’t learning about history in a vacuum.

The database is the brainchild of Ontiveros-Chávez and two former students in the lab, Meghan Brody and Elijah Aarons. Ontiveros-Chávez wanted to create a system for immigration attorneys to share resources they could use to build cases for clients. Together, Brody and Aarons—undergraduate majors in library science and computer science, respectively—designed and built a database to accomplish that goal. While Aarons worked on the coding, Brody focused on user experience: designing the database interface; conducting user testing; and collecting, organizing, and maintaining data. “It’s so exciting to see how the project that I was part of building has grown into something that’s helping so many people,” Brody said. She credits the lab with giving her skills she now uses as a user experience specialist and database system administrator at a public library.

Other students in the lab have gone on to pursue law school or to work in immigration law and public policy, and even with the United Nations. After graduating, Sandoval landed a job at an immigration law firm in Chicago. “Due to my

experience in the lab, I was able to apply critical thinking skills and direct knowledge of immigration law to help clients navigate the complicated and oftentimes lengthy visa application process,” she said. Both Chen and Zuñiga are pursuing law degrees with the goal of becoming immigration attorneys. “The experience of working with MIRC attorneys was crucial in shaping my career aspirations,” said Chen.

Understandably, instructors might hesitate to propose and develop community-based learning projects like the Immigrant Justice Lab because of the increasingly antagonistic political climate toward teaching students about racism in US history. Students in the lab, however, view the passage of laws against divisive concepts critically. “Racial division is what happens when we *don’t* encourage community-based learning projects,” said Tsuno. Grounding discussions of immigration law in the experiences of unaccompanied children and in history combats simplistic narratives and racist stereotypes about immigrants, creating a “controlled, informed environment” for students to discuss immigration issues, added Zuñiga.

Community-based learning means that students aren’t learning about history in a vacuum. “By learning how to tell complex stories of migration within the constraints of the asylum system, students gain a clearer view of the history of how humanitarianism overlays contemporary immigration politics, and the lives of contemporary immigrants,” said Hoffnung-Garskof. “Every history major has heard the question, ‘History—what are you going to do with that?’ Our students may not know what they will do in the future, but they are already doing things with history.” **P**

*Grace Argo is a PhD candidate in history and women’s studies at the University of Michigan.*

## ADVOCACY BRIEFS

*In Support of Students, Educators, and Presidential Record Preservation*

**A**HA advocacy in late 2021 and early 2022 focused on the ongoing battle regarding “divisive concepts” in schools. The new Freedom to Learn initiative launched, which includes contacting state legislatures considering bills that would limit teachers’ ability to provide honest history education. The AHA also spoke out against the Trump administration’s violations of the Presidential Records Act, advocated for history faculty, and signed on to a statement supporting Afghan students and scholars. Furthermore, the AHA condemned recent bomb threats against HBCUs and the Russian invasion of Ukraine, putting these actions into historical context in two statements.

### AHA Sends Letter Opposing Oklahoma Bill That Would Limit Teaching of Race and Slavery in America

On December 23, the AHA sent a letter to members of the Oklahoma state legislature strongly opposing House Bill 2988, which would restrict the teaching of “certain concepts pertaining to America and slavery.” This “irresponsible legislation,” the AHA wrote, would be “harmful to the youth of Oklahoma, leaving students ignorant of basic facts of American history and poorly prepared for the critical thinking and interpretive skills required for career and civic accomplishment.”

### AHA Sends Letter Opposing Placentia-Yorba Linda Unified School District Resolution

On January 6, the AHA sent a letter to leaders at the Placentia-Yorba Linda (CA) Unified School District opposing the proposed Resolution No. 21-12, “Resolution Opposing the Teaching of Critical Race Theory.” “If the district is committed to academic freedom,” the AHA wrote, “why has it singled out one set of ideas—critical race theory—as a subject that cannot be taught in Placentia-Yorba Linda schools?” The AHA hoped history teachers would not be required to minimize historical transgressions or their influence on the evolution of American institutions, writing that “to do so would be a direct and clear violation of ‘the commitment to teach a complete and accurate account of history.’” The letter included a statement criticizing similar legislative efforts to restrict education about racism in American history, co-authored by the AHA in June 2021 and signed by 155 organizations.

### AHA Signs On to Statement Urging State Department to Protect Afghan Students and Scholars

On February 3, the AHA signed on to a statement from the Middle Eastern Studies Association, the American Institute of Afghan Studies, and Scholars at Risk encouraging US State Department officials “to take immediate action to

enable the safe and speedy relocation of Afghanistan’s students and scholars, many of whom represent the best and brightest of the country’s young generation.” The current admission pathways into the United States, the statement says, “are not available to many Afghans who face challenges overcoming the statutory bar to immigrant intent for such nonimmigrant visa categories. . . . As the spring semester commences, we strongly encourage the White House to seize this moment and open a pathway for them to return to school and productive academic careers.”

### AHA Sends Letter to Collin College President regarding Nonrenewal of History Faculty

On February 7, the AHA sent a letter to Collin College president Neil Matkin stating that it “views with alarm your decision not to renew the contract of Dr. Michael Phillips, professor of history” after Phillips’s request that his students “consider wearing masks to protect their own health and the health of their classmates.” This request, along with the historical context Phillips provided about responses to the COVID-19 pandemic, was “well within institutional guidelines. . . . We fear that your actions will serve to intimidate other history professors who seek to teach about the history of pandemics and other controversial issues, and seek to protect the health of their students.”

### AHA Releases Statement Condemning Violations of Presidential Records Act

On February 9, the AHA released a statement “condemn[ing] in the strongest terms former President Donald J. Trump’s reported extensive and repeated violations of the Presidential Records Act of 1978.” “Historians, journalists, and other researchers depend on the preservation of presidential records to educate the public and inform future administrations,” the AHA wrote. “These acts of destruction and noncompliance with the Presidential Records Act demonstrate blatant contempt for both the rule of law and the principles of transparency and accountability that constitute the bedrock of our nation’s democracy.” As of March 15, 30 organizations have signed on to this statement.

### AHA Releases Statement on Bomb Threats against HBCUs

On February 23, the AHA released a statement historicizing and condemning the numerous bomb threats received by at least 17 historically Black colleges and universities in early 2022. “These crimes are part of a long history of attacks on institutions that serve the Black community,” wrote the AHA. “[These acts] spawned not only a hateful legacy, but also a current, ongoing threat to the physical safety and emotional well-being of all Black Americans.” As of March 15, 44 organizations have signed on to this statement.

### AHA Releases Statement Condemning Russian Invasion of Ukraine

On February 28, the AHA released a statement “condemn[ing] in the strongest possible terms Russia’s recent invasion of Ukraine” and Russian President Vladimir

Putin’s abuse of history as justification for the attack. “Putin’s rhetorical premise for this brutal violation of Ukraine’s sovereignty is anchored by a set of outlandish historical claims, including an argument that Ukraine was entirely a Soviet creation,” the AHA wrote. “We vigorously support the Ukrainian nation and its people in their resistance to Russian military aggression and the twisted mythology that President Putin has invented to justify his violation of international norms.” As of March 15, 41 organizations have signed on to this statement. See page 4 for the full statement.

