

*The newsmagazine of the American Historical Association*

# PERSPECTIVES ON HISTORY

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May 2024



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## FEATURES

### ARE WE THE VIRUS? .....15

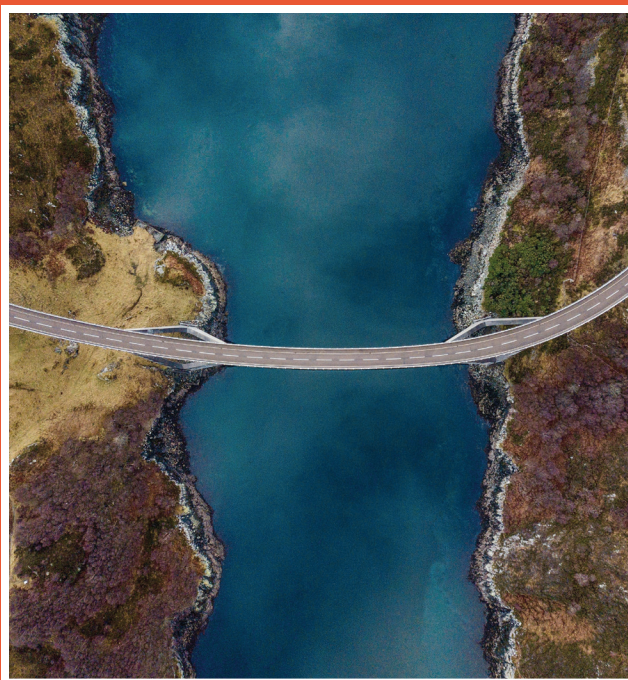
*What a Meme Reveals about Planetary Health*

CAITLIN KOSSMAN

### SMALL ORGANIZATIONS, BIG IMPACTS .... 18

*Three AHA SHARP Grant Projects*

DANA SCHAFER, COLIN WINDHORST, BRENT D. GLASS, AND  
PATRICIA SCHECHTER



### ON THE COVER

The gentle curve of the Drochaid a' Chaolais Chumhaing, a bridge across Scotland's Loch a' Chàirn Bhàin, does not take the most direct route across the water. The bridge's designers considered it more important that the bridge fit with its surroundings, that it cause as little a change as possible in its environment. But despite their efforts, humans' impact on the environment is evident. Environments are spaces in which humans, plants, or even ideas can cross paths. They contain entangled networks of relationships and meanings. And they can be mapped, described, diagrammed, and explained. But which environments we choose to map—and what we do with those explanations—depends on both the perspective we want to represent and the one we bring to the table.

*Photo: kbrembo/Unsplash. Image cropped.*

### 3 | FROM THE EDITOR

Defining History's Future

L. RENATO GRIGOLI

### 4 | LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### 5 | FROM THE PRESIDENT

Archives of a Different Sort

THAVOLIA GLYPH

### 7 | FROM THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

What's Being Taught?

JAMES GROSSMAN

### 10 | NEWS

Are You Sitting Up Straight?

LAURA ANSLEY

Advocacy Briefs

REBECCA L. WEST

### 25 | AHA ACTIVITIES

Call Me a Podcaster, If You Must

DANIEL J. STORY

From Coding Empire to Globalizing  
Publics

MARK PHILIP BRADLEY

Supporting History Department  
Chairs

DANA SCHAFER

### 31 | IN MEMORIAM

### 33 | LONG OVERDUE

### 35 | AHA CAREER CENTER

### 36 | EVERYTHING HAS A HISTORY

Asylum Ruins

WHITNEY E. BARRINGER

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**FPO**

L. RENATO GRIGOLI

# DEFINING HISTORY'S FUTURE

## *A Call for Perspectives Articles*

Every June, I go into the AHA job ads database and access the data for the last year, the first step in writing the AHA's annual report on academic hiring. For someone who completed his PhD in 2021—in the midst of what I, having an affinity for understatement, called a “sizable dip in job postings”—the process of writing the report is a very strange and oddly personal experience.

This year, as I began to reflect on what has been recently said about academic hiring as preparatory research, I came across something unexpected: Christopher Newfield's 2023 presidential address to the Modern Language Association. Newfield argues that, following World War II, the explicit purpose of the American academy was to maintain and propagate US technological, cultural, and capital supremacy. The humanities were a willing and active participant in this endeavor and thus were accorded cultural capital in proportion to that participation. Since the end of the Cold War, he says, the humanities no longer provide an answer to societal needs, broadly writ, and are therefore no longer seen by either the public or funding agencies as legitimate *research* endeavors. But, he argues, there is still a public need for the research the humanities generate, and so the salvation of the humanities depends on reversing this perception. That is, humanists must either show how their work is still relevant or make a convincing argument that it should be.

If you think Newfield's proposed solution sounds a bit presentist—whatever you mean by that—when applied to the discipline and practice of history, I think you're right. But it's one that acknowledges another truth: historians have always been presentist. My own field of medieval history was certainly an active and willing participant in furthering the cause of US cultural supremacy during the Cold War, as anyone familiar with the life and career of Joseph Strayer already knows, and medieval studies is hardly unique. Presentism is a tool like any other—presentist concerns can generate rigorous scholarship just as readily as they can distort it—and not one historians can readily discard. After all, as I said in my first column, the

master quality of the historian is the faculty of helping others understand what Marc Bloch called “the continuing entanglement of past and present.”

The AHA is invested in broadening the landscape and influence of historical scholarship to ensure historical knowledge is understood as critical to the functioning of our modern society. For example, in January 2023, the AHA Council issued *Guidelines for Broadening the Definition of Historical Scholarship*. These guidelines provide a framework by which to evaluate a wider variety of scholarly production for the purposes of promotion and academic tenure. They make clear that “remain[ing] wedded to conventional boundaries of scholarship and methods of evaluation” puts history at risk of “losing ground as a discipline in an environment with so many venues for intellectual and civic contribution.” It also risks, the guidelines state, “undervaluing important work being done *within* our discipline.”

I would argue that valuing among ourselves this broader range of scholarly activities is one way that we can show how our work deserves broader societal respect. It is one part of the grand rhetorical argument that I believe historians must make for the continued importance of our discipline in order to defend and secure the place of history in the face of political, cultural, and social headwinds.

Historians engage in a wide variety of activities aimed at many audiences, and there are many *other* ways we can show this. *Perspectives* is looking to publish a series of articles to make this argument to a popular audience. And so whether you're a podcaster, museum professional, #twitterstorian, assistant professor, all of the above, or anything in between, tell us: Why is what you do scholarship? **P**

*L. Renato Grigoli is editor of Perspectives on History.*

*Drafts should be no more than 650 words. For guidelines, visit [historians.org/perspectives/submit](https://historians.org/perspectives/submit).*



## TO THE EDITOR


A recent rereading of the *Perspectives* issue on retirement (May 2022) has led me to think about my own position. I'm retiring at the end of this semester, after over 60 years of teaching at four different institutions, all of them interesting. I've had a great time. Always loved teaching, despite not getting into it until late in grad school, and I like it still, even though some student issues have become more complex than they were when I started. (And I am not sorry to escape ChatGPT.) The chance to work on a variety of research topics has been consistently intriguing as well as challenging. I agree with the AHA mantra—everything has a history—and have tried to do my bit (and indeed will keep doing so even in retirement).

But I do regret having to step back from full engagement as a historian at a time when the discipline is so beleaguered, and this prompts a few thoughts. Most of the problem is not of our doing. It results from a changing economy and rising student costs (for which historians bear little responsibility), plus the dogged misbelief that history graduates do not get good jobs. It follows as well from our partisan struggles, where most historians align on one side of the culture wars and not only lose support but draw positive animus from the other side—compounding the debate over economic utility. I don't think we're wrong to be on that side, though we may sometimes rub it in a bit, but it adds to our woes.

Yet I do think we, as historians, bear some small responsibility for our current dilemma, and while my thoughts are hardly original, I use the occasion of retirement to venture another statement. With many important exceptions, we as a discipline have fallen in love with too many small, specialized topics. We write too much for each other, compounding this frequently with theoretical constructs that largely repel the uninitiated. With important exceptions, we hew too fiercely not only to single-region frameworks but to rather rigid periodization specialties.

We need to be bolder. We need to embrace discussions with other disciplines, and not just in the humanities—we need to return to more interaction with the social sciences. We need more comparative work, building on but not being confined by our tendency toward intense regional specialization. And we need more efforts (and again, there are some great examples already) to reach out to that elusive beast, the general reading or podcast-consuming public.

My biggest hope, of course, is that we preserve opportunities for excitement and joy, for learning new things about the past and new ways to apply this knowledge to issues in the world today. We clearly need a wider public capacity to think historically, and this can only come from a combination of vigorous teaching combined with ambitious scholarship and communication. I wish we were farther along. But we are invited to explore virtually any significant aspect of the human condition, and this remains a privilege and a challenge.

 PETER N. STEARNS  
George Mason University



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THAVOLIA GLYMPH

## ARCHIVES OF A DIFFERENT SORT

*Marking the Battlefields of War*

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

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



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

What insights might be gained if historians studied battlefields on plantations or in refugee camps as they do Gettysburg?

I think, too, of the Combahee Ferry Raid, remembered today primarily for the rescue of more than 700 enslaved people by Harriet Tubman and US soldiers. It is rarely mentioned that it was also a battlefield—and a mappable one—even though US forces that included Black soldiers burned several plantations, mills, and rice crops, and enslaved people fought Confederate soldiers who tried to prevent their escape. And even though an officer admitted that Confederate forces had allowed "the

enemy to come up to them unawares, and then retreated without offering resistance or firing a gun, allowing a parcel of negro wretches, calling themselves soldiers, with a few degraded whites, to march unmolested, with the incendiary torch, to rob, destroy, and burn a large section of the country.”

## These battlegrounds are largely invisible today, literally and figuratively.

We are talking here about a battlefield where Confederate cavalry used “negro dogs” to prevent Black people from escaping, where a Confederate officer stated in his report of the affair that a “negro girl” had come within yards of reaching a US boat and making it to freedom but that he ordered her to stop and, when she refused, shot her; she got up and ran back to the others who had also been thwarted in their attempt to board the boat. Despite the bungled Confederate response to the US raid, the vast majority of Black people on the Combahee River plantations remained enslaved. Some 30 people from Charles Lowndes’s Oakland plantation were captured by a company of Confederate soldiers as they tried to make their escape. At Field’s Point, the Confederate commander “discovered a good many negroes standing in the edge of the swamp, commanded by one white man” and “ordered the artillery to fire into them,” which it did “several times.” At the Heyward plantation, Confederate forces fired on the “stolen negroes” fleeing to the US gunboat *Blake*. In the aftermath of the raid, Confederate pickets in the area were reinforced, a move slaveholder Mary Elliott praised. “I am very glad to hear of the new picket arrangement for guarding the negroes and trust it may arrest desertion on their part—it would be ruinous to have more of such raids as the [Combahee],” she wrote.

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

official maps of the war, we turn in many cases to maps informed by Black people’s knowledge of the cultural and topographical features of the land. Or, in the case of refugee camps, we have after-battle reports that make it possible to map this landscape of war.

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

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

*Thavolia Glymph is president of the AHA.*

JAMES GROSSMAN

## WHAT'S BEING TAUGHT?

### *Mapping the Landscape of US History Education*

The AHA has vigorously opposed legislative efforts across the nation to discourage, harass, and threaten US history teachers by limiting the use of particular words, ideas, concepts, and sources. This legislation rests on assumptions about what *is* being taught in our nation's classrooms and narrow-minded notions about what *should* be taught. The AHA's work has focused on principles of academic freedom, support of the professional integrity of our members and colleagues, and careful evidence-based arguments that reflect consensus among nearly all professional historians. What has been missing is evidence regarding the very premises of the legislation and the rhetoric surrounding it. In reality, what does the secondary US history curriculum look like? And what do teachers actually bring to their classrooms?

We now have that evidence.

First, however, as a historian obsessed with context and inclined toward narrative modes, I'll explain how we got here. Everything has a history, including the AHA's Mapping the Landscape of Secondary US History Education initiative.

In 2020, the now former president of the United States used Mount Rushmore on the Fourth of July as a backdrop to accuse our nation's teachers of professional malfeasance, intellectual dishonesty, and betrayal of our patriotic responsibilities. "Our children," he said, "are taught in school to hate their own country and to believe that the men and women who built it were not heroes but that were villains. The radical view of American history is a web of lies—all perspective is removed, every virtue is obscured, every motive is twisted, every fact is distorted, and every flaw is magnified until the history is purged and the record is disfigured beyond all recognition."

On that September 17, Constitution Day, his administration hosted the White House Conference on American History to expand and deepen this allegation, legitimating it by using the National Archives building to formally host the

conference but with no input or participation from the agency's staff. The AHA, in a statement signed by 46 scholarly organizations, deplored the conference's distorted caricatures of history education as a "tendentious use of history and history education to stoke politically motivated culture wars."

Beyond anecdotal evidence, no one actually knew what was happening in classrooms.

This, too, has a history. A decade ago, I explained in an **op-ed** that the "debate over what is taught in our schools is hardly new." A substantial historiography—including books by Frances FitzGerald, Diane Ravitch, Jonathan Zimmerman, and Donald Yacovone, among many others—explains the long history of conflicts over how we teach our nation's past. But in recent years, something new has happened: state legislators began introducing laws prohibiting use of the materials and concepts that were denounced in the September 17 conference and the subsequent President's Advisory 1776 Commission report. Although the newly elected president withdrew that report immediately upon taking office in January 2021, it has lived on in legislation. Bills introduced in legislatures across the country refer to "divisive concepts" that must be stricken from history classrooms, usually including critical race theory and specific resources such as curriculum materials produced as part of the *New York Times*' 1619 Project.

