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# PERSPECTIVES ON HISTORY

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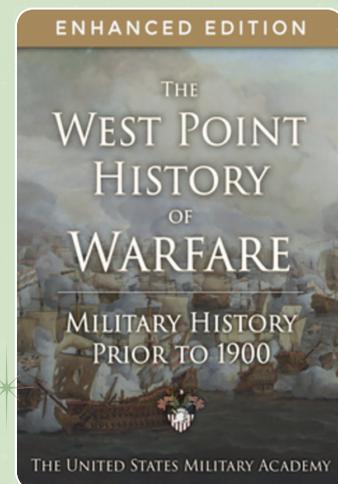
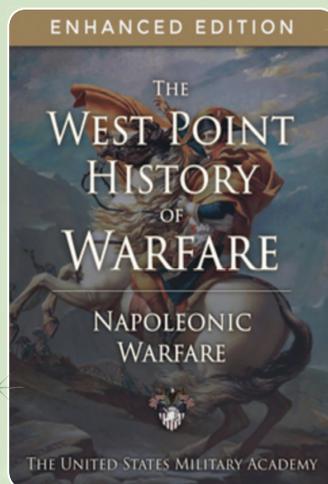
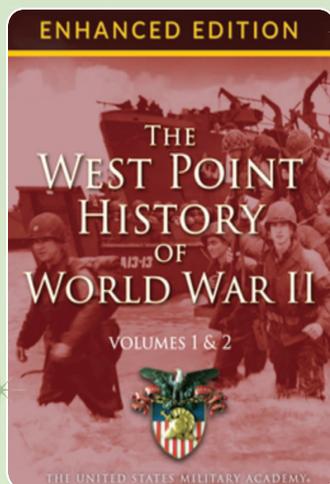
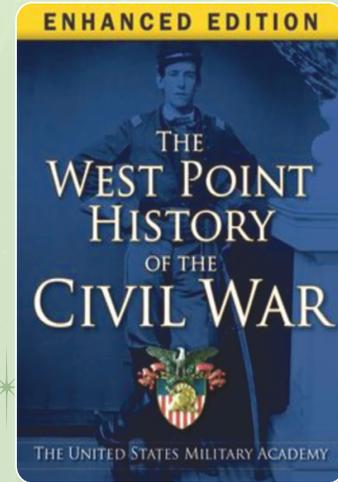
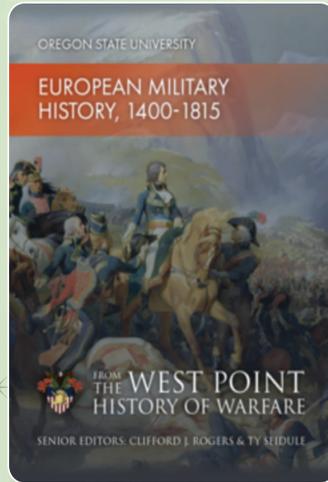
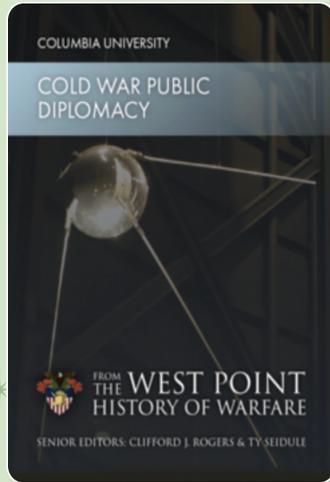
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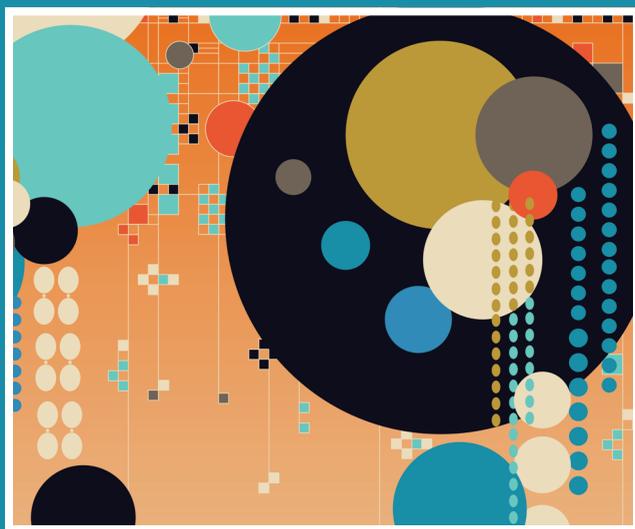
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## ON THE COVER

Attendees of the 139th annual meeting gathered on the shores of Lake Michigan on an unseasonably warm January weekend. In the Hilton Chicago and Palmer House hotels, 3,000 historians spent their days immersed in discussions of fresh research, innovative pedagogy, and historians' place in the world today. The conference artwork, inspired by the aesthetics of Frank Lloyd Wright, complemented the venues' historic vibe.

*Artwork: Rebecca L. West*

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**AMERICAN  
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ASSOCIATION**

400 A Street, SE  
Washington, DC 20003-3889  
PHONE: 202.544.2422  
FAX: 202.544.8307  
EMAIL: [perspectives@historians.org](mailto:perspectives@historians.org)  
WEB: [historians.org/perspectives](http://historians.org/perspectives)



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BRENDAN GILLIS

## UTILITY INFIELDBERS FOR HIRE

*History Majors, Careers Prospects, and Versatility*

“What’s a utility infielder?” a colleague asked in an AHA Slack channel after *The Washington Post* quoted me comparing history majors to this do-it-all role on “the workforce baseball team.” A utility infielder, I explained, is versatile enough to play multiple positions on the field, displaying a well-rounded set of skills that can be adapted to different situations. Admittedly, this isn’t the most glorious (or the highest paid) pathway to success for an aspiring star. But at the hypercompetitive level of professional sports, in which every player is a world-class athlete, such versatility is an exceedingly desirable quality that can make or break a career.

My comments came in response to a Microsoft study identifying the 40 occupations for which generative AI was most immediately applicable. The authors of this report filtered 200,000 anonymized user queries from Microsoft’s Copilot generative AI tool through the 21st-century equivalent of a high school career suitability survey. Historian ranked second on this list, prompting responses that ranged from panic or resignation to incredulity.

What did historians think about claims that AI might replace us? the journalist wanted to know. And what could we say to undergraduate students worried about future career prospects in our discipline? Conveniently, my colleagues Julia Brookins, Laura Ansley, and I were in the midst of preparing a revised second edition of the AHA’s best-selling booklet, *Careers for History Majors*, which features data, testimonials, reflective essays, and practical guidance for undergraduate students thinking about how to put a degree in history to good use after graduation.

College graduates with history degrees forge successful careers in a dizzying array of fields. In the world of athletics, to stretch my analogy yet further, history majors coach football (Mike McDaniel), baseball (Dave Roberts), soccer (Jesse Marsch), and basketball (Shaka Smart), to name just a few. Studying history provides a strong foundation for careers in

business (Carly Fiorina), law (Sonia Sotomayor), museums (AHA president-elect Lonnie Bunch III), and academia. Even four occupants of the White House (FDR, Nixon, G. W. Bush, and Biden) were history majors. The new booklet includes essays and testimonials from professors, academic advisors, career counselors, entrepreneurs, and nonprofit executives, as well as an endocrinologist, a software engineer, a retired colonel, and the owner of an artisanal mustard company.

We approached this edition as an opportunity to center the needs of students and recent graduates entering a rapidly evolving workforce. In addition to updated and expanded career data, we developed a chart matching learning outcomes for history students with the skills employers use in hiring. Additional new content provides practical guidance for the job application process to supplement more reflective essays about what to look for in a graduate program, the civic value of historical study, and the many other (often less tangible) benefits of a life grounded in historical thinking.

Above all, we hoped to reassure current and prospective history majors that there is value in following your intellectual passions. Thinking about careers need not come at the expense of the aspects of history that attracted many of us to this field of study in the first place. Wherever they work, history majors often find ways of applying disciplinary knowledge, empathy, and habits of mind to guide their endeavors.

History is everywhere and helps define all of us. Many jobs require elements of historical thinking. And this, I would contend, can help explain why so many of the queries put to generative AI tools involve tasks associated with our work. There are plenty of reasons to be concerned about the future of our discipline in the AI economy. But reports of history’s demise have been greatly exaggerated. Baseball teams still rely on utility infielders, and the world needs history majors more than ever. **P**

*Brendan Gillis is director of teaching and learning at the AHA.*

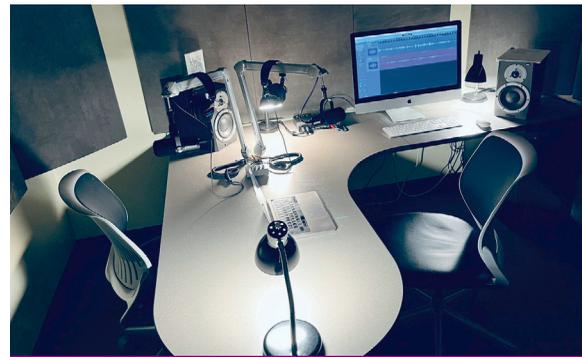


## TO THE EDITOR

I appreciated AHA president Suzanne Marchand's oh-so-timely inaugural column, "On History and Flattery" (January 2026), in which she reminds us—through a lively analysis of several historians drawn from the Western canon—that the historian's task is not to flatter rulers, nations, or public opinion but to present the truth regardless of whether it offends one's contemporaries. As the Trump administration removes historical plaques in Philadelphia that noted that the first US president was an enslaver (to give just one example of today's war on history), it is inspiring to read that some of our predecessors centuries ago stood up against similar pressures to whitewash the realities of their societies. (Our colleagues in science, public health, and other disciplines, of course, are facing the same challenges.)