### AHA Announces Freedom to Learn Initiative

In many states, legislators have introduced “divisive concepts” bills in an effort to limit history education in ways that would make it virtually impossible for teachers to help students understand the continuing impact of slavery and racism in

American history. At the very least, teachers will be wary, uncertain as to the boundaries of the law. The AHA has launched the Freedom to Learn initiative in response to these legislative efforts, helping historians and others understand these bills and how to respond to them, advocating publicly for history education rooted in current scholarship, and creating resources to assist teachers directly affected by this legislation. Freedom to Learn is the first step in what will be a broader series of efforts by the AHA to combat attempts by legislators to minimize or even exclude from classrooms critical elements of the American past. As of February 23, the AHA has sent 14 letters about specific bills and resolutions to representatives in nine states, including Arizona, California, Florida, Georgia, Missouri, Ohio, Oklahoma, South Dakota, and Texas. [P](#)

*Rebecca L. West is operations and communications assistant at the AHA. She tweets @rebeckawest.*



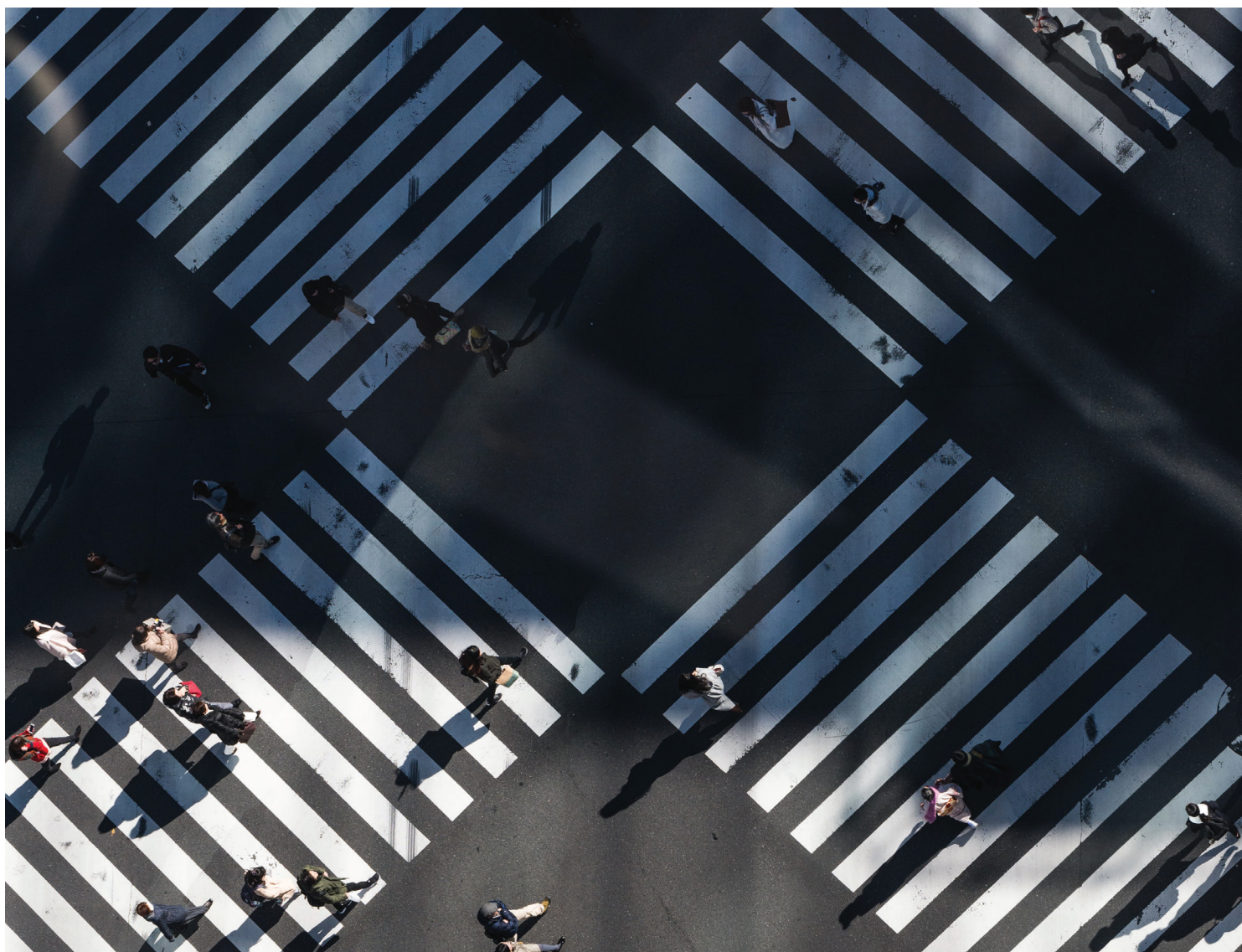
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# AHA22 ONLINE

*A New Gathering*



From escape rooms to collaborative research, AHA22 Online highlighted how historians are walking many paths in their research, teaching and learning, and professional lives.

*Ryoji Iwata/Unsplash*

**A**LTHOUGH IT WAS an absolute delight to hold the 2022 annual meeting in person in New Orleans after two years of pandemic-induced isolation, the realities of the Omicron variant cast a pall over the proceedings and kept many participants, both presenters and attendees, at home. The meeting was quiet, almost intimate, unlike the grand and nervous excitement experienced in the past. One new source of tension, however, appeared: Would all (or any) of the participants be at the session? And so, despite the thrill of the in-person event, there was simply too much good scholarship left on the table, work that deserved time, care, and attention from a broad and engaged audience. This work found its home in AHA22 Online, held February 21–27. From the more than 200 sessions that took place in this new venue, here are some highlights.

—Leland Renato Grigoli, Claire Vanderwood, Alana Venable, and Sarah Jones Weicksel

## TEACHING PANDEMICS WHILE SURVIVING ONE

Since March 2020, history educators teaching across time and place have faced the issue of teaching past pandemics while living through COVID-19. In the session “Teaching Plagues and Pandemics,” chairs Janet E. Kay (Princeton Univ.) and Carolyn Twomey (St. Lawrence Univ.), along with panelists Amy Brown Curry (Lone Star Coll.), Katherine L. French (Univ. of Michigan), and Merle Eisenberg (Oklahoma State Univ.), discussed their methods for teaching about disease in a pandemic society.

Primary sources from plagues and pandemics are filled with accounts of death. French uses statistics as a way for her class to approach these records. In her class on the Black Death, her students, including majors from both the humanities and STEM fields, tackle the task of interpreting English manorial court rolls from Walsham-le-Willows. Data spreadsheets list the death records of the manor residents, and students are tasked with making sense of it. French said, “These assignments turn a mundane if depressing list into something meaningful,” and went on to discuss how the exercise encourages students to think about the historical narratives that can be drawn from administrative sources.

Curry and Twomey offered an interactive approach to understanding plague in medieval society. From medieval North

England to the classroom, Curry transports her students in a Reacting to the Past–style game called “1349: The Plague Comes to Norwich.” Reacting to the Past is an active pedagogy that assigns students character roles and objectives based on historical turning points, and students are asked to create solutions based on contemporary worldviews. Curry assigned students to play roles such as merchants, priests, and bailiffs and tasked them with saving the city. The game forced her students to grapple with the knowledge limitations of historical actors as they made decisions about shutting borders, enforcing quarantine, and seeking justifications for the sickness. Through this exercise, she wanted students to understand the “humanity of us all.” Twomey took a page out of Curry’s book, developing a role-playing exercise that fit a shortened semester. She focused on objects as gateways into the lives of those experiencing death and sickness. Her assignment encourages students to understand that people from the “past were strangers but they were not strange.”

Through this exercise, Curry wanted students to understand the “humanity of us all.”

Access to the primary-source documents and digital media needed to supplement interactive classroom assignments became increasingly difficult as COVID-19 pushed instruction into remote learning spaces. Eisenberg, along with the combined efforts of a group of medievalist experts, created the website Middle Ages for Educators, which aims to democratize access to medieval information, digital learning, and resources. This led to the curation of mini-lesson plans, such as A Medieval Plague Lesson Plan. The group hopes to adapt these lesson plans to meet the individual needs of state requirements.

The panel concluded with Kay’s discussion of her course, the Art and Archaeology of Plague. Spanning 2,500 years of human history in just 12 weeks, she kept students engaged through podcasts, videos, lectures, weekly guest speakers, and a plague simulation assignment. Using ancient medicine and knowledge, she tasked her students with devising solutions to save the university campus from a pandemic. Her assignments allowed students to place themselves mentally in a university environment without being present on the campus. Her goal was to help students understand their own experiences of COVID-19.

As classes switched to remote learning, and pandemic restrictions increased, teachers were faced with a new set of

challenges on how to keep students engaged. This group of medieval scholars used history, primary sources, and a bit of creativity to meet this challenge. By linking the pandemics of the past to the pandemic of the present, these scholars were able to create lessons to help students understand the humanity of us all.

—AV

## YOU CAN'T ESCAPE PALEOGRAPHY

Paleography, the art of reading old handwriting, is a necessary skill for historians of almost any era. Ancient historians grapple with Roman writing, medievalists struggle against Merovingian scripts and Gothic cursives, and early modernists wrestle a seemingly infinite variety of chancery scrawls and eccentric personal hands. Even those modernists whose sources are typed or printed still must read the occasional note scribbled hastily in a margin or between lines, a task that has become increasingly difficult as K–12 instruction in cursive writing (and thus reading) has all but ceased. Learning paleography is also a process with benefits beyond simply

understanding the letters on the page. Because it is difficult, it encourages a slow, close reading of the text at hand and a better understanding of the semantic range of the words involved. Still, for many, the process of learning to read old hands is slow and painful.