Most of the legislative action and administrative mandates initially focused on secondary schools—although with important implications for higher ed as well. I described this landscape in my September 2022 column, and the AHA's letters and statements have intervened in 22 states, emphasizing the legislation's impact on the quality of history education and the importance of teachers' professionalism.

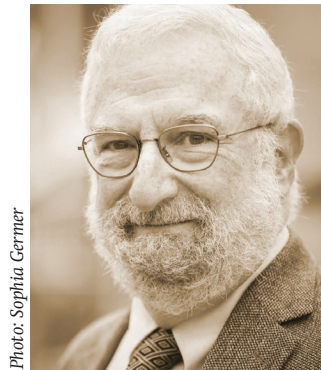


Photo: Sophia Germer

We had not, however, been able to address the essential premise of the legislation: that teachers are introducing critical race theory or other concepts specified in these bills. Nor had we been able to say what materials teachers actually use in their classrooms. There was no factual basis for the contentious debates over history education that have attracted attention from state legislators, school boards, parents, and media across the country. Beyond anecdotal evidence, no one actually knew what was happening in classrooms in different parts of the country. Lots of heat, not much light.

Until now.

An AHA research team has read social studies standards for every state and interviewed hundreds of teachers and administrators. Over approximately two years, these four historians—Whitney E. Barringer, Lauren Brand, Nicholas Kryczka, and Scot McFarlane—have collected instructional materials from districts, teachers, and publishers. This documentation includes urban centers, suburbs, small towns, and rural districts. To find out what teachers are actually doing in their classrooms and how they prepare for

that work, we contracted with the National Opinion Research Center to survey thousands of middle and high school US history educators across a sample of nine states.

Our key finding is clear: if a typical American history classroom exists, its teachers generally are not framing our nation’s history in the specific ways targeted by “divisive concepts” legislation. They are not teaching their students to hate their country, their grandparents, or their peers whose backgrounds and identities differ from their own. If teachers are emphasizing the significance of racism to the history of the United States, it is because most professional historians agree that ideas about race have been among the most important forces in shaping the American past.

Nor are a critical mass of teachers mired in the white supremacist traditions of historians William Dunning or U. B. Phillips, as some critics continue to allege. The resources they consult, the materials they use, and the assessments for which they prepare their students all indicate that students learn histories different from what their grandparents—and in some cases even their parents—might remember.

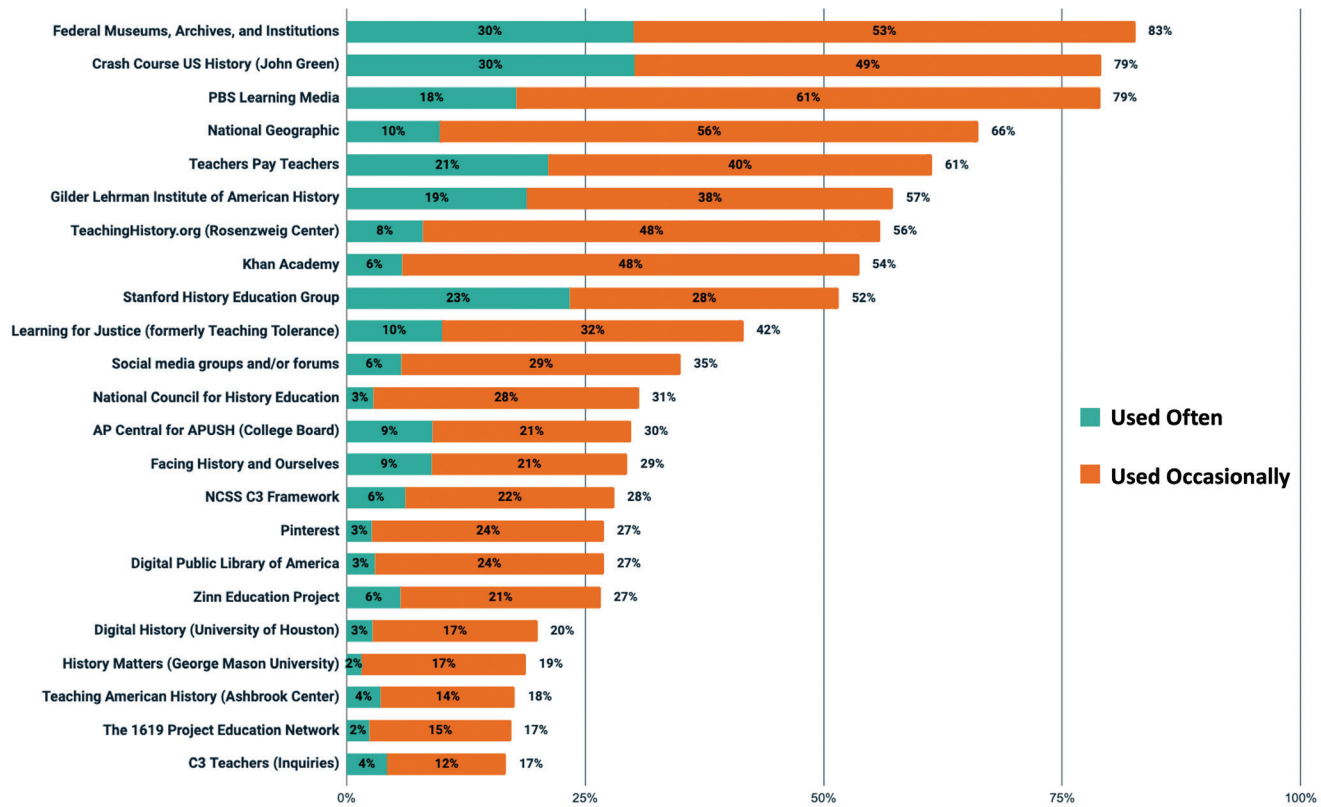


Fig. 1: Top no-cost resources identified by teachers.  
AHA research data



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Moreover, most teachers are drawing materials from sources that are hardly deeply politicized, whether from the left, right, or some other angle. Consider where secondary school teachers in our survey go to for information and lesson plans (Fig. 1).

The AHA neither denies nor ignores challenges in secondary school history education that prompt some college and university instructors to lament the preparation of incoming students. But we also are confident that what matters most is preparation, not “indoctrination.” Our teachers don’t need legislators passing laws that led one Florida teacher to tell us in a conference session, “I don’t know what I can say anymore.” They need legislators who will appropriate funds for history-rich professional development that feeds teachers’ desire to be better historians. District-driven professional development focuses largely on pedagogy and technology; teachers need more content-oriented resources.

Legislators and others worried about indoctrination should focus on what they can do to help, rather than hurl unsupported allegations. Sure, there are activist teachers who cannot resist the lure of the classroom pulpit. There are

school districts whose teachers and boards of education are steeped in ideologies infused with political commitments and a narrow-minded determination to shape a citizenry in their own image. But “indoctrination”? Anyone who has much contact with teenagers is likely aware of the difficulty of indoctrinating a teenager. I can’t resist a comment attributed to San Francisco city council member Harvey Milk nearly a half century ago: “If it were true that children mimicked their teachers, you’d sure have a helluva lot more nuns running around.” **P**

*James Grossman is executive director of the AHA.*

*For preliminary findings from the AHA’s Mapping the Landscape of Secondary US History Education, see the recording of the webinar American Lesson Plan on the AHA’s YouTube channel and “Culture Warriors—on Both Sides—Are Wrong about America’s History Classrooms” in Time. The first extensive report will be issued in fall 2024.*

LAURA ANSLEY

# ARE YOU SITTING UP STRAIGHT?

*America's Obsession with Improving Posture*

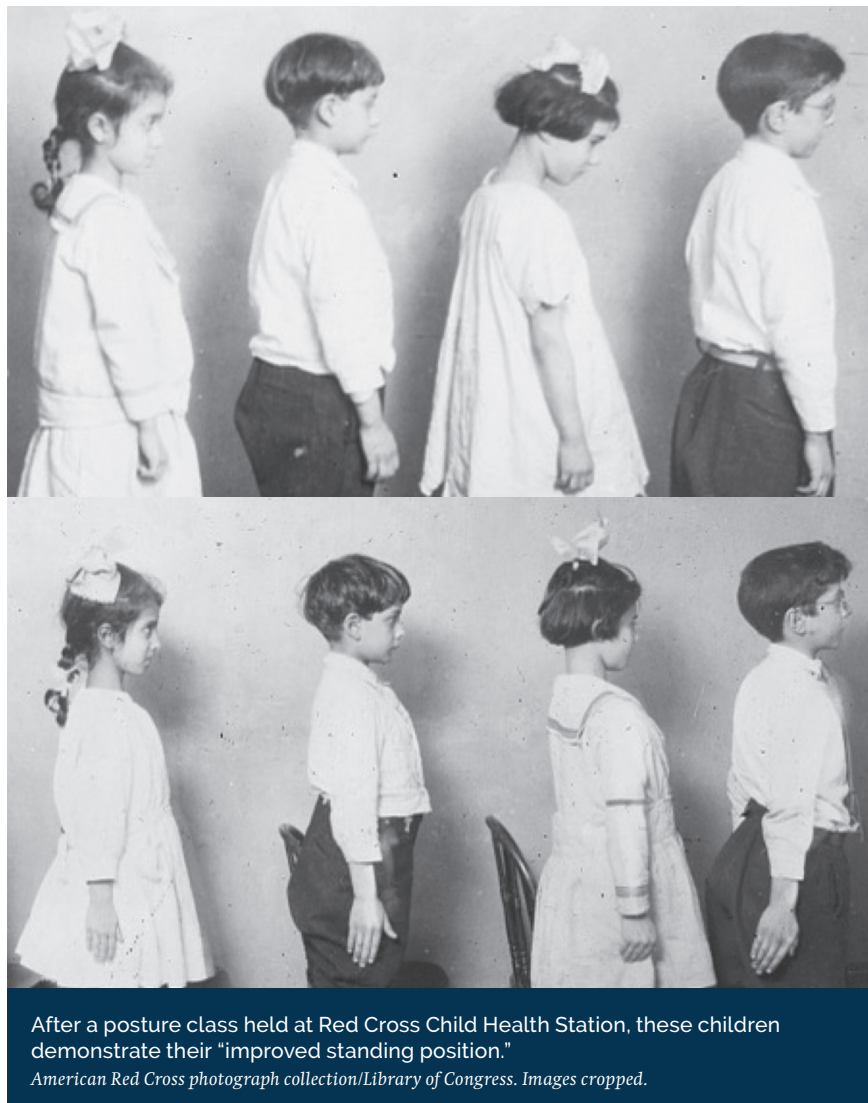
**L**ook down. Are you hunched over? Are your shoulders up near your ears? Are you sitting or standing up straight? Can't you just hear your mother or maybe grandmother admonishing you to "stop slouching!"? (I myself am writing this hunched over my laptop, sitting on the couch with my legs crossed under me—what a kindergarten teacher might call "crisscross applesauce.")

In today's wellness-obsessed world, "good" posture is just one of the many signs that you are looking out for your health and in touch with your body. But concerns about posture in the United States are by no means a new phenomenon. In *Slouch: Posture Panic in Modern America* (Princeton Univ. Press, 2024), historian Beth Linker investigates how we came to believe that bad posture is bad for your health.

Now department chair and professor of the Department of the History and Sociology of Science at the University of Pennsylvania, Linker began her professional life as a physical therapist in the 1990s. As she told *Perspectives*, "Both my clinical and historical training complement each other when it comes to questioning the validity of certain health claims that are taken for granted." From her clinical practice, she learned that "we all have our own posture stories, whether it be scoliosis exams, parental chiding, or feelings of falling

short of socially mandated body expectations. With *Slouch*, I wanted to give a voice and a history to these highly personal, yet often taken for granted, experiences."

As a historian of disability, medicine, gender, and war studies, Linker came to this research how many of us find the next project: stumbling upon something unexpected in the archives.



After a posture class held at Red Cross Child Health Station, these children demonstrate their "improved standing position."

American Red Cross photograph collection/Library of Congress. Images cropped.

While researching her first book on the rehabilitation of World War I's wounded soldiers at the National Archives in College Park, Linker found a box filled with hundreds of sheets of tracing paper showing the outlines of feet. She would come to learn that these foot tracings were a way that the US military gauged flat feet in this era. "Flat feet" was used alongside other tests to evaluate posture, which was believed to indicate strength and future health. Growing up in the post-Vietnam War era and hearing adults reference draft dodgers who used flat feet as an excuse, Linker was curious. Why would flat feet preclude military service? Though she published a journal article in 2007 using the flat foot tracings, she knew there was more work to do on posture and disability.

## Why would flat feet preclude military service?

What Linker eventually found was a campaign across the 20th century that pushed to normalize American posture. In our interview, she described this movement as "motivated by the desire to eradicate anatomical 'defects' and guided by what I call scientific ableism." Developing in the same era as eugenics, the antislouching campaign, she argues, was part of race betterment projects. These were not limited to or only promoted by an educated white elite establishment; Linker also found that middle-class nonwhite communities engaged in these campaigns. She explained, "Black and Jewish professionals wished to literally uplift lower-class peoples of their respective race and ethnicity through posture enhancement." Through these means, they could share a common goal of "separating themselves from the ultimate other: the disabled."



These campaigns contributed many facets of American life that readers may find surprisingly familiar. Did you spend time on the playground's monkey bars as a child? These structures originated in the Progressive Era, when experts thought that imitating a gibbon would both strengthen children's muscles and link them to an evolutionary past. Were you ever instructed to improve your posture by carrying a stack of books on your head? This was likely rooted in early 20th-century ideas that white Americans could train their bodies to have better posture by emulating "primitive" cultures where women carried baskets on their heads. Scientists in that era saw poor posture as a sign of "overcivilization," Linker said, "by which they mean too much leisure and sedentariness." Therefore they "looked to 'precivilized' or 'primitive' peoples (who are often nonwhite) for lessons on how to live 'naturally,'" Linker continued, an impulse we might recognize from paleo diets and other wellness programs today. But it wouldn't do to have white children carry water containers on their heads—books were more fitting for their

"superior" place on the evolutionary scale.