Please take what follows in the spirit of Marchand's approving paraphrase of Lucian, that historians should welcome "educated 'faultfinders' who would catch the historian in errors or exaggerations." Marchand's repeated invocation of "the ancients," "antiquity," and "the ancient world" to signify only a portion of the eastern Mediterranean (and "early modern thinking" to encompass only European scholars) only highlights the fact that she failed here to incorporate her own observation about "the expansion and diversification of the discipline" to, among others, "non-Europeans."

Having taught the introductory world history course for over 20 years, I recoil at the phrase "the ancient world" as a stand-in for Greece and Rome not simply because of political correctness but because of historical precision, including in this very example about historians themselves. Most world history textbooks discuss first-century BCE Chinese court historian Sima Qian, who endured castration because he challenged his emperor's account of events. For example, *Traditions and Encounters* (5th ed., 2011) uses the subheading "Speaking Truth to Power in Han China" in their seven-paragraph examination of this scholar. And *Worlds Together, Worlds Apart* (vol. 1, 5th ed., 2018) includes a half-page excerpt from Sima Qian's work criticizing multiple emperors, with the textbook authors adding that he "later had as much influence in East Asia as Herodotus . . . had in Greece and Rome." It's a line tailor-made for Marchand's



## Historical Podcasts in the Classroom

*Saniya Lee Ghanoui*

Read about ways to use historical podcasts in the classroom and guide students in creating their own historical podcasts.

**SYLLABUS**

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column—and ironic, given that she co-authored other editions of this very textbook.

Later, Ibn Khaldun, termed "the great Arab historian" by *Worlds Together, Worlds Apart*, grappled with the same challenge as the early modern European historians Marchand discusses: dependence on government patronage while seeking an independent, even critical, scholarly stance.

Incorporating the experiences of such non-Western scholars would have made Marchand's column more historically inclusive and provided more than rhetorical recognition of the broadened scope of our discipline.

— ROBERT SHAFFER  
*Shippensburg University (emeritus)*

SUZANNE MARCHAND

## ON HISTORY, OBJECTIVITY, AND INQUIRY

Acknowledging that I entered graduate school as long ago as 1985 might alert readers to the fact that I was educated as an intellectual historian during the high and heady years of deconstructionist and Foucauldian criticism. Famously, deconstructionist criticism made us all suspicious that so-called “scientific” knowledge was made to exert power over someone or something, and the upshot of our own inquiries was to make clear just how unobjective scholarship has always been.

The first red flag that this line of thinking had its own rather terrifying social effects came in 2004 when Bruno Latour, a leading deconstructor of scientific certainty, faced by climate change denial that took this thinking too far, decided that excessive confidence in scholarly expertise was no longer the battle that needed fighting. For me, the full force of this notion came in the course of the 2016 election, as the question of how to fight fake news became paramount. So worried did I become about the public’s loss of trust in historical (or any other) expertise that I began to say—at first only to close friends—“I want my objectivity back.”

For a time, it seemed to me that some idea of objectivity was the only way to restore the credibility of historical expertise. But how to reach it? I knew that objectivity was an empty pretense, one that had, moreover, obscured imperious and later discredited claims. As early as 1988, Peter Novick’s *That Noble Dream* had unveiled the bankruptcy of objectivity claims in American historical writing. In 2007, Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison’s *Objectivity* showed how across the sciences, born of particular forms of mental and bodily practice, the idea was made an epistemological virtue. I could not pretend that these critiques were not still compelling. But, with the prompting of my early modernist guru Anthony Grafton, I increasingly began to recognize the limitations of my modernist training. (My Eurocentric focus is another problem, which I recognize but need more help to fix!) Historical scholarship isn’t all about the *writing* of histories—its core values and virtues lie in our research

*practices*. As the study of ancient history shows us more clearly than does modern scholarship, these practices evolve without us needing to claim they result in perfect objectivity. And when I began to think about the history of Herodotus’s reception, it occurred to me that ancient and early modern authors had much to teach us about the *practice* of historical inquiry, which has been treated (I believe unfairly) with so much cynicism by the deconstructionists.

### Historical scholarship’s core values and virtues lie in research practices.

So what if we focus today on the work of the historian not as a writer, as did, famously, Hayden White, but as an inquirer? Herodotus himself called his work (in Greek) *The Inquiries*, not *The History of the Persian Wars*, as my translation titled it. Indeed, the person we hail as “the father of history” had known that he was doing something different from the poets, even as he wittingly or unwillingly incorporated literary tropes and flourishes into his narrative. Unlike many writers of his era who claimed the inspiration of the muses, Herodotus possessed the specific “voiceprint,” as Robert Fowler called it, of a man who drew explicit attention to his hard work investigating the causes of the Graeco-Persian Wars. Like his contemporary medical thinkers and pre-Socratic philosophers, Herodotus was interested in demonstrating his empirical bona fides, by the twin processes of autopsy (witnessing for oneself) and information gathering, mostly collecting oral traditions. Particularly in the first half of his narrative, which surveys the non-Greek world long before his birth, Herodotus made sure readers recognized that he had labored to measure the circumference of the Black Sea; to record numerous, contradictory, Scythian origin stories; to go to Egypt to ask the local priests more questions than the Elephant’s Child asked the many-colored python in Rudyard Kipling’s famous short story. Herodotus presents himself as the sort of man you can trust because he asked questions, he went places, he checked (at least some) stories.



Photo: Annette Hornischer



Surrounded by fragments of evidence, Clio gives her audience a skeptical look, as if to say, "Hmm, I'm not sure I'm ready to write yet . . . Perhaps I need to learn more first."

Charles Meynier, *Clio, Muse of History*, Cleveland Museum of Art, Severance and Greta Millikin Purchase Fund 2003.6.5, public domain.

In one important passage, Herodotus fact-checks Homer's account to suss out the real origins of the Trojan War. On the basis of the testimony of Menelaus, preserved in Egyptian oral tradition, the historian concluded that Helen of Troy had never gone to Troy but had been waylaid in Egypt by King Proteus. Homer, Herodotus claimed, had known this story, "but since it was not so suitable to the composition of his poem as the other which he followed, he dismissed it" (2.116). As his version of the tale was both more logical (Why would the Trojans go to war for one woman?) and attested by a Greek eyewitness, Herodotus presented his story as different in kind. While Homer's was poetic, his was historical. It was more plausible, in terms of human nature, and it was grounded in evidence; it had been obtained by inquiry. Herodotus said nothing (frustratingly) about how, where, and when he wrote his inquiries. But he would not have been bothered by accusations that he had intruded judgments, tragic emplotments, or full speeches into the text. He had earned the right to do these things by the investigative work he had put in beforehand.

But inquiry would be nothing without criticism, and historians have generally been a critical bunch. As John Marincola noted, Herodotus's predecessor Hecataeus opened his big historical work (now known only in fragments) by dissing his fellow Greeks. Hecataeus said, "I write what follows as it seems to me to be true; for the stories of the Greeks are varied, and, as is manifest to me, ludicrous." And Herodotus's successors never ceased to find fault; "everyone refutes Herodotus," wrote one of his most ardent ancient critics (*Against Apion* 1.16). Everyone felt they had to one-up him: The historians and geographers who followed had to show that their information-gathering processes were better and more probable. One might look at the history of this process as zero-sum squabbling. Yet how best to know the history of Egypt or to understand the character of Alexander was a productive controversy, and criticism ended not in despair but in more inquiry.

Inquiry into the deep past was (and remains) difficult, and few Romans were willing to follow Herodotus into lands of barbarian tongues and iffy tales. Many political men took the Thucydidean path and simply wrote the history of the present, in which they had played a role. History's purpose was increasingly presented as pedagogical, rather than, as in Herodotus's inquiries, antiquarian and memorial. But to instruct elite citizens meant, more than ever, to provide materials that were not invented or incredible. Through research or personal experience, writers were expected to investigate, ask questions, sift out absurdities, and make reasonable judgments of character. Compositional additions were expected—after all, history remained a branch of rhetoric. But it was a branch whose competence was underwritten by being there and knowing a lot, not only by speaking well.

From the Roman period forward, European historians chiefly compiled and compared traditional accounts, and Christian writers muddled the inspiration/inquiry divide by invoking God's voice, and protesting that they needed no other security on which to judge. But even so, medieval writers in the West, as in the Islamic world, collected, selected, and sieved many texts to compose both holy and secular histories. The bibliophile Peter the Eater (Petrus Comestor), for example, worked hard to incorporate profane texts such as Josephus's *Jewish Antiquities* into his *Historia scholastica* (ca. 1173). Monks traveled from place to place to view manuscripts and documents. Autopsy, as practiced by pilgrims and itinerant scholars, played a role in the verification of relics and the legitimation of religious experiences, both of which fed the writing of histories. Recent scholarship has shown us just how much expert

investigation went into the writing of early modern ecclesiastical histories. Competition between them drove writers to encompass more material, learn more languages, explain events—even miraculous ones—with greater and greater degrees of natural probability. Compositional and ideological connective tissue—or its absence—was judged and criticized. But as source materials became more readily accessible, and as readers grew more ecumenical, it became more and more clear that they who inquired more, inquired best.