Participants are tasked with solving puzzles to get out of a trap or solve a mystery, as if *Clue* were mashed into *Dungeons & Dragons*.

Can instruction in this necessary skill be made pain-free? Julie A. Fisher (Bard High School Early College DC), Sara Powell (Houghton Library, Harvard Univ.), and Heather Wolfe (Folger Shakespeare Library) thought it couldn't hurt to try. Together, they set out to develop a “no-tears paleography” course. They had long observed that paleography was more accessible when it was made into a group activity, using group transcription assignments to teach the subject to students as early as the ninth grade and running regular large-scale “transcribe-a-thons.” The logical next step, they thought, was to turn the act of reading a text into a game.



In "The Ghost of Blithfield Hall," players must solve paleography puzzles to move forward.  
Courtesy Fisher, Powell, and Wolfe

Searching the archival collections at their disposal, Fisher, Powell, and Wolfe developed a narrative following the popular escape room model in which participants are tasked with solving a series of puzzles in order to get out of a trap or solve a mystery, as if *Clue* were mashed into *Dungeons & Dragons*. Students would be placed in a room, with low lighting and fake candles to set the mood, and be asked to solve a series of puzzles from locked boxes to riddles and word games. In iterating scenarios through their play tests (a vital component in development!), Fisher, Powell, and Wolfe found that the tactile was critical to creating immersive experiences. Documents, even reproductions, needed to be made so that participants would at least be willing to pretend they were the real thing. Although this took substantial logistics and planning, avoiding anachronisms and keeping a sense of immersion among the students yielded interest in the game and excellent learner outcomes.

Then the pandemic hit. As they shifted to an online production, the team found that they needed an entirely new approach to keep players engaged. Tactile puzzles were, of course, impossible in the digital space, which forced them to develop a stronger narrative. A single room became many; players had to find clues and solve the puzzle of one room to advance to another. In essence, the three had become video game designers—not an easy task without a premade platform or a budget.

Session attendees were invited to solve one room of this new game, “rated MA: for mature archivists only.” After a brief introductory video, players were given their puzzle: a static image of a room where a player had to click specific locations to uncover a handwritten 17th-century letter. Players could obtain clues only by deciphering it. Participants were provided no guidance as to what to do, only that they needed to finish all tasks to advance. Some breezed through the task while others struggled, but all reported enjoying the challenge and there were indeed no tears. It was, in other words, a success.

—LRG

## OPENING THE GATES

What does it mean to open the gates at a liberal arts college? Continuing from a series of Virtual AHA Colloquium sessions in 2021, “Opening the Gates: The Futures of History from a Liberal Arts College Perspective” included a workshop, a roundtable, and a social hour in which participants learned about different ways to make liberal arts history education

more inclusive, diverse, responsive, and engaging for students and faculty alike.

Jakub J. Kabala (Davidson Coll.) moderated the workshop, which featured five short presentations by history instructors at liberal arts colleges, each explaining a different means of “opening the gates.” Several participants focused on course design. Kabala, an instructor of programming in the humanities for students majoring in computer science, presented on the ways history can inform other disciplines, though interdisciplinarity often means the other way around. Danielle Sanchez (Colorado Coll.), a scholar of French colonial history, explained how she incorporates digital history to engage students in her first-year seminar, *The Empires Strike Back: From Anti-Colonial Conflicts to Star Wars*. The class watches a selection of *Star Wars* media together, and then students must pick a scene and create a body of documents to tell the story of that scene through a particular lens. After meeting with special collections staff at the college library, and specialists in ceramics and digital learning if they choose, students learn to understand how power operates in the construction of the archive by creating an archive of their own.

History can inform other disciplines, though interdisciplinarity often means the other way around.

A theme of “Opening the Gates” was students charting their own paths, whether constructing their own archives or helping to grade themselves. Jessica L. Pearson (Macalester Coll.) shared how she has reworked her syllabus from a document that tells students they don’t belong to a tool to invite people in — “a key to open the gates.” Practicing the idea of ungrading, allowing students to set their own course goals and determine their grades alongside the instructor, Pearson explained her method of structuring her syllabus as a living Google Doc, where students can make comments and ask questions, modifying the course to suit their needs.

Many participants recounted difficulties. One attendee noted that some students give more respect to professors who run traditional classrooms or expect more leeway the more instructors give. Panelist and department chair Kathleen Phillips Lewis (Spelman Coll.) spoke about recruiting and retaining diverse and stellar faculty. In small departments, any faculty turnover can be disruptive, drastically reducing the number of faculty and burdening their colleagues with searches. Even at HBCUs, mentoring diverse faculty can be a

challenge. Other participants echoed such concerns, including Ernesto Capello (Macalester Coll.), who emphasized the need for support for professional development to retain faculty.

The discussion on fostering inclusivity at liberal arts colleges continued at the roundtable, in which three more history instructors spoke of tactics they use to engage students and make them feel empowered as historians in the classroom. Anthony Donaldson Jr (Sewanee, Univ. of the South) shared how he challenges students to reflect on whose voices are missing from prevailing narratives, guiding them to discover primary sources that highlight overlooked agency. As a result, his students see how historical actors, people to whom they may not have connected before, charted their own paths, just as the students did when they analyzed the sources. “The content is there,” Donaldson said. “We just have to make sure we select the most inclusive aspects of it.”

In a similar vein, Tyran Steward (Williams Coll.) draws students in with sports history, a subject “captivating to people of diverse backgrounds,” and then asks questions to encourage thinking about sport beyond meritocracy. Sport, to Steward, structures notions of race making and state making, empire building and imperialism. Students see historical actors, athletes, who reflect their own identities, and in Steward’s classes encounter literature that emphasizes a commitment to inclusivity and diversity.

All presenters encouraged gearing course content to a wider audience. Stephanie Montgomery (St. Olaf Coll.) presented on using digital pedagogy to create a “hands-on, hopefully immersive, impactful learning experience.” Using examples from a premodern China course, Montgomery shared how digital tools and digitized resources allow students to provide feedback on one another’s assignments and speculate on the lives of ordinary people long ago.

So how do historians at liberal arts institutions open the gates? The panelists open the gates by selecting documents that appeal to and reflect the identities of their students and by using digital tools to make courses more accessible. They open the gates by allowing students to negotiate course outcomes. And they can open the gates to diverse faculty by creating clear tenure and promotion guidelines and by mentoring early career colleagues in their teacher-scholar careers. Stay tuned for more “Opening the Gates” sessions at future AHA annual meetings.

—CV

## NOT A LOST CAUSE

Teaching medieval studies in the American South poses specific challenges due to unique social and cultural circumstances: the popularity of Lost Cause ideology, the particular religious and racial composition of the normal student body, and the place of premodern history in the K–12 curriculum, to name but a few. Originally organized to bring historians from across the region together in New Orleans, this roundtable discussion among historians Kate Craig (Auburn Univ.), Robert Ticknor (The Historic New Orleans Collection), Brad Phillis (Univ. of Southern Mississippi), Mary A. Valante (Appalachian State Univ.), and Lauren L. Whitnah (Univ. of Tennessee at Knoxville), and chaired by Courtney Luckhardt (Univ. of Southern Mississippi), was wide ranging, but several themes repeated throughout.

The Middle Ages are usually pushed aside in K–12 education in favor of American history.

The first of these was the role of medieval studies in the classroom, or rather its absence. The Middle Ages are usually pushed aside in K–12 education in favor of a curriculum focused on American history. Often, students are simply told that the American Constitution is a successor to the British Magna Carta, and that is it. To the panelists, this was both a curse and a blessing. It makes it significantly harder to help students relate to the Middle Ages, though the use of medieval imagery at the Unite the Right riot in Charlottesville, Virginia, and the pandemic have given some teachers a foothold. But the interpretations of history in the K–12 curriculum in states like Mississippi have not been updated since the 1950s, and the only texts widely available to teachers are from the 19th century, and so there are also few ideas that instructors need to unteach. Similarly, premodern studies are mostly ignored in the controversies surrounding “divisive concepts” bills. The panelists agreed that if medievalists wish to campaign to see their subject included in a standard curriculum, they must also publish items that K–12 teachers can use.