As posture moved from a niche concern within the scientific community to a more mainstream problem, an industry grew up around it. Across these various trends, Linker sees the anti-slouching campaign as having one goal: eradicating "defective" anatomy. Students' posture was monitored by school nurses and physical education teachers, with scoliosis tests and fitness training aiming to ensure that children's "deficiencies" could be nipped in the bud. During an era when beauty pageants were popular, posture pageants cropped up too, rewarding the Posture Queen (and sometimes Posture King) at the Seven Sisters colleges and many historically Black colleges and universities. And consumerism wasn't far behind, with products marketed to Americans from orthopedic shoes to belts and girdles (for both sexes!). President John F. Kennedy treated his chronic back pain with postural muscle training and by wearing a back brace, a canvas corset that Linker wrote had the added benefit of making him appear taller. Some experts speculated that had he not been wearing this brace on the day of his assassination, he could have survived; after the first bullet hit, he would have slumped in a more natural way such that the second fatal shot would have missed. According to them, the brace made him an easier target.

Throughout much of the 20th century, most posture science research took place at higher education institutions. As Linker writes, "a remarkable number" of US colleges and universities required students to undergo an annual physical exam that included a posture evaluation. During this exam, students were required to pose for nude or semi-nude photographs—a practice that continued into the 1970s. But perhaps

unsurprisingly, the stewardship of those records eventually became a massive scandal. In 1995, a *New York Times Magazine* article by Ron Rosenbaum revealed that universities had nude photographs of American elites, from presidents and first ladies to famous actors and journalists. This exposé led alumni to make panicked calls to their alma maters, university administrators and lawyers to review their policies, and many university archives to destroy these photo collections within months of the article's publication.

"Privacy is often more of a privilege than a democratic right," Linker writes. "Thousands of nude posture photos still exist.... [Those] incinerated in 1995 are only a fraction." Those that remain came from places like the Oregon State Prison and the Elgin and New York State Hospitals. "In other words, photographs of historically more vulnerable populations remain in the archive, while the images of white elites have been actively erased." As Linker argues, this scandal upended the usual concerns of archival silences and erasures. Usually, society's most powerful, well-resourced individuals can be found more easily in the historical record, but "the elite also have the power to create archival silences of themselves when it suits them, while more vulnerable populations generally do not."

Not all of Linker's primary sources were fraught with such ethical concerns. Having been seen as such a widespread problem, midcentury ideas about posture appeared in a variety of popular sources too. One of Linker's favorites was Judy Blume's novel *Deenie* (1973). "I think that book captures the zeitgeist of what it was like to be a teen girl growing up in the 1970s and 1980s who had to face the humiliating school posture and

scoliosis exams," Linker said. "While these exams were not the same as the nude photos, they still required pubescent girls to lift up their shirts and bend forward in front of an examiner looking for curves, humps, and other 'defects.'" The novel's protagonist was diagnosed with scoliosis after such an exam, and as Linker described it, "Deenie is required—against her wishes—to wear a hip-to-neck Milwaukee brace 23 hours a day so as to prevent an imagined future of disability and pain." This novel, read by countless girls across the United States, helped Linker "to appreciate the scope and depth of the manufactured health fears around poor posture." She also found educational films both thought-provoking and entertaining during her research. Her favorite find was *Health: Your Posture*, produced in 1953, which featured a talking mirror that coached an outcast adolescent girl on how to become popular by practicing good posture.

## The memory and legacies of the posture panic persist around us.

From draft exemptions for flat feet to the monkey bars on your local playground, the memory and legacies of the posture panic persist around us. Most recently, Linker followed the buzz around a \$200 bra that Taylor Swift reportedly wore during her Eras Tour to correct her posture. "Some online chatter among fitness experts," Linker told us, showed "concerns for Swift's 'dowager hump,' invoking gender-infused slurs to suggest that she is aging before her time. So perhaps she wore the bra for aesthetic reasons."

There are legitimate reasons to pay attention to your posture. Linker

herself has chronic back pain and so is conscious of her posture and how it affects her body. She told *Perspectives*, "I actually wish more of the public conversation and health care resources were geared toward chronic pain management rather than prevention. The focus on prevention saves health insurers money and moves the blame away from structural conditions that cause disabling pain to place it instead on the individual." When there are social determinants at play like access to health care, food and clean water, and housing, those are often "far more important to future health than whether or not someone sits or stands straight." **P**

Laura Ansley is senior managing editor at the AHA.

REBECCA L. WEST

## ADVOCACY BRIEFS

*Letters Sent in Early 2024*

**In early 2024, the AHA wrote to four state legislatures to oppose proposed legislation that would eliminate and politicize tenure, encroach inappropriately on social studies standards, and interfere in teacher training. The AHA also signed on to a letter from a coalition of nonpartisan organizations opposing such legislation in Florida, wrote to South Carolina State University opposing planned eliminations of majors, and wrote to the president of China on the behalf of a detained scholar of Uyghur studies. Additionally, at the business meeting in January, the membership approved the resolution “In Defense of the Right to Learn.”**

### Resolution Passed at the 137th Business Meeting

At the 137th business meeting of the AHA on January 6, 2024, the AHA membership approved the resolution “In Defense of the Right to Learn.” The resolution was accepted by the Council on January 24, 2024.

### AHA Sends Letter to Nebraska Legislature Opposing Bill to Eliminate Tenure

On February 9, the AHA sent a letter to the Nebraska state legislature opposing LB 1064, a bill that would eliminate tenure in state universities and colleges. “If

passed [LB 1064] will severely diminish the ability of the state’s public universities to recruit and retain the quality of faculty required for first-rate teaching and research,” the AHA wrote. “Any public university in the state would immediately become an employer of last choice among scholars who desire an environment amenable to high-quality teaching and research.”

### AHA Sends Letter to Indiana Legislature Opposing “Intellectual Diversity” Tenure Bill

On February 20, the AHA sent a letter to members of the Indiana House Education Committee opposing SB 202, a bill that would “create a policy for granting tenure and terminating the appointments of tenured faculty based on how well that faculty member has fostered ‘intellectual diversity’ within the classroom.” The bill, the AHA wrote, “inserts the will and judgment of politically appointed boards of trustees into the fundamental work of university faculty” and “would create conditions of uncertainty for faculty, presenting situations where their jobs are on the line for the infraction of not having enough arbitrarily decided ‘variety’ in their ‘political or ideological frameworks’ . . . mak[ing] it easier for public interest groups and politicians—of either party—to weed out faculty with whom they disagree.”

### AHA Sends Letter to Iowa Legislature Opposing Bill on K–12 Social Studies Curriculum

On February 22, the AHA sent a letter to the members of the Iowa House of Representatives opposing HF 2544, a bill that “directly encroaches on the authority and expertise of the members of the Iowa State Board of Education, sidestepping statutory minimum requirements for the educational program and bypassing the state’s mandated process for developing social studies standards.” The proposed legislation, the AHA wrote, “is a Frankenstein’s monster constructed out of disembodied portions of five out-of-state model bills” that “leaves no room for input from teachers, administrators, historians, or parents.”

### AHA Sends Letter to Florida Legislature Opposing Harmful K–12 Teacher Training Bill

On February 27, the AHA sent a letter to Florida legislators opposing HB 1291/SB 1372, a “heavy-handed and inappropriate intervention in college curricula, classroom instruction, and professional learning.” The proposed legislation, the AHA wrote, “would require educators teach a history that is incomplete, tendentious, and politically driven rather than based on evidence and consistent with professional standards. . . . SB 1372 establishes a mechanism for censoring classroom teaching and learning, and hence stands in stark opposition to

academic freedom and true intellectual diversity.”

### Coalition of Organizations Submits Letter Opposing Florida SB 1372

On February 28, the AHA, as part of a nonpartisan coalition of organizations, signed on to a letter opposing Florida SB 1372. This letter expressed “serious concerns that the bill is not constitutionally viable, is overly vague, and is an example of viewpoint discrimination that is contrary to free speech and expression.... This bill could create a new generation of history teachers who are unsure how to teach material about slavery, the Civil Rights Movement, or women’s suffrage.”

### AHA Sends Letter to South Carolina State University Opposing Plan to Cut Majors

On February 29, the AHA sent a letter to leaders at South Carolina State

University expressing grave concern about a plan to cut majors in history, African American studies, and social studies teaching at the university. “Cutting a core liberal arts degree like African American studies or history is short-sighted. Civic leaders from all corners of the political landscape have lamented the lack of historical knowledge of American citizens,” the AHA wrote. “Cutting social studies education is an especially irresponsible move at a moment when teachers are being prohibited from teaching the truth about slavery, the Civil Rights Movement, or the continuing centrality of racism in American public culture.”

### AHA Sends Letter of Concern about Missing Chinese Scholar

On March 7, the AHA sent a letter to President Xi Jinping of the People’s Republic of China expressing “concern for the fate of Professor Rahile Dawut, a scholar of Uyghur studies who has apparently been sentenced to life in

prison and whose specific whereabouts are unknown.” Professor Dawut, missing since 2018, has “been detained and sentenced in connection with her peaceful exercise of the right to academic freedom” in a situation that, in addition to raising concern for Dawut’s well-being, “raises questions about the ability of intellectuals in China generally to conduct scholarship safely and freely.” The AHA urged President Xi to secure Professor Dawut’s immediate and unconditional release. **P**

*Rebecca L. West is operations and communications assistant at the AHA. Find her on X @rebeckawest.*

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CAITLIN KOSSMANN

# ARE WE THE VIRUS?

*What a Meme Reveals about Planetary Health*



Memes created during the height of the pandemic are only the latest part of a long conversation about the relationship between humans and the natural environment.

*Ricardo Gomez Angel/Unsplash. Image cropped.*

**INTERNET CULTURE** gets a lot of flak for facilitating anger, mob mentality, and a deeply ahistorical—even amnesiac—approach to events. A friend of mine calls X (formerly Twitter) “the outrage machine,” expressing its tendency toward vitriol. So I was surprised at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic to catch a wave of cultural criticism on Twitter that pinged something I’d been wrestling with in my historical writing. This criticism operated via meme, and it had a gleefully ironic tagline: “The Earth is healing. We are the virus.”

Trapped in my apartment in 2020, working on a history of “Gaia theory,” I became fascinated by the disconnect between word and tone in the “we are the virus” memes. This disconnect points to a question, one that speaks to a larger history of environmental thinking: Are human health and planetary health necessarily in conflict?

First formulated in the late 1960s by a chemist and inventor named James Lovelock, Gaia theory posits that the Earth is habitable because it has life on it, not the other way around. Gaia theory sees the living Earth as a cybernetic system of feedback loops. These include the carbon, nitrogen, and oxygen cycles, as well as regulatory feedbacks on temperature and ocean salinity. Together they make up an emergent entity or system that Lovelock called Gaia.

One of the most important arguments for Gaia theory was the presence of oxygen in Earth’s atmosphere. Lovelock and his co-author Lynn Margulis, a microbiologist and evolutionary theorist, argued that Earth’s oxygenated atmosphere was thanks not to plants but to ancient bacteria. While so much of life today depends on this oxygen for survival, at the time—2.4 billion years ago—the growing presence of atmospheric oxygen was a toxic catastrophe for many organisms. Some of them moved underground to get away. Others died out. This release of oxygen into the terrestrial atmosphere is sometimes called the great oxygenation event. Lovelock and Margulis also referred to it as the first planetary-scale pollution event.

For Lovelock and Margulis, it was clear that one organism’s waste was another’s environment. Sometimes this was beneficial, like the neat coupling of plants and animals breathing in and out carbon dioxide and oxygen. Other times the waste product was toxic, like early oxygen was to many of the other single-celled organisms. But from a Gaian perspective, pollution was relative.

When we read about pollution now, it’s something only humans do. That was where the “Earth is healing” memes started: with reporting that without all the turbulence and pollution from boats, the Venice canals were now full of dolphins, and

that the Himalaya, usually hidden in clouds of smog, could suddenly be seen from New Delhi. The dolphin story seemed like a hope that maybe things weren’t that bad; that if we just stopped emitting so much, Eden-like conditions would snap back, like letting go of a stretched rubber band. The dolphin story was false. But it helped launch the memes.

Some of the memes were fairly tame. An early one that caught my eye, posted by Twitter user @goodbeanalt on April 15, used the old Windows XP “Bliss” background: a grassy hill under a perfect sky, colors seemingly supersaturated. The caption read: “with everyone off the road, air pollution is finally clearing up. I took this picture in my backyard just this morning. the earth is healing, we are the virus. ♥” Others became increasingly absurd. On March 26, @taladorei posted an image of Lime scooters in dark water, writing “with everyone on lockdown, the lime scooters are finally returning to the river. nature is healing, we are the virus.” And some went farther still, like the image of dinosaurs in Times Square from @stpeteyontweety on April 5 (“Wow. This is New York today where the city’s streets are empty and nature has returned for the first time since 65,000,000 BC. The earth is healing, we are the virus.”) or @meesterleesir’s rainbow Lisa Frank image of frolicking dolphins from April 12 (“This photo of the Hudson River was taken yesterday. The earth is healing We are the virus.”).

## If we stopped emitting, Eden-like conditions would snap back.

These memes felt uncanny in their blend of jokey dismissal and environmentalist fear of a conflict between humans and nature. The shockingly provocative “we are the virus” seemed to trivialize the terrifying reality of a deadly pandemic, turning COVID-19 into divine judgment for humanity’s ecological wrongdoing. But juxtaposed with truly outlandish “proof” of such healing, from dinosaurs to pink dolphins, these memes showed the absurdity of their own tagline.