The 17th century saw a full crisis not unlike the deconstructionist threats of the 1970s and 1980s, in which hyperskeptical “Pyrrhonist” philosophers threatened to sweep away the very foundations of knowledge. The crisis also affected historical writers of princely and universal histories. Much less affected were those who we typically call antiquarians, who were deeply engaged in accumulating fragments of knowledge about specific things, and travelers such as Jacob Spon and George Wheler, eager to see for themselves the monuments of ancient and modern Greece. What they saw and recorded could now be processed by others, such as the great stay-at-home Dutch scholar Johannes Meursius, or improved by the next batches of travelers. Although it took some time for antiquarians’ inquiries to be incorporated into narrative histories, antiquarianism, as Arnaldo Momigliano suggested long ago, saved historians from that credibility crisis—chiefly by reminding us of the power of autopsy and of collecting information, processes that made possible the writing of better histories.

In the 19th century, historians named and elaborated an exercise with earlier roots: source criticism. In some ways, this was a new form of Pyrrhonism, one that unveiled the difficulties not of accessing sources but of their very construction and built-in biases. Source critics were not the first to discover vast lacunae in the past, but they created new ones by labeling past histories and/or source materials untrustworthy. Could Plutarch be trusted on Alcibiades, who had lived 500 years before Plutarch wrote *Parallel Lives*? Could one trust a friendly—or unfriendly!—Catholic cardinal on a pope’s upstanding behavior? Such critical questions again required deeper inquiry, and those who did not match contemporary standards of scholarly practice—including the aged Leopold von Ranke himself, in his dilettantish *Universalgeschichte*—were excoriated by their colleagues. This was another part of historiographical practice not discussed by 20th-century deconstructionists, who presumed contemporaries are always speaking the same language. In this crowded 19th-century scholarly world, competition engendered more extensive forms of autopsy—such as

actually going to Egypt or Scythia—and forms of new information gathering, some of which we now recognize as imperialist tomb and archive raiding. But this process, too, was one in which criticism, competition, and the need for more certainty spun off new inquiries. As the circle of writers and critics has increased and diversified in recent decades, more inquiries have created more questions, as well as some better answers.

## We need to renew respect for historians’ long traditions of inquiry and criticism.

If you ask working historians today to describe their research methods, I believe most would say something like: I (using first person, as did Herodotus) learn the specialized techniques I need to ask good questions; I investigate things as directly as possible; I sieve out absurdities and biases in the sources; I read the work of my predecessors and analyze the quality of their evidence. *Then* I tell a story. Criticism, including self-criticism, should then make us pause and ask whether we have unfairly stacked the deck to generate our stories. If we have done so, it is up to us to rewrite, as do dissertators after the defense and authors in response to readers’ reports. We do not have to feel badly if our students and successors improve our techniques and add new insights derived from their own expertise and experiences. Our stories *will* change. But what we do, and what we teach, are most of all sound practices of inquiry and criticism—different for each specialized field—and it is this that we can be proud of handing on to the next generation.

In the end, I don’t want objectivity back—we never had it in the first place. We don’t need omniscience, especially in an age in which AI falsely claims it. What we do need is to renew respect for historians’ long traditions of inquiry and criticism. We need to confront the current public crisis of expertise by committing ourselves to being the sorts of people who can be trusted—because we ask questions, go places, check our stories, anticipate our critics, and, like Herodotus, show our work. The father of history didn’t need to believe in objectivity, but he did need to believe that the combination of inquiry and criticism makes for better scholarship. Perhaps the same can be said for us. **P**

*Suzanne Marchand is president of the AHA.*

## WITH REVOLUTIONARY HISTORY'S FOCUS ON LAWYERS, WHERE ARE THEY IN 250TH COMMEMORATIONS?

**S**ir Walter Scott, who knew a thing or two about myth and meaning, once observed that “a lawyer without history or literature is a mechanic, a mere working mason; if he possesses some knowledge of these, he may venture to call himself an architect.” You can find that line mid-novel in *Guy Mannering*, just one of many remarks tossed off by fictional barrister Paul Pleydell, whose office shelves lean more toward Tacitus than torts.

Now, with the United States commemorating the 250th anniversary of independence, Scott’s line echoes amid renewed debates about memory, meaning, and national identity. The lawyer as mason. The lawyer as architect. Across the country, exhibitions, events, and conversations will shape how Americans remember 1776. Yet as these efforts unfold on parallel, uneven tracks across history and related fields, one group central to the Revolution is curiously often omitted: lawyers.

It’s an odd omission. In the revolutionary era, lawyers weren’t background characters. They were among the most public actors in the revolutionary crisis, drafting manifestos and constitutions, translating protest into legal argument, and helping to frame the break with Britain in terms grounded not just in Enlightenment theory but in British common law.

Over the past 250 years, lawyers have continued to be involved with debates of historical consequence – through court decisions that reinterpret foundational principles, legal scholarship that challenges or defends prevailing doctrines, and advocacy that pushes the boundaries of constitutional meaning, among other forms of engagement. From abolition to civil rights, from women’s suffrage to debates over executive power, lawyers have been both agents of change and defenders of the status quo.

Together, these two professions have helped shape the evolving story of American democracy.

Their work has shaped the legal frameworks through which societal shifts became lasting reforms, complementing the efforts of historians in preserving, interpreting, and sometimes challenging national narratives. While lawyers often operate through statutes, cases, and institutions, historians engage the broader currents of memory and meaning, helping society understand not just what happened but why it mattered and for whom. They illuminate the context behind legal change,

recover overlooked voices, and question inherited myths, ensuring that the past remains a subject of inquiry rather than reverence. Together, these two professions have helped shape the evolving story of American democracy – sometimes in tandem, sometimes in tension, but always in dialogue.

And yet, in many public commemorations, law often remains background noise. Courtrooms may be reconstructed, and facsimiles of founding documents like the Constitution or the Declaration of Independence may make cameo appearances, but these often serve as static props. Likewise, the law and legal profession tend to be treated as backdrops: a passive setting for dramatic political events or moral movements, rather than a dynamic force in shaping the very terms and possibilities of those events.

The legal ideas of the founding – about federalism, rights, representation, or sovereignty – remain ongoing, unfinished arguments that still animate American life today. Lawyers played critical roles in political and social history, helping to reshape the very structures of government and justice that characterize the founding and give it lasting significance and influencing public life as much as politicians, generals, or reformers did.

Lawyers, bar associations, and courts have begun marking the 250th anniversary, but largely within professional

circles and outside the national spotlight. Across the country, legal institutions are using this moment to connect founding ideals with contemporary legal practice, extending their broader commitment to public understanding and the rule of law. These efforts often include traditional continuing legal education programs as well as educational outreach, public dialogue, and professional reflection, serving as tools through which the legal community engages with the democratic project.

For example, the American Bar Association has launched a yearlong campaign and a two-year traveling exhibit to mark the signing of the Declaration of Independence. Led by a planning committee composed of distinguished lawyers from each of the original 13 colonies, the campaign will include a broad array of programming aimed at exploring how the Declaration’s core commitments continue to shape legal thinking and democratic life today. The exhibit, *250 Years of Independence: Fortifying America’s Commitment to Democracy for All*, frames the anniversary as an opportunity to explore the evolving meaning of

independence and the essential role of law in securing it. It brings the story of independence and the law directly into everyday legal environments, such as courthouses, large law firms, and public law libraries from Florida to California.

State and local efforts echo this approach, often blending public education with civic engagement. In Indiana, the Court of Appeals of Indiana and the Indiana Historical Society have partnered to bring *Appeals on Wheels*, an innovative traveling oral argument exhibit, to high schools, colleges, law schools, and other community settings across the state. Meanwhile, the New Jersey State Bar Foundation has produced an expansive set of free educational resources under the title *250th Anniversary of American Independence – Free Materials for the Semiquincentennial (or for civics anytime)*, a flexible tool kit that serves as a model for civics instruction and a reminder that the work of democracy begins with legal literacy.

Other organizations are using the anniversary to invite innovation and reflection within the profession. The

American Inns of Court launched a contest encouraging local chapters to design events or projects that highlight the legal dimensions of the founding era. And in Virginia, a collaborative symposium hosted over the course of 2025 and 2026 by the Virginia Law Foundation and the Virginia Bar Association, *The Legal Revolution*, is exploring the nation’s founding documents and founding fathers as lawyers and leaders.

While these initiatives provide valuable platforms for reflection and education, they often remain contained within the legal community, operating through bar association websites, court educational programs, and professional forums. As a result, they tend to be siloed from the broader, more public-facing commemorations that engage diverse audiences across the country. This separation limits opportunities for the public to appreciate how lawyers and legal ideas have actively shaped the nation’s founding and its ongoing evolution.

This parallel development isn’t unique to lawyers, but it does reflect how the legal profession has, over time, carved



The traveling exhibit *250 Years of Independence* stopped at the Pence Law Library at American University in September 2025.  
Anna Snyder

out its own intellectual and institutional pathways, often adjacent to, but distinct from, the broader currents of historical scholarship and public memory. Like historians, lawyers are trained to interpret texts, weigh precedent, and construct narratives grounded in evidence and argument. Yet legal discourse has often remained inward facing, oriented toward courts, clients, and codes rather than public audiences or historical interpretation. In many ways, the legal profession's deep investment in its own methods and language has created a kind of civic insulation.

The legal profession has carved out its own intellectual and institutional pathways, often adjacent to, but distinct from, historical scholarship and public memory.

As a result, law is too often left out of the public's understanding of the founding—not just as a technical field, but as a language of revolution, reform, and resistance. This separation misses an opportunity: to place legal thinking alongside historical storytelling in shaping how Americans understand their past and envision their future. Reuniting these conversations could help bridge that divide and make the 250th not just an anniversary but a moment of civic renewal.