Cultural issues, too, pose substantial challenges to teaching medieval studies in the South. Several participants expressed bemused frustration that they were unable to interest their evangelical Protestant students in medieval Christianity—even with standard medieval course topics like the Crusades—because, to such students, “Catholics aren’t Christians.” But they identified race and the use of the Middle Ages in grounding Lost Cause ideology as the largest challenges they

confront in the classroom. After all, they noted, medieval studies is an overwhelmingly white field, reflecting the idea that the Middle Ages are the origin of White history. A continuous and “active insistence on the complex reality of the Middle Ages” is necessary to combat this idea. In this regard, panelists returned several times to how white students had tried to relate medieval iterations of slavery to that which was practiced in the Americas and diminish the severity. To this, they suggested several different kinds of answers, but all came with the same warning: Black students are listening to your answer too.

—LRG

## TEAMING UP FOR HISTORY

This year, the AHA Council’s Research Division sponsored a series of sessions on historians’ collaborative work, tackling topics from how digital collaboration has revolutionized research to the challenges related to institutional and disciplinary recognition of that scholarship. One roundtable, “Beyond Collaboration,” took place at both the New Orleans meeting, where it was moderated by Sarah Jones Weicksel (AHA), and AHA22 Online, where it was chaired by Research Division vice president Ben Vinson III (Case Western Univ.) This roundtable brought together historians who work in publications, museums, and digital history to highlight the experiences, benefits, and challenges of working collaboratively.

Laura Ansley (AHA and *Nursing Clio*) and Courtney Thompson (Mississippi State Univ.) discussed the collaboration between *Nursing Clio* and Archival Kismet. Archival Kismet is a term Thompson uses to describe the process of the historian being led by their sources. In 2020, Thompson created the Archival Kismet online conference as a “space for the celebration and exploration of the weird, the off-beat, the strange finds in archives, broadly defined, that we aren’t sure what to do with or that don’t fit into our current research projects or even our broader research identity.” The first conference was a great success, with 50 presenters sharing short, informal presentations and attracting widespread engagement from the audience. Founded in 2012 to tie historical scholarship to the present day, the open access, peer-reviewed blog *Nursing Clio* was an ideal publication in which to feature the work of Archival Kismet’s contributors. After connecting on Twitter about the possibility of collaboration, Thompson, Ansley, and the *Nursing Clio* editorial staff selected four conference participants to publish essays on their archival finds, ranging from letters written in 1910 by patients at the “Pennsylvania

School for Feeble Minded Children” to the dehydrated whale meat that fed British troops in South Asia in 1944. This collaboration is ongoing, with essays currently being edited from the second conference.

Ellen R. Feingold (National Museum of American History) and Leigh A. Gardner (London School of Economics) shared their experience collaborating on “Money, Exchange, and Authority in Africa,” a project that aims to enhance public access to primary sources and increase the dissemination of historical research. Gardner first approached Feingold, curator of the National Numismatic Collection, to inquire about having objects photographed to support her research project on Liberia’s economic and financial history. But this simple research request evolved into a project piloting a new way for academics and museum curators to work together on digitization. Feingold explained that museums typically digitize materials with the hope that those images will become the subject of new research. But in this case, research questions shaped the digitization process, and the pair created new digital collections with records and supplementary materials based on current scholarship. They then used those digital collections to produce teaching resources for K–12 classrooms to promote their wider use. This initial collaboration has expanded to collections related to South Africa and includes new funding and new partners.

Archival Kismet is a term used to describe the process of the historian being led by their sources.

Kristina Poznan (Univ. of Maryland) and Daryle Williams (Univ. of California, Riverside) discussed (at AHA22 Online and in New Orleans, respectively) *Enslaved: Peoples of the Historical Slave Trade*, the vast collaborative project of Matrix: Center for Digital Humanities and Social Sciences at Michigan State University (MSU), in partnership with the MSU Department of History, the College of Arts and Humanities at the University of Maryland, the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, and scholars at multiple institutions. They also discussed a planned joint issue between the *William and Mary Quarterly* and the *Journal of Slavery and Data Preservation*. At *Enslaved.org*, more than 20 historians, software developers, and research assistants are working to discover, connect, and visualize more than 600,000 people records and five million data points tied to individuals who were enslaved, owned slaves, were connected to the slave trade, and worked for emancipation. The project’s success relies not only on a wide-range of skill sets, Williams emphasized, but also on a shared



Marc Monaghan

sense of ethics “around inclusive and reparative scholarship about historical slavery and responsible stewardship of historical data about enslaved people in digital spaces,” which they have codified on their website.


In the discussion, panelists explored logistical challenges of collaborative work, such as securing financial support, managing large teams located at different institutions, and getting buy-in from departments and institutions. They highlighted how disparity in resources and support across institutions limit historians’ ability to pursue collaborative projects or to gain new skill sets to support such collaboration. They also offered examples of potential solutions, such as using the Smithsonian’s Learning Lab platform, participating in the Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture’s OI Coffeehouse, or taking advantage of a digital history drop-in session, like the one hosted by Anelise Shrout, Steven Mintz, and John Rosinbum at AHA22 Online or the upcoming “Ask a Digital Historian: Lightning Consults” online event hosted by the AHA Digital History Working Group.

It is essential, the roundtable emphasized, that historians continue to work both to improve access to resources and to

recognize and reward collaborative work as one of many forms of historical scholarship. Such partnerships not only are personally rewarding but, as these projects show, help historical scholars find new applications for their research, new audiences, and new opportunities.

—SJW

## ON TO PHILADELPHIA

The 136th annual meeting will be held January 5–8, 2023, in Philadelphia. As year three of the COVID-19 pandemic begins, the AHA is committed to designing online programming that will complement the AHA annual meeting and increase accessibility for historians across the country and the world. We look forward to convening in Philadelphia, but we also look forward to launching new online programming, which will build on what we have learned during AHA22 Online. We hope you will join us next year. 

MARY MANNING

# NATIONAL HISTORY DAY UNITES A COMMUNITY

*Ohio's Region 3 Contest*



National History Day at the regional level brings together student contestants with members of the community who act as consultants for their projects and judges for the contest.

*Sarah Brosious/Western Reserve Historical Society*

**I**N 1974, David Van Tassel, a professor at Case Western Reserve University (CWRU), became worried about increasing reports that students were learning less and less history and its related skills. Proposing that giving students opportunities to actively do research and interpret historical knowledge would increase their excitement about the subject, he organized the first National History Day (NHD) contest in Cleveland, Ohio, and invited local teachers to participate by asking their students to complete history research projects. What began as a small local event soon went statewide across Ohio, then national and international. According to the National History Day office, more than half a million students in grades 6–12 now present their research in exhibits, papers, performances, digital documentaries, and websites annually.

The contest that Van Tassel started is now the Region 3 Ohio History Day contest. Though it has changed substantially in its 48 years, it continues to draw hundreds of students to the Cleveland History Center of the Western Reserve Historical Society (WRHS) and CWRU each year. Region 3 is the largest of Ohio's 10 regional contests, with an infrastructure built by Van Tassel himself, subsequent coordinator John Vacha, and WRHS staff. Van Tassel's original motivation—broadening and deepening the history that students learn—remains relevant in 2022, when information literacy and historical thinking skills remain central to our civic needs.

NHD encourages contests to seek community connections that support their students, and Region 3's long history gives us a robust support system. The five counties that Region 3 encompasses have a vibrant community of historical societies, libraries, monuments, and other local history organizations across the greater Cleveland and greater Akron areas that connect regularly through state and local professional groups. Partnering with this community has been crucial to sustaining our vast, supportive infrastructure, and in turn, the contest provides a centerpiece that brings history lovers of all ages together at least once a year to serve as judges, mentors, and prize sponsors. As many as 13 of these organizations offer additional special prizes to the students participating in the contest that celebrate the depth of their engagement with particular subjects or themes, including local history. These partnerships help ensure that our contest meets its goals: to give students a meaningful sense of heritage and place, to foster an understanding of what careers in the history field look like, and to provide an opportunity for students to feel included in intellectual debates about history and how it is produced.

To engage partners even further, our region heartily encourages students to pursue topics that relate to both NHD's

theme (in 2022, *Debate & Diplomacy in History: Successes, Failures, Consequences*) and the complicated, often perplexing history of greater Cleveland. In one sense, this is admittedly selfish—we can encourage students and teachers to make use of the WRHS Library, a research facility with over 250,000 books and 10,000 linear feet of processed manuscript collections among its holdings related to the history of Northeast Ohio. We invite and train students to handle these precious primary sources in the hope that they will learn something of the work of researching and preserving history. For our staff, largely composed of people with graduate research experience, demystifying the research process is something that we hold dear. Students in Region 3 come to understand research libraries and public libraries with special collections as meaningful, yet accessible, repositories of knowledge rather than institutions reserved for the trained elite.