Many environmentalists in the 1960s and 1970s worried humans would eat too much, use up too much space, pollute too much. A famous public service announcement from a 1970 “Keep America Beautiful” campaign, known as the “Crying Indian” PSA, combined aesthetic and moral judgment, showing an American Indian (played by an Italian American actor) devastated by the pollution destroying his homeland. Paul Ehrlich’s *The Population Bomb* (1968) and the Club of Rome’s *Limits to Growth* report (1972) are the most famous examples of how early American environmentalism connected environmental damage with human action. Activists predicted that human resource consumption from exponential population growth

would soon collide with the hard limits of the planet's capacities, prompting mass concern across the movement. Influenced by Ehrlich's book, countercultural icon Stewart Brand organized a "Hunger Show" in October 1969, a performance art event in which activists starved themselves for a week to raise awareness of impending global starvation. Historian Thomas Robertson has written of this period from the late 1960s to the early 1970s as the "Malthusian moment" for its renewed interest in the 18th-century English economist Thomas Malthus, who wrote of widespread poverty and starvation as the human population outran their food supply. Malthus's reanimated concerns prompted agricultural research into more productive and disease-resistant crops, while organizations like Zero Population Growth pushed for human population control.

Resource depletion and pollution remain major concerns, although many scholars and activists now have emphasized the intersections of such fears with racism and colonialism, and others have argued that it is not total human population but the Western, high-consumption lifestyle that causes disproportionate environmental harm. Lovelock, too, sometimes worried about too many humans making life harder for other species. In his 1991 book *Healing Gaia*, he had a chapter called "The People Plague," where he worried that big agriculture would replace necessary forests.

Lovelock had in fact raised concerns about human population growth as far back as 1966, when he wrote a speculative report on the year 2000 for Shell Research Limited, who had hired him as a consultant. Lovelock's report, however, was less convinced of dire consequences. Focused on the likelihood of pollution increase as well as population growth, Lovelock noted that energy technologies and other cultural factors would likely change along with the increasing "curbs" on human growth and resource use. "I am sufficiently optimistic to believe that, just as we have avoided anthropocidal war, so we shall avoid these other disasters," he wrote in the internal report for Shell. "The cost, however, will be high." He predicted dense cities and a return to more, smaller agricultural communities, combined with technologies for more efficient energy use. Despite imagining planetary pressures that would force humans to change their ways or go extinct, Lovelock did not make the assumption of many environmentalists that humanity was *morally* wrong for polluting or expanding their populations. This was no more unnatural or immoral than the cyanobacteria 2.4 billion years ago, belching oxygen.

Lovelock didn't intend for any of his arguments about the naturalness of pollution or the possibility that species could harm one another to be an excuse for causing harm. His consulting work for Shell and other chemical companies, and his

early arguments that chlorofluorocarbons were unlikely to harm the planet, has prompted criticism and distrust. Is Gaia just an excuse for pollution, then, since Gaia will shift to accommodate the new scenario? While Lovelock's early writings lend some credence to this concern, by the 2000s, he had changed his mind. Lovelock's point was that Gaia's health mattered more than that of any individual species, because no species could persist without the continued operation of the whole Gaian system. Gaia could continue without any particular species, as long as that species' function in the maintenance of planetary habitability could be taken over by another. He didn't want humans and other species to die off. He just wanted people to understand that human survival was utterly dependent on Gaia. "I see the Earth's declining health as our most important concern," Lovelock wrote. "Our concern for it must come first, because the welfare of the burgeoning masses of humanity demands a healthy planet."

## Gaia could continue without any particular species.

I have a slightly uncomfortable fondness for the pandemic memes, just like my wary fondness for Gaia theory. They're like a wild animal someone has taken in as a pet: they're cute, but they don't seem entirely safe. Are planetary health and human health necessarily in conflict? Well, no, not *necessarily*. Can they be? Sure, but that's actually not something specific to humans. Many species have the capacity to change the world, and maybe not for everyone else's benefit. It was cyanobacteria 2.4 billion years ago. Maybe it's some humans now, especially the ones laying down the incentives and policies that keep oil the preeminent energy source and keep ever-greater consumption as the stated goal of a good life. The "we are the virus" memes are a reminder that asking whether humans and nature are in conflict is asking the wrong question. We're all on the same planet, and we can't really get out of each other's way—or waste.

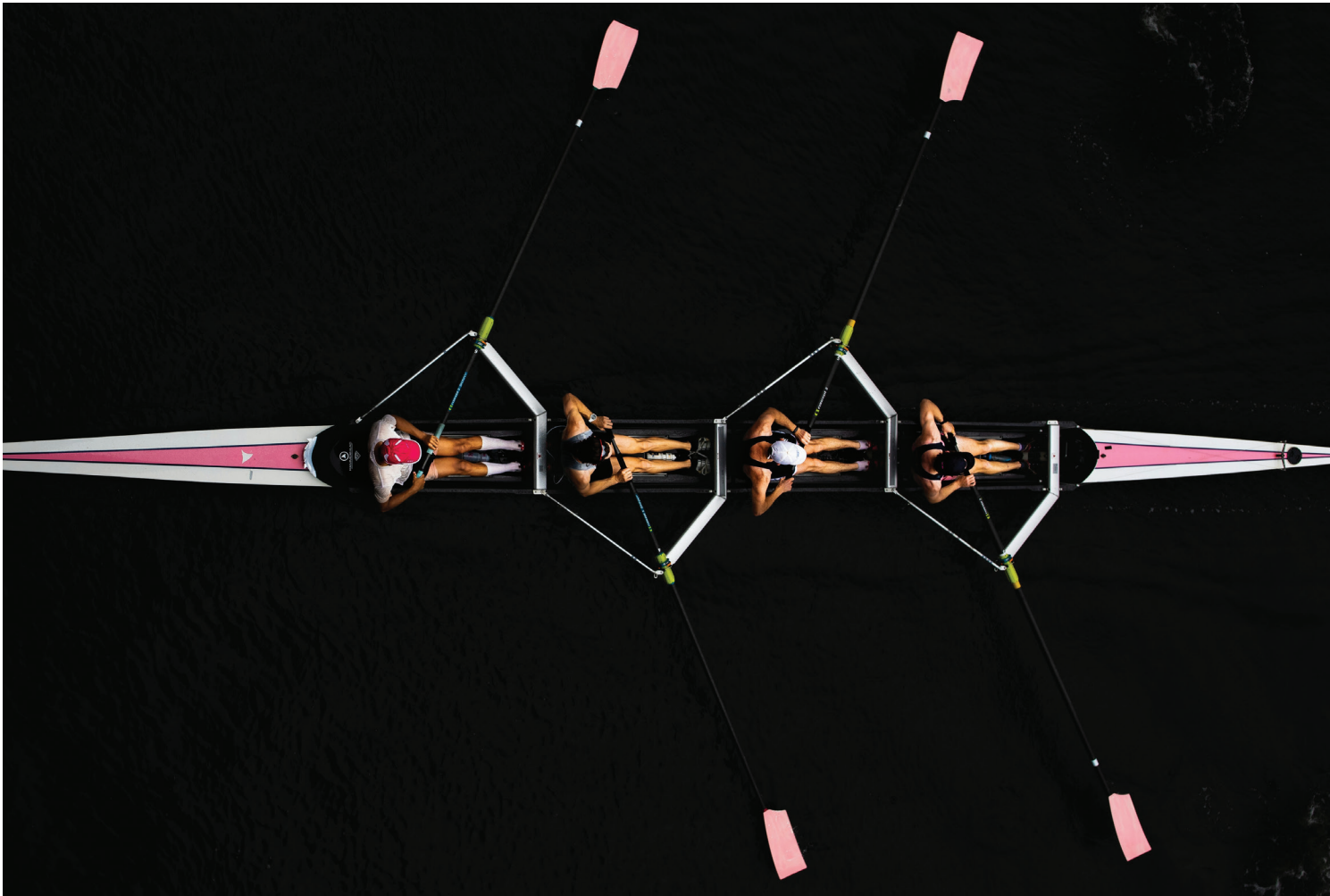
Part of the joke of "the Earth is healing" is that it assumes there's some ultimate healthy baseline the Earth is supposed to return to, a baseline without human impact. Gaia is a homeostatic system, trying to keep stable. But there's no *one* healthy state; Gaia's conditions have changed wildly before. The joke is on us. It's human lives that will worsen as the planet continues to warm, and the lives of our planetmates. Gaia, though, will probably be fine. And that, Lovelock's theory suggests, should be the more frightening warning. **P**

*Caitlin Kossmann is a PhD candidate in the history of science and medicine at Yale University and held the AHA Fellowship in Aerospace History in 2022–23.*

DANA SCHAFER, COLIN WINDHORST, BRENT D. GLASS, AND PATRICIA SCHECHTER

# SMALL ORGANIZATIONS, BIG IMPACTS

*Three AHA SHARP Grant Projects*



With AHA SHARP grants, small history organizations completed ambitious projects that required new thinking, new technologies, and new collaborations.  
*Josh Calabrese/Unsplash*

**FROM THE SPRING** of 2022 through the fall of 2023, the AHA's Grants to Sustain and Advance the Work of Historical Organizations provided \$2.5 million to support dozens of small history-related organizations adversely affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. These grants, ranging from \$12,000 to \$75,000, funded short-term projects that explored new ideas or built on experiments initiated during the pandemic—from developing virtual programming and online publications to using new technologies and expanding audiences and accessibility.

The AHA encouraged proposals for ambitious new initiatives as well as smaller projects that addressed problems that had arisen because of the pandemic. Funded through the National Endowment for the Humanities' Sustaining the Humanities through the American Rescue Plan (SHARP) program, the AHA's grants supported 50 organizations, including membership associations, site-based institutions, and history departments at historically Black colleges and universities.

Many of the grantees had not previously received federal funding, and the AHA's subaward program made this funding more accessible to them. Organizations that might have lacked the resources or knowledge to apply for a grant directly from the federal government found the AHA's program less daunting. With this smaller granting program, the AHA was able to devote significant time and effort to helping our awardees better understand requirements and compliance expectations of federal grants. And through our networks, we were able to reach organizations that were not previously aware of funding opportunities.

A full list of subrecipients and their projects can be found on the AHA website. Awardees included a wide range of organizations from across the country, including three archives, six cultural organizations, 11 historical societies, 11 membership organizations, 15 historic sites and museums, three affiliates in higher education, and one media organization. Most awardees implemented new programs or sustained existing ones, and several were able to create new positions with the funding, allowing for apprentices and researchers, for example. A few subrecipients used the funds to support general operations (like marketing and communications efforts) at their organization.

The funded projects varied widely. They included oral histories; digitization projects to make collections more accessible; the development of resources and classroom materials; events and conferences; exhibits, programming, and tours; communications and marketing efforts to expand audiences; and internship/apprenticeship programs.

In April 2022, the AHA helped to coordinate the awardees' marketing efforts to announce their grants and promote

their projects. That month, we also held an orientation webinar, which included breakout sessions for attendees to make connections with others developing similar projects and share resources and expertise.

Throughout the grant period, grantees remained in contact with both the AHA and one another through email, during one-on-one Zoom meetings, and on a community listserv. A highlight of our SHARP grants program included regular Communities of Practice online sessions, during which grantees met to network, discuss common issues, and share resources. These regular meetings included presentations by content and methodology specialists on general topics, breakout sessions, and dedicated time for discussion among participants. These meetings were essential for attendees not only to learn from experts in their field but, equally important, to learn from one another and their shared experiences. Each attendee brought expertise, insights, and resources from their respective institution, which were valuable to others in attendance. Take, for example, the use of oral histories underpinning many of the participating organizations' exhibits and projects. Participants more experienced in this methodology assisted others who were just beginning the process. These facilitated discussions enabled participants to build a community of peers from across the country and a network of resources accessible long after the program ended. (These connections even continued in person at the SHARP Grantees Meet-Up at the 2023 AHA annual meeting in Philadelphia.)

## The AHA's subaward program made this federal funding more accessible.

By the close of the program in August 2023, all awardees had completed their projects without major deviations from their original proposals. Some had faced staffing challenges or unexpected expenses (including a flood at one property!), but all were able to reach their project goals. The AHA's own goal for the program was to encourage long-term connections that both identify and respond to the needs of organizations that are essential to the work of historians but often too small to take risks, or lack the resources to implement the creativity of their staff and volunteers. The program helped to foster these organizational relationships and contributed to the centrality of historical work in communities across the country.

As a result of the pandemic, the history-focused organizations receiving subawards through our program had faced disruptions to normal activities, including gatherings, services, or

educational activities, and financial stringencies that led to layoffs and a decline in support for discretionary expenditures. The AHA's SHARP grants not only enabled these organizations to address financial and operational issues caused by the pandemic but also created opportunities to rethink programming, identify new audiences, and experiment with ways to extend the work of humanities organizations in different directions.

Below, three historians share some of the varied experiences of the AHA's SHARP grants recipients and represent the essential work of historians in museums, historical sites, higher education, and membership associations. From the development of an online exhibition about a community in rural Maine using GIS technology to the creation of a new museum about the history of incarceration and the establishment of a mentorship program for graduate students, the SHARP grants program had a deep and lasting impact on local communities and historians across the country.

*Dana Schaffer is deputy director of the AHA.*

## MAPPING THE DENNYS RIVER THROUGH TIME

On a hot July weekend in 2021, a dozen college students ventured out along the Dennys River in Down East Maine to map its history. With portable GPS units strapped to their backs and accompanied by local guides, they trekked roads, fields, and streams, pointing their receivers skyward at passing satellites to mark sites of historical significance. They recorded the locations of tribal villages, local landmarks, and places of agricultural, domestic, civic, commercial, and environmental importance. By visiting these sites, the students were helping to create a picture of the communities that have been sustained by this corridor to the Atlantic across nine millennia to the present.