There's an opportunity here: for lawyers and legal institutions to partner with

public historians to tell a richer, more grounded story about the American founding, one that centers legal argument as a revolutionary act—as in the cases of Elizabeth Freeman and Quock Walker, cases that collectively dismantled the legal foundations for slavery in 1780s Massachusetts. What did justice mean in 1776? Who was included in the constitutional order, and who was left out? How did legal ideas about rights, sovereignty, and citizenship evolve? And what can practicing lawyers and the legal field learn from this today?

Answering these questions requires lawyers to participate in a larger civic narrative. Historians bring context and critique and connect scholarship to communities, and lawyers translate principles into practice. Together, they have an opportunity to shape a fuller, more engaged national conversation about the meaning and legacy of the founding. In recent years, collaborations between lawyers and historians have become increasingly important, as major advocacy organizations recognize the value of historical insight in legal strategy and public discourse. The AHA itself has filed amicus briefs, including for the recent *Harvard University v. Department of Homeland Security* case over foreign scholars and students. Partnerships like the Brennan Center's Historians Council on the Constitution demonstrate how professional historians contribute to amicus briefs and legal debates, enriching arguments with nuanced historical perspectives. These collaborations underscore the vital role that interdisciplinary dialogue plays in deepening our understanding of law and history and in ensuring that legal interpretations remain connected to the broader narratives that shape our democracy.

Nothing about the American experiment was inevitable. The founding was not a foregone conclusion, nor were its

principles universally agreed on or uniformly applied. Every milestone in American legal history has been shaped by the choices of individual people: lawyers who argued cases that pushed the boundaries of constitutional meaning, judges who rendered decisions that redirected the course of justice, and citizens who insisted, often at great cost, that the promises of the law be made real. Legal change has never been automatic; it has required interpretation, imagination, and courage. By treating history not as a sequence of settled outcomes but as a record of contested decisions and human choices, we begin to see the law as a living tool that can be used to defend power or to challenge it, to preserve exclusion or to expand democracy.

In that sense, the 250th anniversary is not just a time to look back but an invitation to recognize the responsibility we all share—in courtrooms, classrooms, and communities—to continue shaping the meaning of independence. At its best, legal history doesn't simply explain how the past unfolded. Instead, it opens up conversation about how laws shape our lives and reflect our evolving values. Maybe that's what Sir Walter Scott was after when he drew the line between a mechanic and an architect. The lawyer as mechanic follows rules. The lawyer as architect understands their origins and how they might be rebuilt time and time again.

In 2026, the legal community has an opportunity to join historians, educators, and cultural institutions in reexamining its legacy, placing law back at the heart of the founding story—not as a backdrop but as an active, evolving force in shaping civic life. **P**

*Anna Snyder is the staff director of the American Bar Association's Standing Committee on the Law Library of Congress.*

WILLIAM COHOON

## REDEFINING SUCCESS BEYOND THE ACADEMY

*A Historian's Journey into K–12 Teaching*

**In my sixth year of teaching K–12 social studies, I am grateful to be supported by some of the most dedicated teachers I have ever encountered. Their professionalism and drive to improve their craft to support student learning have inspired me in the classroom and beyond. My colleagues' example—combined with my students' enthusiasm and the freedom to participate in scholarly conferences and continue my own research—has been the catalyst to a meaningful career, marked in ways I could not have predicted by both intellectual and professional growth.**

When I started graduate school, I devoted my attention to finding a career at a university, drawn to becoming a historian by my travels in Guatemala and conversations about the country's history. Teaching high school students had not crossed my mind; I misunderstood K–12 education as a step away from the kind of academic work I was training for. My graduate program offered a “history as a profession” course that highlighted the shrinking academic job market and discussed alternative careers, but I dismissed these warnings, focusing all my energy on finding a university position.

During the 2019–20 academic year, I applied to nearly 30 academic jobs without receiving an interview. The

minor alterations required to fit my application to each job description were time-consuming. With each application came hope and stress about cities my growing family might live in. My wife, also a PhD, and I were expecting our second child, and many of our conversations centered on finding an environment where we could build a family and community. After defending my dissertation in March, I began considering and applying for positions to teach high school history. I received only two requests for interviews, one at an East Coast prep school and another to teach History of the Americas at a charter school with an International Baccalaureate (IB) curriculum in Dallas, Texas. The latter offered me a position. Although I felt some relief securing a stable job, I also experienced a sense of anxiety and discouragement about accepting a position for which I felt both overqualified and underqualified.

My first year of teaching high school was extraordinarily difficult, in large part because I lacked formal secondary teacher training. Luckily, I worked with two outstanding colleagues who guided me. My grade-level lead taught me how to scaffold assignments to help build reading comprehension. Another colleague shared history curriculum resources that support student learning. With their mentorship, I found ways to make an impact, particularly with a small group of students who (to

my surprise) asked whether they could attend an online conference at which I was presenting my work on statecraft in late colonial Peru. Their enthusiasm showed me that my scholarship could resonate with students in ways I never expected and that my research could inspire students at this level.

**My students' enthusiasm showed me that my scholarship could resonate with students in ways I never expected.**

After a year of teaching history, I transferred to the flagship school in our charter district. Some of my graduate training focused on historical cartography in colonial Latin America, so the chance to teach only AP Human Geography was especially appealing. Studying new material reinvigorated my taste for learning and enriched my understanding of spatial analysis in relation to colonialism. At the same time, my unfamiliarity with the curriculum forced me to leave my comfort zone and seek collaboration with other teachers, whose wide-ranging interests opened space for discussions on capitalism, xenophobia, and gender identity. Over the next two years, my students

pursued opportunities to learn for the sake of learning, going home to research topics I could not elaborate on during class and returning the next day eager to share their findings. Watching them work reminded me that teaching, like scholarship, demands curiosity and disciplined inquiry.

After three years of honing my teaching skills, I accepted a position to teach world history at Trinity Valley School (TVS). Collaboration, not competition, defines the culture at TVS. In my department, faculty seek one another out to discuss new lesson ideas and effective ways to integrate them into our classrooms. Recently, I partnered with a chemistry teacher, who guided my students in making iron gall ink from scratch, while I taught them how to whittle quills for a project on knowledge and power in my colonial Latin American class. These cross-disciplinary experiences, paired with small class sizes, allow for close connections with students and their families. In just three years, I have already taught multiple siblings from the same family, deepening my sense of community.

With strong encouragement from my department chair, I have also participated in professional development programs such as the AHA's Teacher Institute in World History and, most recently, the Exeter Humanities Institute West, which showed me that learning in high school could mirror an advanced scholarly seminar. During our Harkness discussions—a method of pedagogy named for the early 20th-century philanthropist Edward Harkness, who championed classes in which students lead the conversation—I recognize the same intellectual give-and-take of a university seminar. Guiding students to question assumptions, assess evidence, and refine their interpretations requires the habits of a

historian, including critical reading and clear argumentation. Much like a research project, creating a lesson begins with a historical question. Then, I gather primary and secondary sources and guide students through interpreting evidence to construct their own arguments. This process mirrors the analytical rigor I use in my own archival work. I design my courses as an act of synthesis by tracing global patterns of exchange, power, and resistance to reveal how seemingly isolated events intersect. This interpretive approach models for students the process historians use to create narratives from disparate sources. Professional development has shown me that teaching itself is an intellectual pursuit, requiring the same curiosity, adaptability, and reflection that I once reserved for archival research.

While my experience is not the norm in Texas, teaching here has sharpened my sense of purpose. Although the Texas State Board of Education has

reshaped the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS) for social studies in the state's public schools, I have still found freedom in what and how I teach in an independent school. The TVS administration encourages teacher autonomy in the belief that discussing difficult topics helps students become critical thinkers and empathetic people. While teaching AP Human Geography, I guided students in analyzing population density maps of LGBTQ+ residents, revealing how geography shaped social confinement. In World History, students read firsthand accounts of King Leopold II's brutality in the Belgian Congo, or research and write minibiographies on revolutionary women such as Anne Lister. To deepen their theoretical understanding, we engage with thinkers like Edmund Burke, Karl Marx, and Michel Foucault, whose ideas help students interrogate systems of power and social change. In my Latin American history courses, students can learn about how women used witchcraft to subvert



In his high school classes, William Cohoon uses Harkness discussions to help his students develop the critical, empathetic, and argumentative skills of a historian.

*Dave Ostroff*

colonial authority or the sterilization campaigns of Indigenous women in the Andes in the 20th century.

I once thought the pursuit of scholarship could occur only in a tenure-track position at a top-tier university. Since I started teaching high school, I have shared my research at the Conference on Latin American History (CLAH), the Southeastern Council of Latin American Studies (SECOLAS), and the Rocky Mountain Council for Latin American Studies (RMCLAS), where I also serve on the executive council committee. Attending conferences allows me to stay connected with current historical scholarship in my field while exchanging ideas with colleagues across institutions. At RMCLAS, I served on the panel “They All Become Latin Americanists (And Won’t Even Know): A Roundtable on Teaching Strategies for Latin American Studies,” where I shared my experiential learning projects with other faculty members. Currently, I am researching experiential learning through a project I developed on the Columbian Exchange, and I hope to publish my findings in *The History Teacher*. I have received recognition and financial support from CLAH and the American Philosophical Society to further my scholarly interests.

These experiences suggest that teaching and scholarship are interrelated—not mutually exclusive but mutually reinforcing. Just as my scholarship enriches my classroom, so too have my students shaped the way I think as a historian. Their questions about capitalism, colonialism, empire, race, and gender have made me reconsider how I frame certain topics in my book project on Bourbon Peru. Explaining complex ideas in a K–12 setting forces me to clarify arguments in ways that make my research sharper and more accessible to a broad audience. Teaching has not pulled me away from

scholarship; it has transformed the way I approach it.