The contest brings history  
lovers of all ages together to  
serve as judges, mentors,  
and prize sponsors.

In another sense, though, we have seen firsthand how exploring local history topics gives students a sense of place and pride in their home—even when their topic covers one of Cleveland's notorious failures. A student conducting research on the 1969 Cuyahoga River fire will learn that it was not the first such fire, only the most famous, and then might connect this incident to the broader history of environmental activism and today's debates on climate change. A baseball fan might research Louis Sockalexis and the history of Native American players in Major League Baseball, fact-checking and contextualizing the immensely complicated debate behind the recent decision to rename the Cleveland baseball team. Because of Cleveland's wide-ranging histories in athletics, arts, and culture, students can pursue local topics that relate to their extracurricular interests, and so they become excited about the process through their subjects.

As the NHD slogan says, "It's not just a day—it's an experience!" Our community partnerships help elevate NHD beyond other projects that students are completing simply for a grade. Because teachers and students often begin the research process in September or October for the contest in March, students embrace doing history as a process with stages and multiple points for feedback and editing. In aiding that process, WRHS and our community partners fashion a calendar of events to help the students ramp up their skills through the fall and refine their projects in the winter. Some welcome all

participating students and teachers, such as Research Days held at the WRHS Library or the Cleveland Public Library. During these events, contest staff teach workshops on topics like conducting oral histories for research and locating and addressing bias in primary sources, while students have the chance to talk with librarians about creating a research strategy before digging into the sources available on-site.

## | Students have become experts.

The teachers themselves, an intensely creative and dedicated group, are the backbone of our contest. Some participated as Region 3 students and returned after college and graduate school to become Region 3 teachers. While some do projects as assignments in class, others gather enthusiastic kids for after-school clubs and independent study arrangements. Some have also created their own library partnerships to create lasting relationships between their students and library staff. For example, the after-school NHD club at Shaker Heights Middle School collaborates with their local public library each year. Students take a trip to the library, and the librarians explain how to access and use various materials they have on-site. Some schools also hold in-school celebrations of the students' work, bringing in staff and local history leaders to give feedback on projects, with enough time that students can use that feedback to revise before the contest. At these events, students and adults move quickly from being strangers to having passionate conversations. Students have become experts, often sharing detailed information that the adult history professionals may not know.

Our teachers and contest staff also connect students to people within the community who can serve as primary sources. Hearing firsthand accounts enlivens how students view and process information, while providing a more complex understanding of the narratives in their textbooks. Because Kent State University is nearby, the May 4, 1970, eruption between student protesters and the Ohio National Guard proves a popular topic. Teachers, parents, and contest staff often have worked their networks to find interview subjects who were present on May 4 and could give perspectives of the conflict. Another example, a staff favorite, is that one of our museum security guards, Paul Landis, served as a Secret Service agent to Jacqueline Kennedy. He witnessed President John F. Kennedy's assassination from the car following the presidential limousine. He is often willing to share his unique knowledge while providing students with a potentially life-changing experience.

Through all of these events, activities, and connections that lead up to the contest day, students refine skills that

contribute far beyond their ability to conduct historical research and present historical arguments. Some teachers use email communications to archives, interview subjects, or other institutions as one of their tiered assignments leading up to the project, giving students a framework for politely and expeditiously presenting themselves and their ideas while asking for assistance—skills they may one day use in contacting internship supervisors or applying for jobs. Surveys of student participants have identified time management and collaboration as other skills that they have gained through NHD projects.

Beyond those college and career skills, students find joy, a level of enthusiasm that lifts history beyond the dates-and-major-events approach we try to avoid in the classroom. While many students interview and learn about notable community members, others dig deep into their family heritage, interviewing relatives and sharing information during family events. For example, over two years and contests, a student of Latvian descent researched two crucial moments of cultural awakening in Latvia, one of which likely led to her ancestors leaving home for the United States. We see students choose topics that they discover on family vacations or that relate to the professions and interests of their parents and grandparents, coming to understand the lives of their ancestors better in the process. No matter how the placements shake out on contest day, students take these experiences forward into the rest of their lives.

Consequently, our regional contest day serves as a culmination of so many events and actions that occur in the preceding six months. We believe that any region, even without Van Tassel's legacy, can build such a community to enhance their participation in National History Day. When asked about her favorite part of the contest, one former Region 3 staffer said, "I saw these students when they came into the research days in the fall, cautious about their ideas, timid about sharing them, and unsure of their process. Then I saw them at the end when they had completed projects and demonstrated confidence in both themselves and their ideas to a room full of strangers. That, to me, is the benefit of NHD, wherever students go afterward." Because Region 3 students experience history as an active process that surrounds them, we know that NHD remains, after all these years, one of the strongest tools we have for ensuring that our students grow into adulthood understanding their responsibility to history and, in turn, how historical events continue to impact their lives. **P**

*Mary Manning is the PK–12 education coordinator at the Cleveland History Center of the Western Reserve Historical Society and coordinator of the Region 3 Ohio History Day contest. She tweets @lamaryanne.*

LEILA MARKOSIAN, KRISTEN SHAHVERDIAN, AND  
ALEXANDRA F. LEVY

## FLASHPOINTS

*Free Speech in American History, Culture, and Society*

Americans have declared free speech, as enshrined in the First Amendment, to be a national ideal since the nation's founding. Yet, in recent years, what constitutes free speech and how it should be protected has become a political battleground. Competing definitions of free speech have led to controversies over hate speech, disinformation, "cancel culture," academic freedom, protest and civil disobedience, and the role of a free press. These controversies have even led some Americans to question the viability of free speech as a unifying value in 21st-century America or to dismiss it as a smoke screen for hatred or a weapon of the powerful.

In response, PEN America and the American Historical Association have developed Flashpoints: Free Speech in American History, Culture, and Society. This project, funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH), is a robust nationwide public humanities program centered on the history of free speech in our democracy. Our goal is to widen recognition of the evolution of the First Amendment in ensuring free speech protections for all Americans and the essential role those protections play in a democratic society.

Americans have continually engaged in cultural clashes over the production and dissemination of ideas, art, and knowledge.

PEN America formed on April 19, 1922, in New York City. The intent, in the wake of World War I, was to foster international literary fellowship among writers that would transcend national and ethnic divides. PEN America's mission is to unite writers and their allies to celebrate creative expression and defend the liberties that make it possible.

Flashpoints is timed to mark PEN America's 100th anniversary in 2022 and the lead-up to the US sesquicentennial. The



series will take a retrospective look at the unique role of free speech in America's past and present. As part of the NEH's A More Perfect Union initiative, Flashpoints will interrogate the place of free speech in American history and contemporary issues by hosting public events and developing resources and guides for educators and the public.

The use of state power to censor creative and political expression, despite First Amendment protections, has been a recurring tension in American society. Americans have continually engaged in cultural clashes over the production and dissemination of ideas, art, and knowledge. The ideal of free speech has frequently been tested, contested, and denied, both to individuals and to groups. Barriers to accessing this right continue to reflect persistent inequities in our society. Flashpoints will reflect on free speech as an unfinished freedom: one that must be continuously expanded and perfected by dismantling barriers, to ensure that everyone has an equal right to speak and be heard.

This initiative draws on many historical precedents. The 1873 Comstock Laws barring the circulation of "obscene literature and articles of immoral use" in the mail, the 1950s Hollywood blacklist, and tensions surrounding the censoring of historical material in schools throughout the 20th and now 21st centuries represent but a few examples of challenges to freedom of speech. Contemporary calls for book boycotts continue a long—and frequently racialized—history of book banning. Many who lead or join these calls today have little sense of this history and ignore such bans' chilling effect on educators and students.

Flashpoints will highlight this history of censorship and ask questions about its consequences for sustaining civic culture. What are the legacies of laws that impeded the circulation of pamphlets about contraception in the 1910s? How has censorship in the McCarthy era influenced the production of theater, film, and television? How do arbitrary limits on academic inquiry or engagement with literature affect schools and

universities, inhibiting students' and scholars' room to explore? In sum, what are the interconnections between official government censorship and the informal censoriousness that can arise within private institutions and in the public sphere?