These students' travels along the river were part of a project to investigate an important question: How does a small historical organization harness digital technology to tell its story? Since its founding in 1987, the Dennys River Historical Society (DRHS) has pursued a mission to discover, preserve, and share the history of this 123-square-mile watershed in eastern Maine. Yet as with many other such organizations, the advent of COVID-19 in 2020 created unforeseen challenges: public programming ceased, tours were canceled, the society's Facebook page became locked and unusable, and membership froze. The pandemic halted the society's popular summer expeditions, changing exhibitions, and regular lecture and discussion forums.



The Dennys River is shown on a Lottery Map prepared by the Massachusetts Committee for the Sale of Eastern Lands in 1786.

*Courtesy Dennys River Historical Society*

The DRHS recognized in the AHA's SHARP grants program the opportunity to create an online presence that could revitalize the society, enabling it to emerge from the pandemic stronger than before. With a proposal entitled "Mapping the Dennys River over 9,000 Years," we requested funding for a new website featuring an interactive map incorporating items from the society's collections.

A year of intense activity included cartography and photography, as well as cataloging images to support the maps and writing accompanying text. The resulting [dennysriverhistory.org](http://dennysriverhistory.org) website provides access to a growing collections catalog, information about the society, and seven iterations of a digital map that displays images and information about the communities in the watershed over the past 9,000 years. On a new Facebook page, a volunteer regularly posts images from the map that link to descriptive entries on the website for more details.

The project required collaboration with individuals and groups including the geographic information systems (GIS) program at the University of Maine at Machias (UMM), the Passamaquoddy Tribe, and the Tides Institute and Museum of Art in nearby Eastport. While the grant paid for a local web-design business to create the website, volunteers also donated hundreds of hours of their time, requiring significant coordination among the project partners.

In addition to society staff, participants included historian James Oberly (University of Wisconsin–Eau Claire, emeritus), Passamaquoddy tribal preservation officer Donald Soctomah, archivist Louise Merriam, geographer Tora Johnson (UMM), glaciologist Dominic Winski (Univ. of Maine, Orono), data scientist and intern Patricia Tilton, web designer Ashley Dhakal, and numerous volunteers. With such varied expertise and backgrounds, the team had to address differences in understanding and perspective. For example, we recognized that when geographers track changes in place, historians study changes over time. The approaches taken by academic historians and local historians also came into play; where academic historians tend to work alone, usually thinking in periods such as decades or centuries, local historians, by contrast, often reflect on personal connections to a specific place and time.

### Our historians needed to become familiar with ArcGIS, a powerful mapping program.

Critical to the success of the project was learning to use software and technology new to the DRHS. Our historians needed to become familiar with ArcGIS, a powerful mapping program used often by geographers. Johnson, who heads UMM’s GIS program, helped the team to acquire a basic understanding of story maps, which became central to the interactive web map. To guide her students, Johnson asked the society to create a spreadsheet listing the names and locations of the sites and provide volunteers to guide them to those locations in the field. Following the initial fieldwork, the data was returned to the lab to be cleaned and assembled. Multiple sets of latitude and longitude coordinates had to be rectified, and ID numbers hastily assigned in the field needed to be compared and unified. Johnson created a mobile app for use with ArcGIS to allow Tilton and me to return to the field and fill in missing data. During the spring of 2023, Winski descended the river with me by canoe, recording features not otherwise accessible to the team. A patient investment of hundreds of hours resulted in data collection for over 450 historical sites.

Along with the ArcGIS technology, the society needed to create a digital repository to link its archives to the spreadsheet behind the interactive map. Using CatalogIt, a scalable, flexible, and accessible software, the archival staff could include images and documentation for each location. When the volume of historical information threatened to overwhelm the pop-ups on the interactive map, a “Learn More” link to the catalog record on the DRHS website helped solve the problem.

Describing sites spanning multiple eras also proved challenging. A limitation inherent in the ArcGIS story map format is the restriction of using only one icon or symbol for each location across the chronological layers. For example, an early Passamaquoddy village at the head of the Dennys River subsequently became a mill site, then a potato field; by the 1940s, it had become the location of an electric power dam, then a junkyard, the location of a fish ladder, and an environmental cleanup site, before being returned to the tribe in 2021. Marking these locations separately, even though they overlapped, offered the best solution to a visually confusing situation. On the other end of the river, within one century the Dennysville Lumber Company’s mill building was relocated to serve variously as a Gulf Oil distributorship, a chicken hatchery, and a community center, before becoming a private art gallery in the 21st century. In this case, the society chose to feature the original and most recent uses of this building, while including further documentation in the catalog record.

The completion of this AHA-funded project has opened a host of possibilities for the future development of the DRHS, including expanded community engagement and education. Our project partners have suggested new directions in public programming such as the decline and reinvention of communities along the watershed, comparative studies on the reasons for in- and out-migration, and the interrelation of economic and environmental change. Users have already begun using the new website and the maps; their reviews have included requests for new search functions that will make the maps even more useful.

The project has greatly increased the depth and scope of the society’s research by providing a comprehensive historical vision of the area, extending our reach to new audiences online. As DRHS president Ron Windhorst has observed, this may not be classed as one of the great rivers of the world, but “Discovering the Dennys: A River through Time” ensures it will be in good company.

*Colin Windhorst is program director at the Dennys River Historical Society.*

## EXPANDING THE NARRATIVE OF THE SING SING PRISON

Every chapter in America’s criminal justice history contains a few pages written at Sing Sing Prison “up the river” in Ossining, New York.

In May 2023, I hosted an unusual meeting of stakeholders at the Sing Sing Prison Museum offices. We invited five formerly incarcerated men, the former state commissioner of corrections, a retired corrections officer, a high school history teacher, a college professor, a prison reform activist, and museum staff to explore the museum's future direction. This was the culminating event in a yearlong program funded by an AHA SHARP grant. Our goal was to update and expand the museum's interpretive plan with a special emphasis on the impact of racialized mass incarceration since 1970. As we prepare to open the museum in 2025, the grant and the meeting in Ossining were significant turning points in shaping our path to the future.

The proposal to build a museum at Sing Sing originated in the late 1980s but lacked financial and political support. In 2015, new project leadership asked me to organize and manage a planning process and to develop an independent nonprofit organization that would work cooperatively with Sing Sing Correctional Facility, a maximum security prison with a population of around 1,500. By 2019, my role as consultant evolved into the museum's part-time executive director. With the support of a board of trustees, and a small staff consisting of a full-time assistant director and four part-time collections and program employees, including two formerly incarcerated individuals, our mission focuses on sharing stories of incarceration and reform, past and present, and bringing people together to imagine and create a more just society.

Sing Sing Prison has been in operation for nearly 200 years. Located on the Hudson River about 35 miles north of New York City, the original site once held 1,200 men and became the symbol of the Auburn prison system based on solitude, silence, surveillance, congregate labor, and corporal punishment. The Mt. Pleasant State Prison for Women at Sing Sing (1839–77) was the first building constructed as a women's prison in the country. Sing Sing became a site of capital punishment, with 614 executions in the electric chair between 1891 and 1963, including Julius and Ethel Rosenberg in 1953. But Sing Sing also was a place of innovative reforms. In 1914, the Mutual Welfare League, a form of self-government created by prison reformer Thomas Mott Osborne, was founded there. Lewis Lawes, warden from 1920 to 1941, introduced modern penology and became the nation's most respected prison official. Today, private sector support organizations such as the Osborne Association, Hudson Link for Higher Education in Prison, and Rehabilitation through the Arts provide valuable programs for men preparing to reenter society after leaving prison.

The rise of racialized mass incarceration since 1970 marks a distinct and singular chapter in Sing Sing's history. To

document this story, we commissioned a report from historian Logan McBride (Macaulay Honors Coll., City Univ. of New York), who has written about Black correction officers in the New York State prison system during the 1960s and 1970s. Her report traces the origins of mass incarceration in New York, starting with Governor Nelson Rockefeller's reorganization of the state's criminal legal system in October 1970, the deadly uprising at Attica State Prison in 1971, and the dramatic growth of the incarcerated population in New York and across the nation through the late 20th century. McBride's report also explores the increase of women in prison, the impact of the AIDS and COVID epidemics, and the portrayal of prison life in popular culture.

## We were redefining our identity as a prison museum.

The May 2023 stakeholders meeting used the McBride report as a catalyst for challenging common assumptions about mass incarceration. After three hours of intense and candid conversation, we identified three key messages. First, leadership matters. Former superintendent Brian Fischer explained how he had expanded the work of education, rehabilitation, and faith-based organizations during his tenure from 2000 to 2007. Of equal importance, he was receptive to program ideas from the prison population and conveyed a sense of genuine trust and respect. Second, diversity matters. By the 1990s, Sing Sing's workforce became the most diverse in the New York state system. The presence of Black and Latinx correction officers and support staff—who often came from the same neighborhoods as the incarcerated population—contributed to better communications and reduced the potential of racial conflict. Finally, support networks matter. Despite—or perhaps because of—the trauma of incarceration, the formerly incarcerated men emphasized the importance of informal networks of mutual aid inside prison that offer support during the long periods of isolation from family and friends. These bonds of friendship are essential in preparing for the day when they come home. For the museum, the stakeholders recommended a visitor experience that revealed the humanity of incarcerated individuals as well as the barriers to changing a rigid system. They stressed that the museum's audience should include students and educators, families of incarcerated and formally incarcerated people, correctional facility staff, and members of faith-based communities.

In addition to the McBride report and the stakeholders meeting, the grant funded an online exhibition called *Opening Windows*. We contracted with Blue Telescope, an interactive

exhibit company, to develop major content areas including an illustrated timeline, a justice statement, a visitor survey, and stories about people, places, and objects connected to Sing Sing Prison's past and present. The exhibition enables the museum to expand online learning opportunities and audience engagement. Blue Telescope earned a prestigious MUSE gold award for the exhibition.

The grant was a catalyst for a transformative growth in the museum's capacity to fulfill its mission. As we explored Sing Sing's recent history, created new online content, and promoted partnerships with stakeholders, we realized that we were redefining our identity as a prison museum. The grant cycle of 2022–23 coincided with the development of a revised master plan and new mission and vision statements, the welcoming of new board members and staff, and the opening of a new office in downtown Ossining. We increased online and in-person public programs and participated in local, state, and national meetings. We also recorded oral history interviews with retired Sing Sing staff and maintained our commitment to amplify the diverse voices of people impacted by the justice system.

As we prepare to commemorate Sing Sing's bicentennial in 2025, we face a number of strategic challenges. First, we must ensure that the privacy of the incarcerated population and the daily operations of the facility are not disrupted by tours and programs. Second, we must collaborate with a wide variety of partners including government agencies, cultural institutions, and reform organizations. Finally, we must create a platform contributing to the national conversation on criminal justice that recognizes the legacy of a brutal past but also makes visible the agents of change who are working to create a society that values individual humanity and dignity. As we concluded at the stakeholders meeting, Sing Sing was exceptional but not an exception. The museum must try to reconcile compelling and often contradictory narratives and call on history as a resource to help us understand our own times.

*Brent D. Glass is director emeritus of the National Museum of American History at the Smithsonian Institution and president of Brent D. Glass LLC.*

## MENTORING REIMAGINED

Mentorship has long been at the heart of the Western Association of Women Historians (WAWH). Established in 1969 and designed to serve scholars in the 14 western states of the United States, the organization was founded by a cohort of

historians who literally had to mentor themselves. These early members were often the only women in their graduate cohorts or history departments, so WAWH meetings provided critically important intellectual encouragement and social solidarity and tried to draw the map of professionalism where there was precious little to go on.

Mentorship was part of the WAWH's DNA, but the COVID-19 pandemic tested our resilience. Our 2020 annual conference was canceled. We managed to meet fully online in 2021 (thank you, Ula Taylor!), but for more than two years, we missed that face-to-face connection that is so important to feeling truly connected and in community. Our leadership worried that our membership, especially graduate students and early career scholars, would suffer and, of course, feared for the integrity of our organization as well.

I was in touch with colleagues (mostly in California) who were recent veterans of transitioning teaching and research into the remote environment and eager to lend a hand. An unexpected partnership was born between the WAWH and the University of California Consortium for the Study of Women, Genders, and Sexualities in the Americas.

Not good at applying for grants? Me neither. The first lesson I learned was that I had colleagues who were experts and eager to help. The consortium had written a grant proposal to support a student-centered research project called the Empire Suffrage Syllabus to mark the 100th anniversary of the passage of the 19th Amendment. This project was a good model for WAWH, since our more than 50-year history is centered on mentorship, support, and professional development for early career scholars and graduate students. Without meeting in person at our annual conference, we could literally not fulfill our mission. The AHA SHARP grant and the partnership provided the opportunity for WAWH to think in fresh ways about our mentorship mission, pushed as we were so forcefully into the digital environment.

The second lesson I learned was that mentorship could—or perhaps needed to—work in the online environment. Up-and-coming historians were already more wired into the digital world than I was, so the time was now to show up and meet them there. The WAWH and the consortium leadership together devised a series of online workshops to be held over Zoom to try to meet our constituents where they already were.

Like many other organizations during the pandemic, we had to make a compelling case about why these scholars should spend time with us. We framed the project as an investment

in the next generation of historians, and in fact, the majority of the grant funding provided stipends for participants. We wanted our members to know that they are valued, their time is valued, and their work is valued. Compensating participants for their time sent a very clear message about this value. We also compensated our convening faculty.