Graduate students navigating today’s academic job market need to adopt a broad definition of what it means to be a historian. The skills cultivated in graduate school—conducting archival research, framing complex arguments, communicating ideas clearly, and managing long-term projects—are useful not only in the university. I rely on those same skills when scaffolding research assignments, guiding Harkness discussions, and teaching students how to frame questions about our readings. Graduate training has value outside the professoriate; it provides tools for engaging the next generation. Students need these skills more than ever to judiciously evaluate the flood of information they encounter daily.

Teaching and scholarship are interrelated—not mutually exclusive but mutually reinforcing.

My academic journey has taught me to redefine what success looks like. I once believed that a career outside the academy was a mark of failure. I carried the weight of that belief for many years after signing my first contract as a secondary school teacher. In reality, the decision opened opportunities that I might not have found in a tenure-track role. I now experiment with pedagogy to integrate my scholarship into teaching in creative ways, while making an immediate difference in young people’s lives. I have come to see success in new terms: as a balance of excellent teaching, active research, and meaningful scholarship. Teaching world history

has expanded my research interests and strengthened my scholarship. Most of all, I have discovered that intellectual fulfillment and professional purpose can flourish outside a university setting. That path is one that graduate students should see not as a last resort but as a rewarding possibility. **P**

*William Cohoon teaches upper school history at Trinity Valley School in Fort Worth, Texas. He earned his history PhD at Texas Christian University in 2020.*



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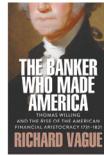
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# AHA26

*250 Years, 139 Annual Meetings*



2025 president Ben Vinson III connects with fellow historians at the graduate student reception.

**THE YEAR 2026** is a forward-looking moment in the historical discipline in the United States. The 250th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence has prompted discussions about historical memory, the history we teach, and the responsibility that historians have toward the various and diverse publics that we serve. As a discipline, we are all asking, How do we meet the moment?

At the AHA's 139th annual meeting in Chicago, that context suffused many of the sessions and events across the weekend, even those not explicitly about the semiquincentennial. From how to effectively advocate for policy to innovative classroom instruction and the current effects of artificial intelligence, we were all thinking about what comes next for us as individuals and a community. Luckily, there were more than 500 sessions and events at which attendees could share and learn from one another's expertise and experiences.

—Laura Ansley, Whitney E. Barringer, Brendan Gillis, Elizabeth Meggyesy, Ben Rosenbaum, and Hope J. Shannon

## HISTORIANS AND THEIR PUBLICS

This annual meeting provided many opportunities for historians to reckon with an array of threats facing our discipline. Whether on panels, in the Exhibit Hall, at organized meetings, or over conference coffee, attendees discussed—sometimes wryly, sometimes urgently—how new ways of thinking about the past might counter shrinking resources, political pressures, declining enrollments, pedagogical challenges, and the whims of segments of the American public that seem alternately hungry for history and hostile to historians. The two evening plenary sessions struck tones of cautious optimism, emphasizing proactive engagement with the broadest possible audiences. Whether on campus or in our communities, these conversations suggest, there may yet be hope for our discipline to expand its reach and renew public trust.

Thursday's plenary, "*Let Facts Be Submitted to a Candid World*": *Historians, Their Publics, and the 250th Anniversary of the US Declaration of Independence*, focused on how and why historical practitioners, regardless of their specific areas of academic expertise, might capitalize on public enthusiasm around the semiquincentennial celebrations kicking off in 2026. "We need to meet this moment," urged Jason Hanson (History Colorado). "Nothing gets people interested [in history] like an anniversary," he explained, and this awareness allows historians and historical institutions to emphasize that all

Americans share a history even if we do not always agree on its precise significance for our world today.

At the local, state, and national levels, archives, museums, historic sites, and other organizations are planning programming as varied and diverse as the communities we serve. To engage a national public, Colleen Shogan, the former Archivist of the United States, has established *In Pursuit*, a non-profit initiative that will publish a series of short essays over the next year about every president and some first ladies of the United States. There are many more such initiatives at the local and state levels. More than a dozen Western states, Hanson noted, have pooled resources to develop traveling exhibits that use aspirational ideals articulated in the Declaration of Independence to frame key moments in subsequent eras in US history. In Massachusetts, to cite another example, Royall House and Slave Quarters hosts hands-on textile arts programs, including a Black weaving school and a durag workshop, to highlight the intersection of history, slavery, and fashion. It can be both valuable and empowering, the museum's executive director Kyera Singleton explained, to start with what our communities *want* to talk about and then use these themes as points of entry for a richer engagement with the lives of people in the past.

The scale of public appetite for revolutionary history is immense. In 2025, thousands attended preview screenings (the first of which took place at AHA25) of excerpts from Ken Burns's six-part documentary series *The American Revolution*, with millions more tuning in for television broadcasts or streaming it online. With interactive exhibits and innovative programming, museums and historic sites are preparing for a substantial increase in visitors, with several of the largest institutions expecting annual attendance in the millions. Historians, warned Jane Kamensky (Thomas Jefferson's Monticello), ignore these audiences at their peril.

Still, a comparison between preparations for America 250 and bicentennial celebrations in 1976 results in some sobering conclusions about the extent to which a dramatically altered federal funding environment may have lasting consequences. There are over 21,000 history organizations in the United States. Of these, explained John Dichtl (American Association for State and Local History), between 30 and 40 percent were founded around 1976. Bicentennial funding, Kamensky added, helped support new fields, such as Indigenous history, and grants from the National Endowment for the Humanities supported scholarly publications, including Edmund Morgan's *American Slavery, American Freedom* (1975), that helped institutionalize a more diverse and vibrant history of the revolutionary period. "What will come out of the

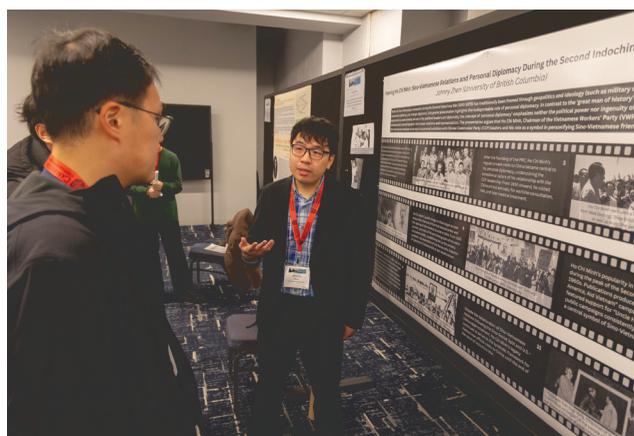
semiquincentennial moment?” asked Karin Wulf (John Carter Brown Library). “Will there be any legacy of this?”

It remains to be seen how historians and historical institutions will fare over the next months and years. Without the scale of federal investment that defined the bicentennial and its aftermath, it may fall to individual historians and our institutions to help set the tone. “I’d love to see more synthesis coming from the history field,” Hanson explained in his concluding remarks. Many Americans struggle to make sense of competing and often irreconcilable claims about the past. They are looking to historians for help sorting all of this out and “maybe bringing some more of the *unum* to the *e pluribus*.”

History education offers additional opportunities to help shape public awareness of our discipline and its practices. Saturday’s plenary, *Making History Indispensable to Your Institution*, kicked off a year of AHA programming about the place of history in general education and other courses required for graduation with support from the Teagle Foundation.

As part of its History Gateways initiative (2019–22), the AHA supported faculty experimentation in refining introductory undergraduate courses, many of which can be used to satisfy general education requirements, to promote student success. When asked about the purpose of these courses, noted Julia Brookins (AHA), faculty generated a list of 63 goals, far more than can be accomplished in a single semester. “There’s not going to be a one-size-fits-all framework at different kinds of institutions,” Brookins added, “but our research revealed that there are many ways faculty and departments can approach making history in general education more vibrant.”

However, it can be difficult for individual faculty or departments to convince administrators or colleagues in other disciplines that students need to develop historical awareness. A declining number of institutions require all undergraduate students to take introductory history courses. Many colleges and universities use thematic distribution requirements to afford undergraduate students more choice in how they satisfy general education requirements, which can affect enrollments at the department level. As senior associate dean for undergraduate education, historian Ian McNeely (Univ. of North Carolina at Chapel Hill) helped to develop and implement the IDEAs in Action curriculum, which splits 1,500 courses approved for general education across nine “focus capacities.” Of 449 courses that UNC-CH cleared to satisfy a requirement in “engagement with the human past,” only 139 are offered through the history department. That said, history courses are also included in three other core capacities



Historians presented their work in four poster sessions, including two focused on undergraduate research.

Michael Baniewicz

on global understanding, power and society, and ways of knowing. Nevertheless, between Advanced Placement courses and dual enrollment, a growing number of students complete these requirements before they reach campus.

In certain contexts, flexible general education requirements grounded in the liberal arts tradition have secured the foundations for history and other humanities disciplines on campus. Enrollments in history had fallen by half before Melinda Zook (Purdue Univ.) helped establish the Cornerstone Integrated Liberal Arts program, a curriculum designed to create opportunities for students to engage with transformational texts in small classes taught by full-time faculty. The runaway success of this program has resulted in an efflorescence of high-quality teaching and humanities scholarship on campus. Since 2019, Zook explained, new faculty are required to teach 50 percent of their courses in Cornerstone, but this has allowed the college of liberal arts to hire 119 new faculty. The energy around the program, she suggested, stems from the power of philosophy and great literature from around the world to inspire our students. “Gen Z students recognize that they need knowledge to succeed; above all they are seeking opportunities for edification.”