PEN America, in collaboration with the AHA, is organizing informed, historically grounded discussions to underscore how essential precepts of free speech have been to every aspect of American society, including creative expression, women's equality, civil rights, scientific advancement, social justice movements, and political change. Organized around thematic issues that span American history, Flashpoints will bring the tensions, contradictions, and benefits surrounding free speech to diverse public audiences.

Flashpoints will bring the tensions, contradictions, and benefits surrounding free speech to diverse public audiences.

We will delve into these questions and themes over the course of six public events around the country in 2022–23, featuring historians and other scholars. The first will be held in Chicago on May 18, 2022, with a discussion about “Free Speech and Political Dissent,” and next with “Free Speech and Civil Rights” on July 28, 2022, in Birmingham, Alabama. In the fall of 2022, the New York Public Library will co-host a discussion on “Free Speech and Banned Books.” The series continues with “Free Speech and Hollywood Censorship” at the Los Angeles Public Library and “Free Speech in Schools,” co-sponsored and hosted by the AHA at its annual meeting in Philadelphia. We finish in Tulsa, Oklahoma, by looking squarely at the issue of “Free Speech and Hate.” This event will explore the difficult balance of restricting hateful and derogatory speech while maintaining robust protections for free speech. Each location has been chosen either to take advantage of national convenings, like those of the AHA, or because of symbolic connections in these localities that resonate with historical flashpoints.

In addition to hosting these events, PEN America and the AHA will develop practical resources and discussion guides for educators and the public. Our online resource hub will include downloadable discussion guides, educational materials, cultural content intersecting literature with free speech advocacy, and professionally produced videos of each discussion in the series. Through direct engagement with local partners in target cities and the production of discussion guides and digital content, this pathbreaking series will

compel Americans to reflect on free speech and civil liberties.

Everything has a history. The story of our nation is intertwined with the fight for free speech. In weaving together distinct but connected historical moments, Flashpoints will cover a diverse range of eras and enable conversations that evoke myriad tensions among unity, pluralism, and dissent, all of which have been core to the application of the First Amendment. **P**

*Leila Markosian is the free expression and education program assistant at PEN America. Kristen Shahverdian is the program manager of free expression and education at PEN America. Alexandra F. Levy is communications manager at the AHA; she tweets @AlexandraFL21.*



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## 2022 AHA NOMINATIONS

The Nominating Committee for 2022–23, chaired by Carla Pestana (Univ. of California, Los Angeles), met virtually in February and offers the following candidates for offices of the Association that are to be filled in the election this year. Voting by AHA members will begin June 1.

### President

**Edward W. Muir Jr.**, Northwestern University (Clarence L. Ver Steeg Professor; medieval and early modern Europe, religion, urban, legal and criminal)

### President-elect

**Thavolia Glymph**, Duke University (Peabody Family Distinguished Professor of History and Professor of Law; slavery, emancipation, plantation societies and economies, gender, women)

**Earl Lewis**, University of Michigan (Thomas C. Holt Distinguished University Professor of History, Afroamerican and African Studies and Public Policy; race and ethnicity, US, politics and power)

### Professional Division

#### Vice President

**Anne Hyde**, University of Oklahoma (professor; 19th-century North American West, Indigenous America, race)

**Maria Montoya**, New York University (Global Network Associate Professor) and NYU Shanghai (dean of Arts and Sciences; US, American West, labor, environmental)

#### Councilor

**Tony Frazier**, North Carolina Central University (associate professor; social and legal history of blacks in 18th-century in Great Britain, Atlantic slavery and emancipation, African American)

**Mike Rattanasengchanh**, Midwestern State University (assistant professor; US-Thai public diplomacy)

### Research Division

#### Councilor

**Maureen Elgersman Lee**, College of William & Mary (Mellon Engagement Coordinator for African American Heritage and Bray School Lab Director; African American community, Black women in Canada and Caribbean, slavery)

**Erin Greenwald**, Louisiana Endowment for the Humanities (vice president, Public Programs; French Atlantic world, colonial Louisiana)

### Teaching Division

#### Councilor

**Hanael Bianchi**, Howard Community College (professor and chair; St George's Day in English history, Catholic culture in modern America)

**Charles Zappia**, San Diego Mesa College (retired dean; corporatization of higher education, community college historians, transformation of work and the American labor movement)

### Committee on Committees

**Rashauna Johnson**, University of Chicago (associate professor; Atlantic slavery and emancipation, 19th-century African diaspora, US South, urban and regional)

**Caitlin Rosenthal**, University of California, Berkeley (associate professor; political economy of slavery, US social and economic)

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## Nominating Committee

### Slot 1

**Carlos Kevin Blanton**, Texas A&M University (professor; Chicana/o history, education, civil rights, Texas)

**Marcus Nevius**, University of Rhode Island (associate professor; African Americans/slave resistance/slavery-based economies/abolition during the Age of Revolutions)

### Slot 2

**Elisabeth McMahon**, Tulane University (associate professor; African slavery/emancipation/development, histories of gender and emotion in East Africa)

**Bianca Murillo**, California State University, Dominguez Hills (professor; modern Africa, global capitalism/economies/markets, race and gender studies)

### Slot 3

**Mou Banerjee**, University of Wisconsin–Madison (assistant professor; modern South Asia, politics of religion in colonial India)

**Kaya Şahin**, Indiana University (associate professor; early modern Ottoman Empire, history writing, governance, religious/confessional identity, ceremonies and rituals)

Nominations may also be made by petition; each petition must carry the signatures of 100 or more members of the Association in good standing and indicate the particular vacancy for which the nomination is intended. Nominations by petition must be in the hands of the Nominating Committee on or before May 1 and should be sent to the AHA office at 400 A St. SE, Washington, DC 20003. All nominations must be accompanied by certification of willingness of the nominee to serve if elected. In distributing the annual ballot to the members of the Association, the Nominating Committee shall present and identify such candidates nominated by petition along with its own candidates. **P**

*Liz Townsend is manager, data administration and integrity, at the AHA and the staff member for the Nominating Committee.*



## Richard S. Dunn

1928–2022

Historian of Early America

At the beginning of the pandemic, Richard S. Dunn's daughters Rebecca and Cecilia whisked him from his condo in Cambridge, Massachusetts, to join Rebecca's family in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. It was there that he died on January 24, 2022, with his daughters at his side, after a COVID-19 infection. He was 93 years old.

Richard was born and raised in Minnesota. In 1950, he earned his BA from Harvard University, and in 1955, he received his PhD from Princeton University, where he studied with Wesley Frank Craven. He joined the history department at the University of Pennsylvania in 1957 and retired in 1996 as the Roy F. and Jeannette P. Nichols Professor of American History Emeritus. A teacher, scholar, mentor, editor, institution builder, and administrator, Richard flourished in collaborative endeavors.

Richard ranged widely around the English colonial world in his geographic and thematic interests. His many authored and edited books include *Puritans and Yankees: The Winthrop Dynasty of New England, 1630–1717* (Princeton Univ. Press, 1962), selected by the publisher for its Legacy Library, and *Sugar and Slaves: The Rise of the Planter Class in the English West Indies, 1624–1713* (Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1972), which remains a foundational work in Caribbean history. With his wife, the historian Mary Maples Dunn, he co-edited the multivolume *Papers of William Penn* (Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 1981–87). The result of decades of research and analysis, his final book was *A Tale of Two Plantations: Slave Life and Labor in Jamaica and Virginia* (Harvard Univ. Press, 2014). Dunn remained an active scholar to the end, reflecting critically on *Sugar and Slaves* during a workshop on the volume in June 2021 and completing an abridged classroom version of *Two Plantations* shortly before his death.

For students and colleagues alike, Richard modeled a career characterized by humanity, integrity, and generosity. When Mary became president of Smith College in 1985, Richard commuted between Philadelphia and Northampton, showing what an egalitarian partnership might look like when there

were few such models available. After Richard's retirement, he joined forces with Mary to serve as co-executive officers of the American Philosophical Society from 2002 to 2007.

Richard was a thoughtful, demanding, and observant graduate educator. He worried that the most challenging and isolating period for graduate students was the return from archival research and the transition to writing. This insight, along with his desire to promote the work of others, his commitment to the field, and his diverse intellectual and administrative talents, converged in the foundation of the McNeil (formerly Philadelphia) Center for Early American Studies in 1978. The center grew from modest beginnings, with Richard coming to seminars laden with shopping bags of chips and wine for the essential postseminar social hour. Thanks to Richard's efforts, Robert L. McNeil Jr. became the center's primary benefactor, making it possible for the center to find a permanent home in its own bespoke building. By the time Richard retired as director in 2000, 90 scholars had passed through the center on dissertation fellowships.