To get buy-in from potential participants, we surveyed our membership early and often. Their responses confirmed an interest in and need for connecting with senior scholars in informal, lower-risk intellectual environments. Based on survey feedback, we devised a yearlong schedule of monthly sessions on topics suggested by our membership. We also planned a one-day in-person workshop at Portland State University. Through a flurry of emails and Google Forms, we signed up six yearlong participants for the monthly mentor sessions and six workshop participants who would take a deep dive into the digital humanities led by experts.

## The project was an investment in the next generation of historians.

We sent out a general invitation to our membership, but those who came forward to participate had two things in common. First, they were mostly graduate students, most in the predissertation phase. Second, they had advisors who strongly encouraged them to participate. The organizers thought that the stipend would send a strong and attractive message—and it did—but money was not enough to secure a commitment from very busy historians in training. Turns out, the encouragement and validation provided by their supervising faculty proved quite decisive. This lesson was an important one for our thinking about mentorship in WAWH.

Each month, participants and convening faculty met for two hours on Zoom in sessions that toggled between issues in professionalism (such as work-family balance and diversity, equity, and inclusion) and writing workshops. The issue-based discussions were engaging, especially as people were starting to get to know each other in the earliest sessions. However, the writing workshops were the strongest sessions. This was another lesson learned: graduate students need rigorous, nonjudgmental, and collaborative ways to work on their writing. WAWH's membership comprises a cadre of highly skilled teachers of writing and people with considerable chops in professional development work. From my vantage point as the support person for all the Zoom sessions, it was eye-opening and inspiring to see colleagues skillfully manage a writing workshop in caring and deeply insightful ways.

The participants' feedback underscored the powerful connections we made. One wrote, "The activity of free writing from the perspective of a character in my project transformed how I think about the art of narrating. I also genuinely appreciated the structure of today's writing session; it was very organized and productive use of time." Another reported, "Today's session equipped me with tangible tools and resources for tackling 'writer's block.'" A third recognized how they would return to the day's lessons, saying, "For the size of our group and the time frame we had for the session, this was a great balance of writing exercise and discussion/debriefing. I even kept a copy of the exercises to refer back to when I (inevitably) get stuck in my writing down the line."

Yet the digital training workshop in Portland reminded us of the still irreplaceable role of in-person connection. We benefited that day from expert guidance from two outstanding practitioners of digital humanities. Ashley Garcia (Univ. of California, Los Angeles) provided a generous overview of the field and opportunities for participants to try new platforms and programs and have their questions answered in real time. Jeanette Jones (Univ. of Nebraska–Lincoln) guided participants through a major completed digital project, her *To Enter Africa from America: The United States, Africa, and the New Imperialism, 1862–1919*. The group then shared a home-cooked dinner together along with women historians from Portland State and the community.

We anticipate two long-term impacts of the program. One is to continue to engage with the program participants, be there for them across their careers, and support their links with one another. WAWH also plans to invest more pointedly in its own mentorship capacity, including writing future grant proposals and doing targeted fundraising. In the near future, we expect to add a new position on our board, something like a mentorship chair, to spearhead these efforts.

I spent time with several participants during the Berkshire Conference in June 2023 and was told things like "I would have never been able to complete my PhD prospectus without the mentorship program" and "Meeting with that group all year gave me a connection that I didn't know I needed at this stage of my career." I could not have asked for a more rewarding exchange with these wonderful young scholars. **P**

*Patricia Schechter is professor of history at Portland State University and immediate past president of the Western Association of Women Historians.*

DANIEL J. STORY

## CALL ME A PODCASTER, IF YOU MUST

### *Producing the American Historical Review's History in Focus*

If you've paid attention to podcasting in recent times, not just as a listener but as an observer of culture, you may have noticed a shift over the past few years. Even as overall listener numbers continue to climb, excitement over this still-newish medium has morphed. Series like *Only Murders in the Building* and the recent reboot of *Sex and the City* both offer satirical portrayals of the idea that everyone has a podcast now. They also channel the boom and at least partial bust of the corporate "podcast gold rush," as Rebecca Sananès terms it in a 2023 *Vanity Fair* article. Podcasting, Sananès suggests, is no longer cool. The term itself can seem almost pejorative in certain contexts. But maybe that's a good thing. "I used to have a lot more fun making audio before anybody cared," she writes.

I can relate. I may not have been at it for nearly as long, but I, too, sometimes feel distracted by the cultural and professional baggage around podcasts and podcasting that can sometimes cast the work as unserious or merely a fad. Call me a podcaster, if you must, but for me there are deeper resonances that make this form of doing history unique and compelling.

When I'm tempted to squirm at the label "podcaster," I find it can help to shift my attention to the great work that inspires me, whether among my fellow history podcasters or from out in the wider world of audio storytelling. And with that I can refocus—on my own experience with audio, on the fundamental reasons why I am drawn to this medium, and on what I aspire to create going forward. That is what I reflect on here, primarily through the lens of my work on *History in Focus*—the official podcast of the *American Historical Review* (AHR) and my current outlet for audio creativity.

I stumbled into podcasting almost by accident. I was a grad student at Indiana University Bloomington and working as an AHR editorial assistant when then editor Alex Lichtenstein decided that it was time for AHR to launch a podcast. Since I had a bit of experience with audio editing, I volunteered to help out. In 2017, we launched *AHR Interview*, and gradually this work opened my eyes to the power of audio.

When I began my job search for digital humanities positions, my podcasting experience turned out to be a big asset. In my current role at the University of California, Santa Cruz, where I am a digital scholarship librarian at the University Library Center for Digital Scholarship, I both support podcasting on my campus and produce projects myself. One of my first big endeavors was a 10-episode documentary podcast called *Stories from the Epicenter*, which explored the experience and lasting effects of the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake on Santa Cruz County, the location of the quake's epicenter. That project was challenging but represented a giant leap forward for me in terms of interviewing and editing. I could see more and more how audio could present intricate, complex histories in ways that could be compelling for many kinds of audiences, both inside and outside the academy.

This work opened my eyes to the  
power of audio.

As AHR editor Mark Philip Bradley took the reins in 2021 and began introducing exciting changes, it quickly became clear to both of us that a reimagined podcast could be an important avenue for the journal's expanding scope, by opening up AHR content for listeners in new ways. *AHR Interview* already had a behind-the-scenes element to it, but with the new podcast—which we called *History in Focus*—we wanted to push this further with more immersive storytelling and engagement with the wider array of material that the AHR was beginning to publish. We wanted to up the production quality too. But above all, we wanted to be experimental and try new approaches in hopes of evolving toward something that would be interesting and useful for a wide range of listeners, not just academics.

The pilot episode of *History in Focus*, "Follow Your Nose," which focused on the historical smells research group Odeuropa, is a good example of this new approach. I interviewed multiple researchers from the group, and they sent



Maybe podcasting isn't what it used to be, but it still has a great deal of potential for historical storytelling.  
*Israel Palacio/Unsplash*

me scents ahead of time that I smelled for the first time on air as I talked with them. Listening back, I can hear elements that were still a bit rough, things like recording quality and editing that could stand to be tighter. But a lot of the raw material is there for what I hoped we could do with the new podcast—open up the processes of doing history and present it all in a way that is appealing, even immersive, to the ear.

Subsequent episodes carried forward this focus on less conventional or surprising contexts in which history is done. Many examples, of course, are not new, but the *AHR* in times past did not tend to feature them. For instance, season 1, episode 4, focused on the Blackivists, a collective of Black archivists in Chicago who are working to support the preservation of the city's Black cultural heritage. "Art and History," a segment in season 1, episode 8, highlighted the ways that contemporary artists are increasingly making use of history in their work. Episode 3 of our second season highlighted historians at work at the intersection of politics and public memory.

Other episodes probe the ways that historians are increasingly doing collaborative work. In our May 2024 episode, Kalani Craig and Arlene Díaz outline their joint digital history project and, with that, a potential blueprint for many different kinds of historical collaboration. In other instances, we've featured historians collaborating outside the discipline, such as in season 1, episode 6, "Soil and Memory," featuring historian Alexis Dudden and graphic artistic Kim Inthavong. Alexis and Kim worked together on a written and illustrated piece in the *AHR* History Lab on the history of and present-day activism in Okinawa, Japan. On their episode, we had Alexis read portions of her written piece and Kim describe each of the graphic panels she created to go along with that writing. This is still one of my favorite episodes for how it provides such a clear and fascinating window into how a collaboration like this can work. I also loved the exercise of discussing visual pieces in an audio medium, a challenge that both Kim and Alexis took to readily. I think this is a clear example of an episode adding to and extending the version of the piece that appears in the journal.

These collaboration-focused episodes raise another important point. If I have any central touchstone in my audio work, it would be something like: center the voices of the people nearest the action. In other words, whenever possible, I don't want to be the voice telling you what happened. I want the people who were there—or were there in the sense that they visited the archives, they did the research—to tell you themselves. The podcasts and audio producers that have inspired me the most tend to take this approach—above all the Kitchen Sisters, but also *This American Life*, *Rumble Strip*, and *The Paris Review* podcast, just to name a few. Other formats can be powerful too, and sometimes you need a more present narrator. But I know that as a producer and as a listener, I am most moved by the nonnarrated (or lightly narrated) pieces. Season 1, episode 9, “Black Reconstruction,” leans most heavily in this direction, as Elizabeth Hinton and four other historian and activist voices—and even the voice of W. E. B. Du Bois himself—carry forward the story of Du Bois's powerful work and its legacy. This is another one of my favorites, and we were so pleased and honored to have it reaired on *The Kitchen Sisters Present* podcast a few months later.

## I want the people who were there to tell you themselves.

Other episodes break down what might be considered more traditional AHR articles—Judd Kinzley on hog bristle production during World War II, Diana Paton on gender and Atlantic slavery, Andrew Preston rethinking America's liberal Protestants, and Beeta Baghoolizadeh on racialized slavery in 20th-century Iran all come to mind. We tend to approach these episodes as two stories in one: the story of the history itself and then the story of the historian doing the research. We throw in related archival audio whenever we can find it. Figuring out how to tell these as one combined story, and do that succinctly in 10 to 15 minutes, is always a challenge. But that kind of editing puzzle is another part of this work I find highly engaging. And I'm not producing these episodes alone. Over the last year and a half, graduate assistants and co-producers Matt Hermene and Conor Howard have helped immensely with the editing process and have contributed great interviews themselves.

Another thing you'll notice in all our episodes is a generous amount of music. And while it might seem like one of the more superficial aspects of the production, I don't think of it that way. In fact, one of the things that podcasting has done for me as a scholar and historian, something that working primarily with text did not, is push me to think about the role of affect and emotion in communicating history. We kid

ourselves if we think that emotion doesn't, or shouldn't, figure into scholarly work, whether that is our own emotions around the subjects we're researching or the way we choose—deliberately or by default—to set this or that emotional tone in the way we communicate our scholarship. Working in audio, and in particular working with music, brings those questions to the surface in a way that I find healthy and generative.

Maybe the ultimate affective consideration in this work is the human voice itself. Podcasting is often touted as offering a heightened degree of intimacy, and for good reason. I would argue that it punches well above its weight when it comes to revealing the human side of history, whether we mean historical actors or the historians researching them. Rather than the disembodied narrator of the history textbook, or clinical voice of a typical article or book, audio brings a human voice right to your ear. We hear—more readily than we can read it—excitement, struggle, trepidation, humor, and many other complex emotions that we humans inevitably bring to the table when we do the work of history.

Ultimately, that is probably what I find most compelling about this medium, and what I hope comes through in our work with *History in Focus*. Whatever you want to call that kind of work, sign me up. **P**

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## FROM CODING EMPIRE TO GLOBALIZING PUBLICS

*In the June Issue of the American Historical Review*

The June issue of the *American Historical Review* features articles and forums that rethink approaches to global, environmental, and intellectual history and introduce readers to new methods in historical digital scholarship.

**Elizabeth Chatterjee's** (Univ. of Chicago) "Late Acceleration: The Indian Emergency and the Early 1970s Energy Crisis" explores how the global energy crisis briefly unlocked a radically new horizon of possibilities that played out differently around the world. In India, she argues, the crisis did not begin with the famous Arab oil embargo of 1973. Instead, like many poor oil-importing nations, India experienced the first oil shock as merely one component of a broader climate-food-energy emergency that reverberated throughout the political system and brought a twinned set of fateful changes: the imposition by Prime Minister Indira Gandhi in June 1975 of a constitutional dictatorship called the Emergency, and a parallel state-led embrace of coal despite elite reservations about the environmental damage that would follow. Chatterjee argues that these genealogies also provide the origin story for today's carbon-intensive energy regime in India and the accompanying challenges of climate change.

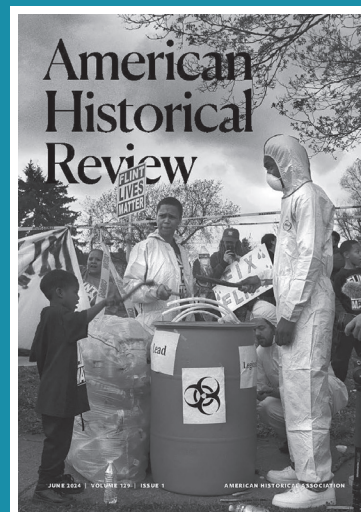
**Sarah Thal's** (Univ. of Wisconsin–Madison) "Chivalry without Women: The Way of the Samurai and Swinton's World History in 1890s Japan" explores how an American world history text—read, interpreted, and used in an entirely unintended context—shaped what we now see as a quintessentially Japanese concept, the Way of the Samurai. William Swinton's influential textbook, *Outlines of the World's History*, was widely read in Japan in the 1890s in English and Japanese translation. Proponents of the new and evolving idea of *Bushidō* (the Samurai code) found Swinton's discussion of European chivalry particularly useful and, borrowing from his text, challenged what they saw as the immoral "woman worship" of the West. Thal argues that Swinton's textbook gave rise to a Japanese conception of chivalry without women that posited an inherently male-supremacist national spirit with a mission to civilize Japan and, for some proponents, the world.