At Vanderbilt University, a core curriculum patterned after the Cornerstone model has met with similar success. “General education is a really important platform on your campus,” observed Sarah Igo, Andrew Jackson Chair in American History and Dean of Strategic Initiatives, but “you may need to reimagine it” for faculty to understand how it can enrich and deepen liberal arts education for all students. Vanderbilt’s new model sacrificed a specific general education requirement in history. “We knew we were taking a bit of a gamble,” she explained. “But our proposition is that if we get some of

our best teachers and best historians into our new core [curriculum], we trust that our students will follow them into their home departments.” And many have done so.

Reforming general education or other graduation requirements can present a range of challenges. The teaching-intensive models at Vanderbilt and Purdue, several audience members observed during the Q&A, may not be feasible at smaller institutions or those with different expectations for faculty workload. Colleagues in other schools and departments do not always want to share enrollments when institutional resources are scarce.

The potential rewards of bringing our knowledge, disciplinary habits of mind, and excitement for history to general education are both clear and substantive. As with the public interest in the semiquincentennial, a renewed focus on reforming general education might allow historians to challenge some preconceptions about what historians do and why our work matters.

—BG

## LIVE FROM AHA, NPR'S *THROUGHLINE*

On Friday, Ramtin Arablouei and Rund Abdelfatah, co-hosts of NPR's *Throughline*, joined attendees to discuss their award-winning history podcast. They appeared in conversation with Daniel Story (Univ. of California, Santa Cruz), producer of the AHA's *History in Focus* podcast, at one of three events in the Sinclair Workshop on Historical Podcasting, a sponsored annual meeting series focused on podcasting and historical storytelling.

Work on *Throughline* began, Arablouei and Abdelfatah explained, years before the first episode actually aired. The two met at NPR—he was a sound designer and she a journalist—and soon discovered a common interest in diversifying and enhancing public understanding of non-Western parts of the world. “We need to make a show that does for history what *Radiolab* does for science,” Arablouei proposed. They began to workshop their idea on nights and weekends around their other work. After two years of piloting “essentially in the dark,” they sent a sample to their boss. NPR green-lit the show, and the first episode aired in January 2019.

The show takes a “sound-forward approach” to production, which was new for NPR when *Throughline* premiered. Instead

of adding music at the end, as many podcasts do, they think about sound as another character in the story. “We design in scenes; we storyboard the way you might in a show or movie,” Abdelfatah said. They want listeners to feel like part of the scene, Arablouei explained. “Entertainment is an important part of storytelling. No one wants to listen to a boring story.”

“People don't remember facts;  
they remember how they feel.”

To build that story, a *Throughline* team member conducts extensive historical research on a topic to determine its viability as an episode subject. If they decide to move forward, they conduct more research, engage fact-checkers, and interview historians and other subject matter experts. They prioritize finding experts who can speak about their research in an engaging way. Most of the historians they interview understand that audiences are more interested in the broad strokes than the minutiae and especially interested in what their research means for today.

Abdelfatah and Arablouei also discussed the challenges facing public media and how those challenges have affected *Throughline*. After funding cuts, “we're in evolution mode,” Abdelfatah said, trying to maintain the integrity of the show “in terms of research and nuance and creativity” while also seeking ways to do more with less. The audiences they reach and where and how people find and engage with content is changing too. According to NPR polling, their listener base is broader and more diverse than many podcast audiences, but those demographics have shifted as listening platforms have changed and diversified. Abdelfatah and Arablouei are also navigating a crowded and shifting information landscape, in which listeners have access to a broader array of media content and platforms than ever before.

Abdelfatah and Arablouei answered several audience questions, including one from a public historian working at a well-known historic site engaged in this year's semiquincentennial celebrations. Stating that “bringing history to life” can be “inherently speculative” and therefore “scary for many” historians, she asked whether they could provide “advice for those of us trying to walk that line.” Abdelfatah said such narratives are being created no matter what, and the question is whether you want to be part of the conversation. If you do, “be transparent,” make clear to your audience that “there are different interpretations” of the topic, “and explain why you're leaning toward one interpretation. The more you can incorporate the primary source materials, the

more people can see and hear for themselves.” Audiences have a short attention span. Without “high stakes or emotional attachment, people are not going to pay attention.” Yet history is essential today, and “there’s a lot of competing [interpretations] from people who aren’t even making an attempt to stick to the facts.” Arablouei agreed, adding that the academy’s focus on facts and rigor means information is not reaching the populations who most need it. “People don’t remember facts; they remember how they feel,” he said, “so we have to tell these stories in a way that makes them feel something.” For the podcasters and other historians who attended the Sinclair Workshop sessions, this is a key reminder that rigor and accessibility are not opposing goals and that thoughtful storytelling is essential to ensuring expert historical scholarship reaches wider public audiences.

—HS

## AI IN TEACHING AND RESEARCH

Since ChatGPT became publicly available in November 2022, concerns about artificial intelligence (particularly the tools called large language models, or LLMs) have proliferated across academia and other scholarly communities. Sessions at AHA26 wrestled with the practical and ethical problems and the potential for AI in historical research and teaching.

As all historian-teachers know and the panelists acknowledged at the start of *Rewriting the Past? AI, Interpretation, and the Future of History Education*, AI has become normalized among students and has come to characterize much of the student work they now receive. Of the 850 students Steven Mintz (Univ. of Texas at Austin) teaches in a given semester, approximately 400 now submit virtually the same essay. The “crisis,” which he described as “totally unsettling me,” has arrived with “no campus conversation at all,” leaving individual professors to navigate the ways that student participation and interest in classes has eroded.

Panelists discussed how AI has changed multiple facets of their course design. Jacob Bruggeman (Johns Hopkins Univ.) now assumes that “students are using AI,” but he argued that the degree to which they cheat is determined by course design, and structured engagement with AI tools can give students an acceptable framework, and a permission structure, within which they can use AI in a history classroom. Jo Guldi (Emory Univ.) described moving to in-class writing without

using AI but with “a lot of talking with human engagement.” She has found that getting students to write successfully takes much more scaffolding through multiple iterations than it used to. She also noted that some universities have taken radically different approaches to the landscape. Georgia Tech has banned AI in the first two years of its computer science classes, instead requiring that students write code using paper and pencil. Similarly, historians too should think about the goals of their assignments and redesign courses so their students can still meet the learning outcomes. Samuel Backer (Univ. of Maine) urged the audience to focus on the process of history. “More and more core research tasks are going to be automatable. What is the value added of historians? What does it mean to think historically?” History, he argued, is a “distinctive mode of knowledge—where should it be put in the world?”

Economic historian Louis R. Hyman (Johns Hopkins Univ.) has been thinking historically about the AI moment. The question “What is the relationship of the human and the machine?” has been an animating debate for much of the last 150 years, and it informs Hyman’s teaching. He asks students, “Are you going to cede your education to the machine? Or I can teach you to think better than the machine, write better than the machine, feel better than the machine.” Hyman also spoke to the possibilities of AI in accelerating the work students can do. In one course, he estimates that he now teaches a semester of coding, a semester and a half of statistics, and a semester of history all in one semester, because of the ways AI speeds up his students’ work. “They can do stuff that took me six months in grad school in two weeks,” Hyman asserted. Guldi concurred, saying, “You don’t need to be a linguist to write, and you don’t need to be a programmer to code.”



The annual Gender Equity Breakfast allowed time for conversation before a panel discussion on teaching gender and sexuality history in these troubling times.

When it came to what AI could mean for professional historians, panelists were generally bullish while gesturing to a shrinking place for historians in the academy. Guldi articulated a vision of AI use in history classrooms and research that could help historians do the work we already do in better and more expansive ways. She offered ideas such as teaching students how to write engineering prompts for different types of archives, such as oral history, parliamentary, or visual archives, and extolled the possibilities of searching across “a hundred archives in a hundred languages” and having the AI help historians with the synthesis. Communicating AI’s value to our colleagues is also necessary. “Humanists have a very misguided idea of what AI is,” Mintz said, with many dismissing it as a “plagiarism machine.” But behind the scenes, “there are sophisticated humanists teaching AI how to research and analyze.” He believes that there are high-paying jobs for humanists working with AI, referencing an acquaintance with an English PhD who worked as a narrative analyst for Netflix, designing the story structure directions the company provides to creatives who populate the platform with their work. “The future of the American economy,” Guldi argued, “rests on solving one problem—the ‘alignment problem,’” which she suggested persists because STEM grads without humanities experience design the systems with “nobody in the room who has the ability to compare different documents.” The MacArthur and Mellon Foundations have created a joint \$500 million fund to create a more “people-centered future for AI,” which Guldi said shows that there is money for humanists to be involved in the future of AI.

During the Q&A, the audience seemed generally sold on the idea that there could be use cases in research, but questions focused on the ethical, cognitive, and environmental costs



The annual K–16 Educators’ Workshop, led by Lee Ann Potter (Library of Congress), focused on primary sources on revolutionary history.

of AI in and outside the classroom. As time dwindled, the panelists elected to let the audience ask questions even though there was not enough time to answer them. What about the use of water and electricity and the ways that AI currently contributes to an ecological crisis? What about AI’s erosion of our ability to think? As AI improves, how can we continue to make the case that historians are necessary, when administrators and public leaders seem ambivalent at best about the future of the discipline? Can humanists act ethically while improving the tools used by corporations like Amazon, Netflix, and Meta? There wasn’t time to answer these and many other questions, but conversations about AI continued at sessions throughout the conference.

These discussions didn’t stop with teaching. At *Making AI Work for History: Tools, Workflows, and Research Possibilities in Archival Collections*, librarians presented a set of case studies for AI use in the archives that show promise for making archives more accessible to researchers. Loren Moulds (Univ. of Virginia Law Library) and Lorin Bruckner, Amanda Henley, Matt Jansen, and Rolando Rodriguez (all of Univ. of North Carolina at Chapel Hill) shared the ways they have been using and training AI tools to assist in tasks such as analyzing text as data, transcribing varied handwriting, and creating alt text for archival photographs.