As a mentor and colleague, Richard was generous and attentive, sharing research notes alongside advice. Richard possessed a rare ability to mentor graduate students from other universities and to appreciate each for their distinctive interests and talents. He always had a solicitous eye for the shy newcomer standing awkwardly in the corner. He hosted graduate seminars, evening salons, and countless dinner parties at his apartment in the Dorchester, where he uncorked many a wine bottle and politely overlooked any number of gaffes. In 2017, the AHA recognized Richard with its Award for Scholarly Distinction, an event he celebrated in characteristic style by hosting a dinner for students, former fellows, colleagues, and family.

Richard enjoyed travel, theater, music, a good cocktail, and time with his family. He was a talented artist whose drawings bring three generations of Winthrops to life in *Puritans and Yankees*. Lesser known is Richard's foray into the McNeil Center's festive annual tradition of sundries and notions. In 1990, two fellows persuaded him to turn his talents to tote bag design, and Richard obliged, producing an image of William Penn proclaiming, "Damn, I'm good!"

Richard is survived by his daughters and their families and an extensive international network of colleagues, McNeil Center fellows, and students.

Alison Games  
Georgetown University

Photo: Jeanne Campbell



## Maya K. Peterson

1980–2021

Environmental  
Historian of Central  
Asia; AHA Member

Maya K. Peterson, a pioneering environmental historian of central Asia and associate professor at the University of California, Santa Cruz, passed away suddenly on June 16, 2021, at age 41. Her death was followed a day later by the passing of her newborn daughter, Priya Luna.

Maya grew up in South Hadley, Massachusetts, the only child of Mark and Indira Viswanathan Peterson, both professors at Mount Holyoke College. She embraced the liberal arts by attending Swarthmore College, where she majored in history and made lifelong friends on the rugby team and beyond. Maya then earned a master's in regional studies of Russia, eastern Europe, and central Asia at Harvard University, where she first became interested in central Asia. She stayed on at Harvard for her doctoral studies, earning her PhD in 2011 before moving to UC Santa Cruz a year later.

Maya's book, *Pipe Dreams: Water and Empire in Central Asia's Aral Sea Basin* (Cambridge Univ. Press, 2019), stands as a milestone in the growing field of central Asian environmental history. By telling the history of water management in the Aral Sea basin from the 1840s to the 1930s, Maya recast Russian and Soviet imperial histories from their environmental frontiers. In Maya's view, the many river diversion plans, cotton-growing schemes, and overambitious irrigation projects in the region were part of a common Russian imperial project to turn this alleged wasteland frontier into a productive agricultural landscape. Maya was careful to center the native populations, who often resisted, in ways big and small, the efforts to make them disciplined, loyal subjects of newly irrigated lands. She captured vividly the human cost of these engineering projects. She also highlighted the continuities of environmental imperialism across the czarist-Soviet rupture. While it is too soon to judge fully, her book is poised to shape scholarship on the Russian and Soviet projects in central Asia and on environmental history in frontiers.

In just under a decade at UC Santa Cruz, Maya became a fixture on campus. As a historian of an underrepresented area,

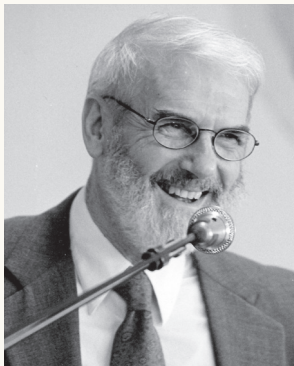
she embraced teaching a millennium of history and supervised a bevy of independent studies. She advised multiple award-winning undergraduate theses, supervised two graduate students, and served on five graduate committees. All the while, she nurtured a second intellectual home at the Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society in Munich, where she was a fellow, and she traveled far and wide, presenting work in Alaska, Estonia, China, and many places in between. Through this work, she steadily built global scholarly communities and nurtured wider interest in central Asia, helping to expand the field into issues of race, medicine, biopolitics, and the environment. Her ongoing projects included a study on the Soviet steppes as a curative climate and a history of the role of fermented mare's milk in central Asian cultures.

Maya was an adventurous soul. She packed more into her too-short life than many will achieve in double the years. History for her was not an isolated passion but rather her access point to the wondrous diversity of our planet, which she savored with élan. She was a constant, restless traveler. She visited 34 countries on four continents. But it was the kind of travel she undertook, from mountain climbing with friends to solo adventures deep into rural central Asia, that revealed her unquenchable thirst for new experiences. Everywhere she went, she collected friends and forged communities. People were magnetically drawn to her enthusiasm, her unshakable equanimity and good humor, and her utter lack of pretension.

The communities that Maya built were in evidence at a virtual celebration of her life on December 16, 2021, hosted by Harvard's Davis Center for Russian and Eurasian Studies. Over 140 people attended. Speaker after speaker elucidated how her scholarly contributions were inextricable from the lives she touched. As one colleague put it, Maya was "a deeply kindred spirit with whom to devour the world." Memorial and scholarship funds have been established in Maya's honor at UC Santa Cruz; the Association for Slavic, East European, and Eurasian Studies; and South Hadley High School. She is survived by her parents and her partner, A. Marm Kilpatrick.

Brendan Karch  
Belmont, Massachusetts

*Photo courtesy Carolin Roeder*



## Jonathan Spence

1936–2021

Historian of China;  
Former AHA President

Jonathan Spence, a pathbreaking historian of China and former AHA president, died on December 25, 2021, from complications of Parkinson's. Jonathan received his PhD from Yale University in 1965 and taught there until retiring in 2008. His numerous honors included a MacArthur fellowship and 10 honorary degrees. His many books, typically told through a biographical lens, showed us Ming intellectuals, Qing emperors, and 20th-century revolutionaries but also brought to life forgotten people; one celebrated book, *The Death of Woman Wang* (Viking Press, 1978), used just a few fragmentary sources to re-create the world of a peasant woman murdered by her husband in an impoverished 17th-century county. His wonderfully readable textbook, *The Search for Modern China* (Norton, 1990), emerged from his lectures in what was, year after year, one of Yale's most popular courses.

At a 2009 conference honoring Jonathan's career, several of his former graduate students raised an odd question: Had we been scared of Jonathan while studying with him? Nobody thought that he ever tried to be intimidating, but some nonetheless recalled that they couldn't help being overwhelmed by Jonathan's accomplishments, feeling they would never measure up. What spared the rest of us, we concluded, was that what Jonathan did was so inimitable that nobody could expect us to match it—leaving us free to be whatever kinds of historians we could be, with the full support of an adviser who never gave any hint of wanting anything else. Jonathan's enthusiastic engagement with dissertations ranging from art and philosophy to number-crunching social and economic history was, I now realize, extraordinary, but at the time I took it for granted: that was, apparently, what great historians did.

This seemed to flow naturally from Jonathan's positive attitude toward all sorts of things—from great poetry to less-than-great pizza—rather than being something he explicitly theorized. But it did, I think, reflect a view that historians, like novelists, should re-create a world, and that whatever would have mattered to somebody in that world was worth exploring. He wrote and taught history to create empathetic

understanding, and he knew that fostering such understanding across the great gulf in time and space separating his readers and listeners from most of his subjects required not stripping out the “exotic” to get at something more “universal”—much less isolating independent variables—but showing how, since we all live in particular times and places, what we perceive as the exotic and the universal are always intertwined. For the same reason, Jonathan was committed to what one might call 360-degree teaching, aiming for the kind of fully rounded understanding that history—being, like Jonathan, eternally eclectic—prizes. While not a particularly directive adviser, he did insist on broad preparation. He did not want students neglecting either “old” fields like military history or “trendy” ones like gender history, and I think he was especially pleased when somebody brought seemingly disparate fields together (as the history of masculinity might link these examples).

This commitment to thick description made Jonathan very much a part of his scholarly generation's project of creating what Paul Cohen called “China-centered” Chinese history. True, he wrote more about individuals than about the big trends of demography, commercialization, and so forth that his contemporaries used to give Chinese history a Chinese motor (replacing “Western impact” as the source of Chinese modernity). True, also, that foreigners featured prominently in his work. But he always emphasized the Chinese context within which they acted and how it shaped them (while questioning how much they shaped China). So, too, he emphasized understanding how these foreigners looked to their Chinese counterparts at least as much as the easier task of reporting how China looked to them.