In "Gulistan in Black and White: The Racial and Gendered Legacies of Slavery in 19th-Century Qajar Iran," **Leila Pourtavaf** (York Univ.) uses the late Qajar Iranian court and harem as a historically specific site through which to examine the complex and diverse histories of slavery within the region in the 19th century. Pourtavaf is particularly attentive to how hierarchies of race, gender, and sex functioned as constitutive elements of this institution. She also zooms in on the lives and afterlives of two eunuchs, Aziz Khan and Agha Bahram, who were part of the servant class of Gulistan Palace during Nasir al-Din Shah's reign, and whose life trajectories offer further insight into the racial and gendered legacies of late 19th-century slavery in Iran.

Proponents of *Bushidō* found Swinton's discussion of European chivalry particularly useful.

The AHR History Lab opens with two interventions into digital history. In "The Coded Language of Empire: Digital History, Archival Deep Dives, and the Imperial United States in Cuba's Third War of Independence," **Kalani Craig**, **Arlene J. Díaz**, and **David Kloster** (Univ. of Indiana Bloomington) develop and deploy what they term Mixed-Method Approaches to Collaborative History (MMATCH) that blends more traditional close readings with digital tools including computational text analysis to explore the language of empire and the struggles for Cuban independence from 1895 to 1898 from both American and Cuban perspectives. They also reflect on what it means to undertake a collaborative historical research project with nontraditional methods, foregrounding the importance of overlapping interpretative dialogue with each other around sources and methods for successfully realizing their project. **Jo Guldi** (Emory Univ.) in "Text Mining for Historical Analysis" examines the importance of several recent developments in computational analysis and the use of big data for historians: efforts to understand structural silences and biases in the archive around the

The June *AHR* includes a featured review of recent scholarship on the Flint water crisis and histories of environmental justice. The cover image is drawn from the visual artist, photographer, and MacArthur Fellow LaToya Ruby Frazier's *Flint Is Family in Three Acts* project, for which she spent five years in Flint, Michigan, documenting the lives of those most affected by the city's water crisis. In approaching her project, Frazier was in part inspired by a collaboration between photographer Gordon Parks and writer Ralph Ellison for their 1948 "Harlem Is Nowhere" essay that explored the psychological effects of racism on Black residents in Harlem. Through photographs and text, Frazier examined the disproportionate impact of the water crisis in Flint, where Black residents make up a majority of the city's population and more than 30 percent of the population lives below the poverty line. LaToya Ruby Frazier, "Flint Students and Community Members outside Northwestern High School (Est. 1964) Awaiting the Arrival of President Barack Obama, May 4, 2016, Flint, Michigan, II," 2016–17. Gelatin silver print. 24 × 20 inches (61 × 50.8 cm) © LaToya Ruby Frazier. Courtesy of the artist and Gladstone Gallery.



histories of race, gender, and the postcolonial; explorations of causality in changing language usage over time; and emergent efforts to develop a theory of text mining for the discipline.

A forum on "Globalizing Publics" is also a part of the June History Lab. Organized by **Valeska Huber** (Univ. of Vienna), it brings together 10 historians to discuss the modes of public-making pursued by historical actors such as journalists, writers, educators, translators, radio listeners, theater producers, and activists from varying political positions and regions of the world. Along with Huber, **Emma Hunter** (Univ. of Edinburgh), **Nile Green** (Univ. of California, Los Angeles), **Ismay Milford** (Freie Univ. Berlin), **Sophie-Jung Kim** (Freie Univ. Berlin), **Su Lin Lewis** (Univ. of Bristol), **Sarah Bellows-Blakely** (Freie Univ. Berlin), **Ali Karim** (Univ. of Calgary), **Katharina Rietzler** (Sussex Univ.), and **Lea Börgerding** (Freie Univ. Berlin) explore the often fragile and contingent practices through which these historical actors have sought to "globalize" publics, as well as what it means to do more public-facing work ourselves as historians. As **Glenda Sluga** (Univ. of Sydney) writes in her comment, the forum helps us appreciate the kind of public-making history can do "across the linguistic, cultural, and geopolitical borders that define our discipline . . . and to what global ends."

The June History Lab includes two new modules for the #AHRsYllabus project. In "Teaching How Official History Is Made: State Standards as Primary Sources," **Stephen Jackson** (Univ. of Kansas), the 2023 recipient of the AHA's Eugene Asher Distinguished Teaching Award, traces the controversial rise of state standards over the last decade for K–12 education and offers teachers a flexible lesson plan that encourages them to draw on the history standards in their own states to help students better understand the complexities of how local

constructions of official knowledge are made. **Rebecca Earle's** (Univ. of Warwick) "How to Teach an *AHR* Article" offers a lesson plan for teaching her own 2010 *AHR* article "If You Eat Their Food . . . : Diets and Bodies in Early Colonial Spanish America," which is among the journal's all-time top 10 most downloaded articles. Earle reflects on how she came to write the article and why she wanted to pay attention to the history of food. She also provides a set of primary documents from the 15th through 17th centuries and guiding questions that allow students to undertake a deep dive into the significance of food for early modern colonists in Spanish America and their understandings of bodily health.

A History Unclassified essay closes out the June edition of the Lab. In "Grassroots Archives," **Daniel McDonald** (Univ. of Oxford) considers the opportunities and challenges of using social movement archives to democratize the study of history. He reflects on an effort to preserve the memory of the activism in São Paulo's urban peripheries during Brazil's civil-military dictatorship (1964–85) in which he took part, and what this effort reveals about preserving at-risk historical sources, enhancing local capacity, and broadening the practice of history beyond the academy. **P**

*Mark Philip Bradley is editor of the American Historical Review and the Bernadotte E. Schmitt Distinguished Service Professor of History at the University of Chicago.*

DANA SCHAFFER

## SUPPORTING HISTORY DEPARTMENT CHAIRS

### *Behind the Scenes at the AHA*

I've been involved with a wide range of activities in my 11 years working at the AHA, but some of my most rewarding experiences have been working with history department chairs. Chairs are on the front lines of the discipline, defending historians' work and supporting their professional lives at all stages of their academic careers. A crucial goal of the AHA and its Professional Division, which I serve as staff liaison, is to strengthen this work and to provide resources and opportunities that make chairs' work easier and valued. Each year, the AHA hosts a variety of events and opportunities to benefit department chairs and build community, including webinars, sessions at the annual meeting, and an annual workshop.

Since 2018, the AHA has held a Department Chairs Workshop each July. The workshop brings together department chairs from all types of institutions around the country to share their experiences, offer advice, and build a cohort of peers who can serve as resources for one another long after the workshop ends. The 2023 workshop was my own introduction to working with department chairs. The attendees, including both incoming chairs and those with several years' experience, enjoyed two days of facilitated discussions, presentations, and camaraderie, learning from each other and tackling common issues together. Chairs shared insights about strategies for recruiting majors and advocating for their departments, navigating personnel challenges, and managing a work-life balance, to name just a few of the topics covered. Attendees were supportive and energized, ready to take what they learned and apply it in their home departments. I'm looking forward to the 2024 workshop on July 15 and 16 at Northwestern University. (There is still time to register!)

Because finding the time and resources to attend an in-person workshop can be challenging for some, the AHA also offers a Department Chairs Webinar Series throughout the academic year. Planning these webinars has been a real pleasure for me—working with both AHA colleagues and committed department chairs to select topics and facilitators for each part

of the series. These 60-minute sessions are held on Friday afternoons and, much like the workshop, include both facilitated discussions and breakout rooms on common issues. The 2023–24 series featured events on response to crises, postpandemic graduate education, navigation of legal issues, and the place of history in general education. These sessions are free to attend, but registration is required—keep an eye out for webinar announcements in our *Fortnightly News* emails.

Each year, department chairs have a large presence at the AHA annual meeting. The Department Chairs Lunch is a great opportunity for chairs from a wide range of institutions—from small liberal arts colleges to Research 1 universities to regional publics—to meet one another, share ideas, and learn about resources for their work. At the latest annual meeting in San Francisco, chairs discussed how departments might institute programs to develop the employability of college learners. (We are considering topics for next year's lunch and welcome your suggestions.)

Additionally, the AHA has helped to convene regional chairs' meetings, both in person and online, with discussions tailored to the needs and interests of the group. If this is something that might benefit your department, please let us know, and we can help.

Finally, in addition to our range of events and activities, the AHA hosts a vibrant Department Chairs listserv community, where chairs can post questions, pool resources, share data and insights, and solicit feedback and advice. The community is a confidential space for chairs to support one another and benefit from the contributions of their peers.

The AHA is grateful for the work of history department chairs, and we strive to provide programs, activities, and resources to help them sustain their work, support colleagues and students, and defend the historical discipline. **P**

*Dana Schaffer is deputy director of the AHA.*



## George K. Behlmer

1948–2024

Historian of Britain

George K. Behlmer, historian of modern Britain and professor emeritus at the University of Washington (UW), died on January 4, 2024.

George earned his BA, with highest honors, in 1970 from the University of California, Santa Barbara. He then did his graduate work at Stanford University, where he earned his MA in 1972 and his PhD in 1977. While a graduate student, he took courses in the psychology department to pursue his interest in psychological factors and historical change. His dissertation, “The Child Protection Movement in England, 1860–1890,” was advised by Peter Stansky.

After one-year appointments at Stanford and Yale University, George joined UW as an assistant professor in 1979. In 1982, he won a Distinguished Teaching Award. When interviewed about the award and asked about his memories of teaching, he noted, “In the first Irish history class I taught, I had a role-playing exercise. The debate was over whether the British Army should be forced to leave Northern Ireland. One student, who was Irish and thought of the IRA as heroes, had to argue for the British. He got involved more than any student I’ve ever had. He even called the Rev. Ian Paisley in Ireland and interviewed him on tape. During the class, when he was asked a question, he played the tape. It blew everyone away.” George’s dedication to teaching the history of Northern Ireland and of the republic led to four UW study-abroad programs in Belfast between 2001 and 2007. His lifelong affection for Ireland culminated in his 2012 Alumni Association History Lecture Series, *Revenge and Reconciliation in Modern Ireland*.

In all his research, George resisted simple dichotomies and offered startlingly sensitive and nuanced accounts of his historical subjects – often of those whose voices had gone unrepresented. *Child Abuse and Moral Reform in England, 1870–1908* (Stanford Univ. Press, 1982) won the award for best first book from the Pacific Coast Branch of the AHA. *Friends of the Family: The English Home and Its Guardians, 1850–1940* (Stanford Univ.

Press, 1998) dissected the Victorian deification of the family, illuminating contemporary debates about “family values” and their political deployment. In honor of Peter Stansky, George co-edited a volume of essays with Fred Leventhal, *Singular Continuities: Tradition, Nostalgia, and Identity in Modern British Culture* (Stanford Univ. Press, 2000). Among George’s prize-winning articles was “Grave Doubts: Victorian Medicine, Moral Panic, and the Signs of Death” (*Journal of British Studies*, 2003), co-winner of the 2003 North American Victorian Studies Association Donald Gray Prize. George’s most recent book was *Risky Shores: Savagery and Colonialism in the Western Pacific* (Stanford Univ. Press, 2018), which won the 2019 Stansky Book Prize from the North American Conference on British Studies. With George’s characteristic precision, he explored how the notion of savagery was used not only to marginalize native populations but to emphasize the fragility of Indigenous cultures. Lively and engaging, but never sensationalistic, *Risky Shores* treats the Pacific (as George did the family) as a site of mutual misunderstanding and misrepresentation.

Over the course of his career, George served on numerous PhD committees. He was an active member of the North American Conference on British Studies and the Pacific Coast Conference on British Studies and held several leadership positions, including the presidency of PCCBS from 2011 to 2012.

George’s drive to excel in his scholarship and teaching was echoed in his love of sports; he was a star swimmer in his youth and competed in triathlons into his 70s. All will remember his integrity and the incredibly high standards he set for himself, coupled with his sharp humor and generosity toward students and colleagues (whose work he edited with rigor, but also tact). He was his own hardest (and most self-deprecating) critic, and a painstaking reviser of his own work – which resulted in his beautifully clear and direct prose.

George leaves behind his wife (and, as he said, “loving critic”), Jane Cater; his brother, Charles; and many close friends, students, and colleagues.

Jordanna Bailkin  
University of Washington

Jane Cater  
City University of Seattle

Glennys Young  
University of Washington

Photo courtesy University of Washington



## Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie

1929–2023

Historian of France;  
AHA Honorary  
Foreign Member

Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, distinguished historian of ancien régime France, died at age 94 on November 22, 2023. He embarked on his career after completing his studies at the École normale supérieure in Paris. He held several coveted posts, including a research position at the Centre national de la recherche scientifique in the late 1950s, before being named the chair of modern history at the Collège de France in 1973. Many encomia have appeared since Le Roy Ladurie's death. The present reflection is less a traditional memorial notice than an expression of gratitude for his contribution to the formation of my own historical consciousness in the 1970s, when his influence was at its pinnacle.

I glimpsed Le Roy Ladurie on a few occasions in Paris while doing postdoctoral research at the Bibliothèque nationale de France, but I did not have the temerity to introduce myself. His masterpiece, *Les paysans de Languedoc*, appeared in 1966, and by the time I arrived in graduate school at Princeton University, it was required reading. The book, along with the newfound utility of the computer in doing social scientific research, contributed to the growing attraction of quantitative history. Since Le Roy Ladurie's study covered an enormous span of time, it also contributed to American historians' fascination with the *longue durée* approach to history most closely associated with Fernand Braudel.