With Mellon Foundation funding, the UNC team has pursued several AI-assisted projects. The initial project used text mining and machine learning to identify racist language in Jim Crow laws and other legal documents. Another has been analyzing movie catalog cards from the World War I era, which requires being able to process mixed handwriting, typed text, stamps, symbols, and marginalia—all within an inconsistent structure. To improve accessibility and findability, one team has been using AI to describe photographs in the Southern Historical Collection. They tested multiple LLMs for this task, including ChatGPT, Claude, Gemini, and Llama. In all cases, humans need to check the work being done for errors or bias. In the photo project, for example, they found that the AI exhibited gender bias in describing the people pictured. Yet even with the extensive review needed, it still sped up the process of writing such descriptions.

Moulds offered another case study, in which he assisted a historian with developing an AI-assisted transcription and analysis of a 1930s plantation tourism guest register. The researcher didn’t require a letter-perfect transcription; instead, he was interested in learning about larger-scale trends such as how many visitors were from Northern versus Southern states and whether women were traveling alone. The text

used different hands for each entry, different inks, and other challenges for an AI, and the tools did struggle with the messiness of the source material. But the AI also helped to clean the data and introduce a metadata schema. Moulds used not one tool but assembled a workflow to combine automation and human judgment in transcribing and assessing this primary source.

Projects like these illustrate some of the possibilities for generative AI assisting historians with research and helping archivists to maximize limited staff time and budgets. As Moulds said, “Human expertise remains essential,” but these tools have the potential to help to move human labor away from repetitive tasks like transcription to the interpretative skills that are essential to historical practice. For historians interested in projects that require large-scale research, as these tools are refined and improved, their time might one day be reallocated to higher-level tasks than even complicated transcription or data coding—though we’re not at that point yet.

—LA and WB

## CAREERS FOR HISTORY MAJORS

History departments have long faced declining undergraduate enrollments and have tried to counter the popular myth that a history degree does not prepare students for employment after graduation. The data—and countless history BAs out in the workforce—tells a different story. How can historians better communicate this data, and the value of a history degree, to students? How can history departments counter these myths? And how can the student experience inform these efforts?

Attendees convened to discuss these questions at the *Careers for History Majors* session at AHA26. Loren Collins (Cal Poly Humboldt) began the conversation by sharing his experience as both a history BA graduate and now a director of academic advising. He recalled when, as a student, he was told by a faculty member that his degree had taught him how to “read, write, and communicate.” That moment was critical, he said, to helping him understand how to convey the value of his education to a potential employer, and that perspective informs his current work. When he first started in academic advising, he encouraged history faculty to build career curriculum directly into their courses. Some resisted, he shared, thinking this approach framed the history BA as

a vocational degree. But, ultimately, positive student response to and interest in built-in career curriculum eased faculty concerns.

Jeff Crane (Cal Poly Humboldt) added his perspective as a dean and administrator, as well as a former history faculty member. He also hosts the podcast *Yeah, I Got a F#%\*ing Job with a Liberal Arts Degree*. As a dean, he focuses on what faculty can do for students to ensure student success. What students need, he explained, is to matriculate in programs that define and build explicit skill sets over time and give students the tools to describe those skills and their value to employers when applying for jobs. He described the creation of a new applied humanities department and major at Cal Poly Humboldt that aimed to do just that. Faculty met the program’s creation with skepticism, Crane said, but it has since gained in popularity among students.

Maysan Haydar (Case Western Reserve Univ.) drew on her experience as an assistant professor of history and a former fellow at the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, where she worked on the Academy’s Humanities Indicators project. She shared data on history majors, including the industries they enter, job satisfaction compared to other graduates, and degree completion trends from 1987 to 2024. Haydar also highlighted survey data showing that employers greatly value skills central to history training, including critical thinking, written and oral communication, and evaluation of information, reinforcing Collins and Crane’s emphasis on helping students recognize and articulate the skills they gain through the curriculum.

Frank Valadez (American Bar Association) shared the story of his own career path as an example of how history BAs can articulate the value of their degrees to employers. After earning a BA and an MA in history, he became a textbook editor, then worked at the Newberry Library on teacher professional development. He later joined Chicago Public Schools as a grant writer and then led the Chicago Metro History Fair as executive director. Valadez emphasized that his history major laid a necessary foundation to build new skills at each job, which continued to expand and deepen with each position, culminating in his current work at the ABA. Employers, he noted, especially valued his problem-solving abilities: Historical thinking skills can “put anything in some kind of context,” he said, which provides insight and solutions to the kinds of complex problems faced in a professional environment.

The conversation underscored the immense value of a history degree to potential employers, as well as the need to

better prepare students to speak to that value and ensure faculty have the resources they need to guide students. These and other topics are addressed in the second edition of the AHA's *Careers for History Majors* booklet, published in January 2026 and including essays by Collins, Haydar, and Valadez.

—HS

## TEACHING RECENT US HISTORY

When gathering data for *American Lesson Plan*, the AHA's report on secondary US history education nationwide, the most glaring lacuna in lesson plans, curriculum, standards, and our survey of teacher knowledge was recent history—the era since 1970. Content takes a steep drop-off after the civil rights movement, with many teachers straining even to teach the Vietnam War, Reaganomics, the end of the Cold War, or September 11 and the war on terror. The data created a picture of teachers struggling against bureaucratic, political, and knowledge restraints to try to meet students' need to understand how the modern world came to be, stuck with an outdated curriculum that mentions the cotton gin more often than the computer.

Among AHA26's three State of the Field for Busy Teachers sessions, one addressed this tricky time period. *State of the Field for Busy Teachers: Post-1970s US History* brought together teachers trying new methods and materials to address the nearly 60 years of missing history in K–12 classrooms.

Students increasingly lack the historical knowledge and tools to understand the world they live in. Lightning Jay (Binghamton Univ., State Univ. of New York) set out the scope of the problem: The average students witnessing modern events cannot answer the question “Why is this happening, and how did we get here?” Jay quickly dismissed that the lack of knowledge was the fault of teachers, who are working hard under adverse conditions, or students, who are smart enough to learn the material. Instead, “these problems reflect the system.” To this point, Jay discussed a review of standards from the 30 most populous states and saw that while standards are becoming more likely to gesture to the present, with broad terms like “globalization” and “immigration,” conservative and right-wing figures, organizations, and movement events become largely invisible after the 1960s, with 14 out of 30 states mentioning political figures on the right since the 1970s. When figures are mentioned, it is often to distill them

as symbols for decades and movements, like covering the 1980s through the lens of Ronald Reagan, which dramatically oversimplifies the history of the era. He called this absence a “consensus,” evidence that “we don't talk about the right after World War II.” The overall narrative is one of teleological progress, where the civil rights movement “cleanses the sins of slavery, capitalism, and democracy” while denying a conceptual frame to understand the modern right, creating the impression that the fights for civil rights and equality are over, when “it is in fact deeply not over.”

Mindy Lawrence (Pace Academy) spoke to her experience as a classroom teacher, stating that the “greatest enemy is time” in the perpetual struggle to include content after the 1970s. Lawrence's aim is to make coverage of the period meaningful and reasonably comprehensive while being realistic about teacher and student capacity at the end of the year, when “my enthusiasm has waned and so has theirs.” To counter the exhaustion, Lawrence encouraged educators to incorporate “novelty” and the “unexpected” into their classroom lessons. The post-1970s era is particularly ripe with multimedia sources, such as music and TV, that are untraditional in most history classrooms but can be used to deepen students' connections to the material and make the information “stickier” as well.

“If [the post-1970s] era is not one-fifth of your syllabus, you are making a choice.”

With over 30 years of combined experience in K–12 and college settings, Sage Gray (Macalester Coll.) spoke about building “foundations” to fix “conceptual blind spots” and “oversimplification” that plague instruction on the recent past. Gray suggested that when working through the 1970s, educators focus on events in economics and technology and give students the context for how wealth has driven shifts in the US economy, particularly since the 2000s, giving the example of the monumental shift in technological primacy from IBM to Apple.

When asked about how to compensate for state standards, Jay stated that standards “will not save us” as they are “political documents” telling an agreed-on “political story.” His stark challenge to educators in the audience was to cover the post-1970s era proportionally to its share of US history, saying, “If [the era] is not one-fifth of your syllabus, you are making a choice.” For teachers struggling with oversimplified standards, Jay suggested creating “a dialogue between symbols” rather than teaching the standards as the whole story.

He also pushed educators to understand “fascism” as an analytical term, not a label for politics that one can claim or disclaim, and to teach Project 2025 as a primary source in the classroom. Giving the example of letting students compare the Heritage Foundation’s EPA policy suggestions in 1980 and in Project 2025, Jay urged that the topic can be taught through a historical lens, rather than a moral one, while still giving students the tools to understand their world. Gray noted that it remains controversial to teach “harmful” documents, citing a previous generation of scholarly discussion about whether teachers should assign plantation documents and reproduce those voices. Such questions are important, but the panel made clear that history educators must actively, as a community, seek their answers, if we are to empower each student with the skills to find and stay grounded in context, even if the ground rapidly shifts beneath their feet.