Fifty years ago, very few Westerners had experience in China, spoke Chinese, or read much from there. Of course, even scholarship like Jonathan's, which reached audiences far beyond the academy, is only a small part of why so many Westerners now know so much more about China. But it was hardly inevitable that geopolitical and economic entanglement alone would stimulate serious engagement with Chinese culture, or that many people's engagements would go beyond seeking pragmatic, managerially useful knowledge (already an ambitious goal) to also seek intellectual enrichment and perspective on their own cultures. Jonathan did as much to encourage that broader, deeper engagement as any one person could.

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Kenneth Pomeranz  
University of Chicago



## Tyler Stovall

1954–2021

Historian of France;  
Former AHA President

On December 10, 2021, Tyler Stovall suddenly and unexpectedly passed away in New York City. He spent most of his career in the University of California system. He held a Berkeley postdoc from 1984 to 1986 and then was a professor at Santa Cruz from 1988 to 2001. From 2001 to 2015, he served on the Berkeley faculty, entering administration in 2006. Stovall returned to Santa Cruz as dean of humanities from 2015 to 2020. In 2020, he became dean of graduate studies at Fordham University. Despite his administrative duties, Stovall remained a prolific historian and a passionate teacher.

Stovall was one of the first historians to engage in a critical analysis of race in France, challenging the self-congratulatory French myth that racism was an Anglo-Saxon problem. Arguing that history could not exist within the framework of the nation-state, he placed France in a world historical context. While trained in the late 1970s and early 1980s as a social historian of white industrial workers, Stovall pioneered the history of nonwhite people in France. His best-known work is *Paris Noir: African Americans in the City of Light* (Houghton Mifflin, 1996). The lively and entertaining narrative recounts how Black American soldiers in the First World War discovered a white world free of Jim Crow. Stovall contrasts how Paris welcomed generations of Black Americans with how migrants from French colonies in Africa were (and continue to be) subject to various forms of prejudice, repression, and violence. After decades of historians either ignoring or romanticizing the French colonies, Stovall played a crucial role in the “colonial turn” in French history, an explosion of critical empire studies. Stovall co-edited volumes including *French Civilization and Its Discontents: Nationalism, Colonialism, and Race* (Rowman and Littlefield, 2003); *The Color of Liberty: Histories of Race in France* (Duke Univ. Press, 2003); and *Black France/France Noire: The History and Politics of Blackness* (Duke Univ. Press, 2012), which directly challenged older scholarship and scholars.

Stovall was a gifted lecturer who, at the age of 18, gave his first public talk at an antiwar demonstration in his

hometown of Columbus, Ohio. At UC Santa Cruz, he enthralled undergraduates with his ability to blend sophisticated historical analysis with lively and often humorous vignettes. Always erudite but never pretentious, he loved to drop lyrics from Bertolt Brecht and references to Hollywood classics into both class lectures and casual conversations. Stovall claimed that his teaching style was inspired by his graduate school mentor, Harvey Goldberg (Univ. of Wisconsin–Madison), who combined political passion with the study of history. In turn, Stovall was the primary supervisor for six PhDs and sat on some two dozen dissertation committees, leaving his mark on a new generation of historians of France and African American history. As an administrator, Stovall worked to support historically underrepresented faculty and students long before the phrase “diversity, equity, and inclusion” became common parlance.

In 2017, Stovall served as president of the AHA. In his *Perspectives* columns and his presidential address, Stovall presented the central argument of his last book, *White Freedom: The Racial History of an Idea* (Princeton Univ. Press, 2021), which examines the intersections of white supremacy and political privilege in France and the United States. The book is a culmination of the historian and the man who was Tyler Stovall. His final work critiques the global history of white supremacy, arguing that French and American notions of freedom were built on the unfreedom of people of color.

In addition to his scholarly excellence and professional achievements, Stovall was nothing short of a charming conversationalist and wonderful friend. He was always the person to chat with at a conference reception, and he delighted in taking his former students to lunch. With a mischievous sense of humor, he loved to poke fun at the hypocrisy of the powerful, be they in an ivory tower or the White House. Despite his success, he was humble and self-effacing. Stovall was above all deeply committed to liberation struggles, be they rooted in class, racial, or gender dynamics.

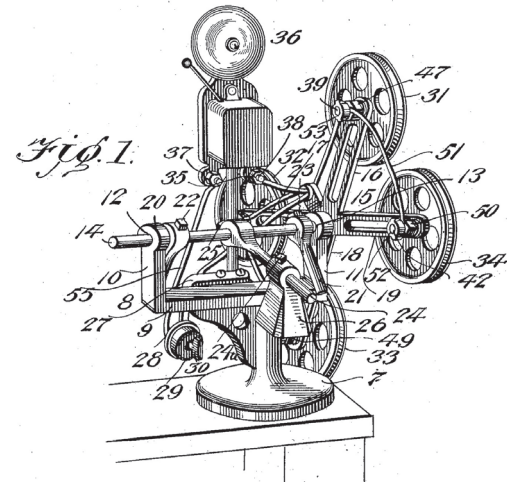
Tyler Stovall should be remembered as a scholar who firmly believed that the writing and teaching of history was a political act. He is survived by his wife, Dr. Denise Herd, and his son, Justin.

Michael G. Vann  
California State University, Sacramento

*Photo courtesy Carolyn Lagattuta,  
University of California, Santa Cruz*

ALEXANDRA HUI

# ELEVATOR SOUNDS



Elevators are inherently noisy contraptions. The conveyance machinery hisses and whirs, bells ding in anticipation of arrival. Above it all, *the music* cheerfully burbles along. The sounds of the elevator mechanism pulling or pushing the cab via hydraulic, electric, or vacuum power have been slowly but deliberately hushed since the introduction of the first passenger elevator in New York City in 1857. Spurred by increased regulation, new safety measures, and the ubiquity of their use, a growing trust that an elevator would not plunge riders to their deaths may have reduced the need for attentive listening to the conveyance system. Nevertheless, other normative listening behaviors of maximizing personal space, facing the doors, and engaging in minimal conversation were established by the early 1870s and continue to this day. So what are passengers still listening to?

In-cab operators, common through World War II, would have greeted passengers and perhaps made small talk. The patent record indicates that the jangle of bells was added early on to help operators anticipate arrival. Push-button controls introduced at the end of the 19th century, as well as safety sounds to indicate opening and closing doors, expanded the bell-listening audience to include passengers. But what about the music?

Elevator histories and histories of background music suggest that music was initially introduced to cabs to calm passengers by distracting them from and concealing the sounds of the conveyance mechanism. There is, however, nothing in the patent record to indicate this purpose. In-cab speaker systems were developed in the 1930s, around the same time that music was first piped in to public spaces. Systems specifically designed to play music in work settings and via public address systems, informed by psychoacoustic studies and complete with their own subscription services and aesthetics, like Muzak and RCA Victor, became prevalent after World War II. This background,

“easy listening” music, as Muzak advertisements described it, was “to be heard, not listened to.” It gained a distinctive aesthetic that was upbeat, with bright instrumental versions of show tunes, jazz standards, and light swing or polka. Such “elevator music” became associated with the strange liminal space of the elevator itself, a place of waiting, of cheating death, of uncanniness as a passenger recognized the melody of a familiar song, stopped hearing, and started listening.

By the 1980s, these sounds of the elevator became shorthand for tackiness and shtick, to be mined for comedic effect, perhaps best captured in the cutting between zany bedlam of the police and army descending on Chicago City Hall and the calm of the elevator, complete with “The Girl from Ipanema” wafting in and out, in *The Blues Brothers*. (The runner-up would be the parody of this scene in the *Star Wars*-themed *Family Guy* episode in which a tinny bossa nova version of “The Imperial March” bops along in the background.)

Elevator music did not survive the mockery of it; presently most elevators are, other than the indicator dings, silent. The behavioral expectations of the elevator carry on, however, offering the historian some clues about the way silence was understood—and embodied—at the end of the 20th century. And the music itself lives on outside the elevator, as a distinctive aesthetic, now associated with the very specific experience of waiting—in a lobby or on hold on the phone—for human contact. **P**

Alexandra Hui is associate professor of history at Mississippi State University.

Image: J. King, elevator bell signal, US Patent 828,746, filed May 23, 1905, and issued August 14, 1906.

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