Le Roy Ladurie admired Braudel's work, but he had serious reservations about the reliance on climate and geography as explanatory variables in it. Moreover, animosities arose between the men over the direction of the flagship French historical journal, *Annales ESC* (now *Annales HSS*). The present initials stand for *Histoire, Sciences Sociales*, a somewhat bland motto for the extraordinary scholarly enterprise associated with the names of Marc Bloch and Lucien Febvre. The original initials, which stood for *Économies, Sociétés, Civilisations*, evoked the materialist view of historical causation. Factors that informed the economic basis of life created the preconditions for social formation and its development, from which civilization took shape. Le Roy Ladurie remained attracted to this

paradigm his whole career, but he never seemed limited by it. He also sought to reconstruct the *mentalités* of various historical societies in a number of his books, most controversially *Montaillou: Village occitan de 1294 à 1324* (1975). I remain in awe of the accomplishment.

Many medieval historians were less enthusiastic. A number of serious reviewers, including Leonard Boyle and David Herlihy, had misgivings about Le Roy Ladurie's technical skills and his interpretations of the great inquisition on which he based his study. Nonetheless, what was very attractive about the book to me as a relative neophyte and has continued to be to succeeding cohorts of medieval historians was its author's passionate attachment to his subjects, the peasants who suffered the intrusive disciplinary practices of the 13th- and 14th-century church.

Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie had unbounded historical curiosity about many subjects, including climate, ritual practices, popular culture, biography, and politics. His interest in politics was not solely academic. Rather, he was an engaged intellectual whose political trajectory included his relatively youthful affiliation with the Communist Party, disillusionment with it after 1956, and a longer-term membership in the Socialist Party, which in the end also did not satisfy his political yearnings. What is clear is that his passion for the real problems of real people in the present deeply informed and enriched even the most structuralist examples of his scholarship.

Arno Mayer, my colleague at Princeton, knew Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie well. Both were cosmopolitan personalities. On Mayer's return to Princeton from a European trip in the early 2000s, one that included a visit to Le Roy Ladurie's family residence in Normandy, he asked me whether I had ever met the great French historian. I confessed that I had not. I should have, he responded. Le Roy Ladurie had read my book on the great famine of the early 14th century and enjoyed it. I was delighted, of course. I was more touched that he had inscribed to me a copy of his most recent book at the time, *Histoire des paysans français* (2002). This wholly unexpected gift is one I shall always treasure. In my admittedly not disinterested opinion, the discipline has lost not only an inspiring historian but also a generous human being.

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William Chester Jordan  
Princeton University

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## Susie Lee Owens Bryant

1905–86

Historian of Reconstruction

Susie Lee Owens Bryant was one of the first African American women to earn a PhD in history, but as with many scholars of her generation whose academic career was spent in historically Black colleges and universities, especially those who left academia before its integration, her pathbreaking work as a historian of Reconstruction has been largely forgotten.

Susie Lee Owens was born February 5, 1905, in Oxford, North Carolina. Her father, Samuel, was a tobacco factory worker from Oxford when he met her mother, Louise Usher, in South Carolina, shortly before the turn of the century. The pair had moved back to Oxford by the time of Susie's birth, and they went on to be fairly successful, owning their own home and Louise later managing a café.

Owens earned a BA from Howard University in 1928. She put her degree to work through the early 1930s as a schoolteacher in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, where she also coached a girls' basketball team that won the state championship. She went to New York to earn an MA at Teachers College, Columbia University, in 1937 and almost immediately began work toward a PhD at New York University under the supervision of Henry Steele Commager. While at NYU, Owens was a co-founder of the James Weldon Johnson Literary Society. She completed her dissertation (who supervised it after Commager left in 1939 is not clear) in 1943.

Owens's dissertation, "The Union League of America: Political Activities in Tennessee, the Carolinas, and Virginia, 1865–1870," was the first and, until Austin Marcus Drumm's 1955 dissertation and Michael Fitzgerald's 1989 book, the only full-length study of this crucial organization that linked political support for the Civil War in the North with mobilization of freedmen in the South during Reconstruction. Her study, inspired directly by W. E. B. Du Bois's *Black Reconstruction* (1935), took a different and much more negative view of the Union League, in some ways anticipating a postrevisionist position. While not blaming the freedpeople, she did argue that "the [Union League of America] and its affiliated organizations are

responsible for the creation of the so-called Solid South; for the intensification of race antagonism; for the delaying of political reconstruction; for the retarding of economic recovery for the masses; and for many of the distorted stories about the Negro race which are now accepted as truisms." Later historians of Reconstruction from the 1960s onward have sometimes cited her work to draw on its extensive research in Union League publications and newspapers, though few agreed with its conclusions.

After completing her PhD, Owens, who at some point married North Carolina native William Cullen Bryant, taught briefly at Winston-Salem Teachers College in 1944–45 before taking a position at Tennessee Agricultural and Industrial State College by 1946. There Owens Bryant was professor of history and coordinator of graduate studies and research in social sciences; she was also affiliated with the political science department.

Owens Bryant left Nashville and academia in 1958 for family reasons and moved to Englewood, New Jersey, where she worked for the Urban League. She was on the board of directors of the Englewood branch and was chair of its educational committee, but her influence extended much further. In 1965, to respond to the problem of African American youth dropping out of the school system, she originated the "street academy" program, a community-based alternative to steer young people away from delinquency and help them gain educational credentials and, in some cases, prepare them for college. Although always fighting a lack of resources, it was an influential model in the late 1960s and the 1970s, and in 1972, the Urban League awarded Owens Bryant the Whitney Young Award in recognition.

Owens Bryant retired in 1973, and she spent the remainder of her life in Englewood, New Jersey. She was an active member of the First Baptist Church and chaired its Chapel of the Four Children Scholarship and Education Fund, which helped fund higher education in memory of the four girls killed in the 16th Street Baptist Church bombing in Birmingham, Alabama. Owens Bryant died on March 23, 1986.

Bruce E. Baker  
Newcastle University

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Amherst, MA

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immigration policy and the very idea of "Americanness"; how matters of race inform issues of environmental justice; and how the American legal response to the legacy of slavery compares and contrasts with that of other nations with a history of chattel slavery (e.g., Brazil). Teaching responsibilities include two courses per semester and supervision of senior honors projects. We welcome applications from persons trained in the social sciences, the humanities, and/or law. We are particularly interested in candidates whose research and teaching are interdisciplinary. The position requires a PhD (candidates must have the PhD degree in hand or all requirements for the degree fulfilled by the start of the appointment) or a JD. The start date for the position is July 1, 2025. To apply, candidates are asked to submit electronically (<https://apply.interfolio.com/142507>) a cover letter addressed to Prof. Lawrence Douglas, a CV, a sample of their scholarship, a teaching statement, and three confidential letters of recommendation. Review of applications will begin on September 15, 2024, and will continue until the position is filled. Amherst College is a private undergraduate liberal arts college with 1,800 students and more than 200 faculty members. Located in the Connecticut River Valley of western Massachusetts, Amherst participates with Hampshire, Mount Holyoke, and Smith Colleges and the University of Massachusetts in the Five-College Consortium.



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The AHA retains the right to refuse or edit all discriminatory statements from copy submitted to the Association that is not consistent with these guidelines or with the principles of Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. The AHA accepts advertisements from academic institutions whose administrations are under censure by the American Association of University Professors (AAUP), but requires that this fact be clearly stated. Refer to [www.aaup.org/our-programs/academic-freedom/censure-list](https://www.aaup.org/our-programs/academic-freedom/censure-list) for more information.

For further details on best practices in hiring and academic employment, see the AHA's Statement on Standards of Professional Conduct, [www.historians.org/standards](https://www.historians.org/standards); Guidelines for the Hiring Process, [www.historians.org/hiring](https://www.historians.org/hiring); and Policy on Advertisements, [www.historians.org/adpolicy](https://www.historians.org/adpolicy).

WHITNEY E. BARRINGER

## ASYLUM RUINS

Originally built in 1797 far from Baltimore, the Spring Grove Hospital Center is now consumed by the expanding University of Maryland, Baltimore County, campus in Catonsville. On a recent Baltimore Heritage tour, I was struck by the hospital's architecture—old and new mixtures of brick, stone, glass, and cement, both stately and nondescript. Written across these buildings was more than 200 years of psychiatric care. But when we learned that the hospital's current baseball field was built on a patient graveyard, I remembered the tragic irony of asylum history: it was exactly the stories I was being told—about dilapidated buildings where people experienced neglect and horror—that the 18th- and 19th-century inventors of the modern asylum had tried to vanquish.

By the 18th century, the European concept of *asylum* captured a type of sanctuary for those like the mentally ill, lepers, and the elderly poor, who were especially vulnerable to mistreatment. As 18th-century philosophes began to debate a new idea called “human rights,” distaste grew for inhumane treatment and environments for the mentally ill. Reformers in England and France pushed for grand experiments in care, including “moral treatment,” a therapeutic approach with bucolic, structured environments where patients could learn how to manage and recover from their conditions. By the early 1810s, word had reached the United States that sympathetic and scientific treatment of mentally ill patients could *restore* the faculties, defying centuries of belief in the immutability of mental illness.

By 1861, mental hospitals expanded across the United States, even in the South, where enslaved people built institutions to which they could not be admitted. The Kirkbride Plan became the standard for asylum architecture. Its palatial image—an enormous V-shaped building with two wings, stone columns, brick facade, grand entryway, and large common rooms—communicated the asylum's permanence and authority. In accordance with moral treatment, Kirkbride institutions were built far from the stress and sound of cities, surrounded by



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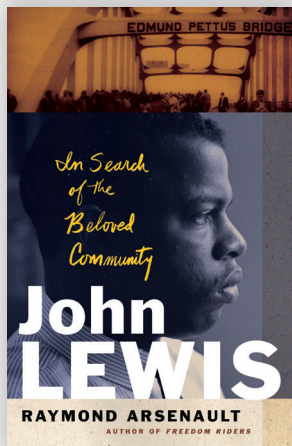
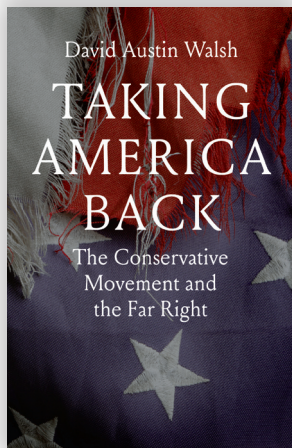
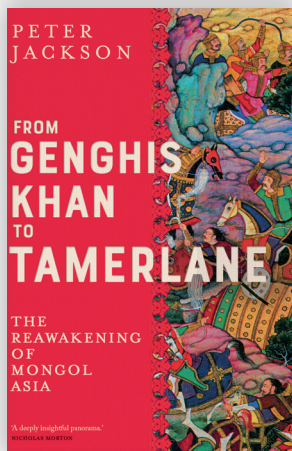
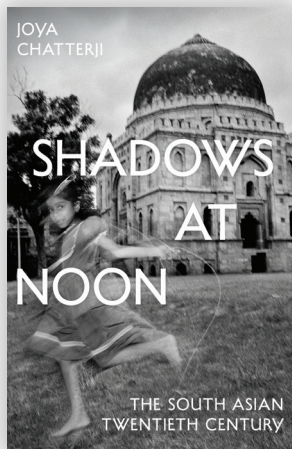
orchards, gardens, and farms where no more than 150 patients performed the labors designed to make both the institution and the soul self-sustaining.

Mental trauma follows war, and established mental hospitals strained after the Civil War. Shell-shocked veterans and Southern African Americans, no longer legally prohibited from care, filtered into already overcrowded asylums. Postwar economic devastation and market crashes created mental health crises and strained hospital budgets. Moral treatment was prohibitively expensive and unceremoniously abandoned. States expanded expanded institutions rapidly—and poorly—to meet carceral demands, housing thousands of patients on campuses designed to hold a fraction of that number. Death, disease, tragedy, scandal, and rumor persisted around mental health institutions. By 1900, the curative aims of the mental institution were a pipe dream; the mental hospital's reputation, permanently sullied. As new construction designed to meet the needs of states rather than patients supplanted the old, the old became too expensive to maintain. The asylums of the 19th century eroded into ruins.

Many of these sites have been demolished, but the grand and gothic ruins of asylums still haunt the American landscape and our psyches. Whether in horror movies or ghost-hunting reality shows, they evoke a past where people were institutionalized against their will, separated from their families, and buried in careless graves. But asylum ruins house another poltergeist. For a moment, the wills of state governments, reformers, and doctors aligned to create a state institution that could not only rehabilitate the mentally ill but also reimagine the responsibility of a state to its people. To accurately remember the tragedy of the asylum, we must add political failure to the retinue of ghosts walking the floors between crumbling brick walls. **P**

Whitney E. Barringer is a researcher at the AHA.

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# AHA Reads

## 2024 SUMMER READING CHALLENGE



In our busy lives, it can be difficult to find time to read for fun—or to read at all! Yet one of the most enjoyable parts of our work as historians is reading scholarship about the past and discussing that work with others. Participate in the AHA's third annual Summer Reading Challenge by choosing three tasks to complete by Labor Day:

- ☐ Read a history of a place you're visiting this summer.
- ☐ Read a history by a scholar whose day job is outside academia.
- ☐ Read a co-authored history.
- ☐ Read a history of Indigenous people.
- ☐ Read a piece of historical fiction (novel, story, poem, play) set in the time or place you study.
- ☐ Learn from a historian presenting their scholarship in an amicus brief, digital collection, exhibition, podcast, video, or another format outside traditional academic publishing.

From June 1 to Labor Day, complete three reading tasks to finish the challenge!  
Use **#AHAReads** on social media or share in the AHA Member Forum.

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