—WB

## WHO HAS CONTROL?

“Classical education” (CE), a post–World War II education movement within the spheres of homeschooling and private schooling, has recently come to carry weight in debates about public school education and acquired powerful advocates at the local, state, and federal levels. As discussed in the panel *What Historians Should Know About Classical Education*, CE first entered education conversations nationwide when it became a standard-bearer for post-1960s cultural reactionaries seeking a counterargument to civil rights education reforms. As CE moves from the fringes into the mainstream, the panel sought to impart more fully what CE is, how it is and is not tied to the political right, and how to assess the threats it may present to a fractured American education landscape and to history education specifically.

Jessica Richardi (Coastal Carolina Univ.) began the session with an intellectual genealogy of CE. In 1947, novelist Dorothy L. Sayers published an essay titled “The Lost Tools of Learning,” in which she urged educators to reclaim the educational “tools” of the ancient Greeks and Romans and combine them with Jean Piaget’s theories of childhood cognitive development. William F. Buckley Jr. republished Sayers’s essay in the *National Review* three times (in 1959, 1960, and 1979), aiming to influence debates over public education. Douglas Wilson, an evangelical pastor, read the article and saw an opportunity to marry CE to evangelical Christianity. Soon thereafter, he created the Christian school Logos from



Meetups brought together attendees for more informal conversations and activities, from fiber arts to board games.

Hope Shannon

his home in Moscow, Idaho. Richardi estimated that the number of classical schools in the United States has grown to nearly 1,700, though this does not include the homeschooling families using the model. Richardi credited Susan Wise Bauer, fellow panelist and co-author of *The Well-Trained Mind* (1999), currently in its fifth edition, as perhaps the most influential figure in CE among homeschooling families. After Sayers, Wilson, and Bauer, the fourth major figure of CE is Mortimer J. Adler, a philosopher, liberal education advocate, and editor of the landmark 54-volume *Great Books of the Western World*, which served as a model for the types of texts that should be included in a CE curriculum.

Richardi and Bauer both emphasized that the CE movement is neither politically monolithic nor even solely Christian—but there are elements of consensus. CE developed in a liberal arts tradition, inspired in part by Greek and Latin approaches to education, but according to Bauer, it is more closely related to the model of religious education of clergy that emerged in Europe between the fifth and eighth centuries. The modern CE movement joins moral and character development (interpreted mainly through the lenses of individual responsibility and self-reliance) with rigor, high but developmentally appropriate expectations, and the “quest for truth, goodness, and beauty.”

Despite these unified ideas, CE schools closely guard their autonomy, which is ideologically tied to the centrality of the family in educational decision-making. Texts may be shared within schools or networks, but the idea of a “canon” is corrosive to self-governance. As a result, the definition of “classical” becomes flexible and contingent. Bauer argued that CE reading lists are frequently “overweighted” with Western

texts, but the avoidance of nudity and sex within the movement ironically reduces and narrows interaction with the classical world. As she noted, one would be hard-pressed to find Sappho on a CE reading list.

CE's recent stretch beyond K–12 education is remarkable and requires urgent attention. In Florida, the Classic Learning Test (CLT) has emerged as an alternative to the College Board and university entrance exams, and the Department of Defense will begin accepting the CLT for service academy applications in 2027. Nathan Rives (Weber State Univ.) spoke about the CE roots of Utah's general education reform bill SB 344 (2025), which, Rives reported, the *National Review* called a "game changer nationally." It creates a Center for Civic Excellence at Utah State University under a new vice provost, who Rives said would serve as a "general education czar" with a long list of extraordinary powers, including hiring, firing, and evaluating all faculty in general education and syllabi review. The law's focus on the humanities, "viewpoint diversity," and an overwhelmingly Western canon puts humanities faculty under particular pressure to carry out the ideological project. Yet Rives seemed skeptical of the project's ability to achieve its overall goals. While the content lists are ideologically inflected, requiring a work be taught is not the same as studying it in a modern university classroom. Using the example of Tocqueville, commonly found on proposed lists of required reading, Rives asked, "I wonder—will reading it have the effect they think it will?"

The speakers identified the CE movement as being, at root, about control. Rives pointed to a right-wing "obsession" with reversing the reforms of the 1960s by taking "control of content," though he added, "It's not clear to me that they know what content does." For Bauer, the desire is behind the shift from an emphasis on method, which is historically central to CE, to content, which is much easier to control and monitor. Because of distrust of teacher training since the 1960s, efforts to control curriculum increasingly exclude experienced classroom teacher, and reformers in their urgency are increasingly prioritizing ideology over the science of learning. Bauer attached this urgency to "apocalyptic thinking" throughout the Christian education ecosystem, where educators seek to "save Western civilization, one student at a time." Rives concurred, saying that the movement has "taken on a life of its own" as people reach for "whatever they think will save [them]" in an age of increasing uncertainty. While CE has implications for all areas of study in K–12 education, the humanities and social studies in particular are susceptible to CE advocates' moves to command curriculum in institutions of public education. Historians, guided by their professional integrity, must be informed participants in these nationwide debates

about curriculum reforms that have shaped and will continue to shape generations of students.

—WB

## HISTORY AND GENOCIDE STUDIES NOW

About a dozen sessions across the weekend addressed the topic of Palestine, including *Historians and the Politics of Genocide Studies*, a roundtable sponsored by the AHA's Research Division. This session brought together scholars to reflect on "how historians as public intellectuals have responded to cases of genocide and ethnic cleansing during the last century, and how this response has been entangled with American domestic politics, cold war, and the US foreign policy agenda."

The session drew a large and engaged audience, matching the equally engaging panel made up of scholars of genocide and related fields. Bedross Der Matossian (Univ. of Nebraska–Lincoln) opened by describing what he characterized as a "post-truth and denial" era in the United States and globally, in which facts are less influential than opinions. In discussions of genocide specifically, he argued that people bend reality. Facts are selectively chosen to support predetermined positions, while a lack of expertise can make it difficult to distinguish reliable scholarship from misinformation. This "post-truth dynamic distorts historical memory," he said, emphasizing that denial has serious consequences when the governments that advance this misinformation are powerful global states. This context raises urgent questions about the role of a historian in the face of genocide. He urged historians to publish on genocide denial and to situate it within a comparative framework in order to provide scholarly legitimacy.

Barry Carl Trachtenberg (Wake Forest Univ.), a historian of the Holocaust, described a recent incident in which Israeli Defense Forces raided Birzeit University and interrupted the screening of a documentary about a Palestinian child killed in Gaza. He noted a lack of condemnation from the AHA and other institutions and framed this as a broader pattern of uneven responses to global violence from historical organizations. Trachtenberg suggested that scholars face a choice in their response: Work for change from within or turn away from institutions and create new ones. He pointed to

organizations such as the Liberatory Jewish Studies Network and the Genocide and Holocaust Studies Crisis Network as examples of groups seeking to interrogate why and how institutions have justified genocide and foster discussion. These conversations need to be held out loud in the open for change to happen, he said.

## This “post-truth dynamic distorts historical memory.”

Gabriel Winant (Univ. of Chicago) reflected on the politics of higher education in relation to genocide. During the 20th century, American universities engaged widely with contemporary questions of violence and genocide; they helped make sense of moments of tragedy. “Now,” he said, “we are in a new crisis.” According to Winant, the response to recent student encampments illustrates the power of the oligarch class over our institutions and the hostility they have over the knowledge produced there. “They are interested in the destruction of knowledge,” he stated, suggesting that donor influence and political pressure to suppress Palestine has enabled universities to suppress other subjects. Even so, he emphasized that resistance within and beyond the university is robust, though undervalued and misrepresented. Activist organizations, legal challenges, and graduate student unions, he argued, have played a critical role in pushing back. In the moments when our universities are oppressive, he said, there are always organizers. Universities and other large institutions can inflict enormous harm, but he reminded the audience that they cannot erase the power built through organizing and solidarity. He concluded, “We will look back at this time as generating a new American campus. . . . It is crucial to recognize we have resources to defend ourselves.”

The destruction in Gaza and its implications for historians were the focus of Abdel Razzaq Takriti’s (Rice Univ.) remarks. He urged the audience to consider how the targeted destruction of infrastructure that anchors society, including educational, health, sewage, and cultural institutions, is genocidal. Gaza has a long and rich history bridging Asia and Africa, and Takriti called attention to the loss of archives, cultural and religious artifacts, and educational institutions that are deeply important to the history of the Ottoman Empire, Christianity, and the Middle East region at large. He mourned the loss of 195 university professors, hundreds more schoolteachers, and even more students. To Takriti, historians have a responsibility to respond to these tragedies and use the power of their scholarship to oppose and end genocide.

Takriti also addressed the experiences of historians of Palestine like himself, who have felt marginalized within the discipline and the AHA because of what they study. Multiple panelists referenced “the Palestine exception,” a term used to describe a pattern of institutional discrimination that restricts scholarship on and advocacy for Palestine. Despite these challenges, Takriti emphasized the urgency of “taking up space” within institutions because colleagues in Gaza have asked them to do so. “It is uncivil to be silent on genocide,” he stated. He urged the AHA to show solidarity and agreed with other panelists that historical institutions should be speaking out against genocide as an abuse of history.

The Q&A period reflected the intensity of the session. Several undergraduates in the audience sought advice, asking how emerging historians can deal with feelings of overwhelm, shrinking graduate opportunities, and the perceived gap between private acknowledgment of a genocide in Gaza and institutional action in public. Session chair Mezna Qato (Univ. of Cambridge) responded that there is progress in the broader acceptance of today’s events as a genocide, but that there is often an aggressive reaction toward the messenger, which she finds “maddening.” The panelists encouraged the audience to work in this tension and to keep pushing forward. “Count victories as victories even if they are dwarfed by the scale of genocide,” a panelist stated.

—EM

## HOW TO ADVOCATE FOR HISTORY

Following a year in which historians, and the historical discipline itself, were under imminent threat, conference attendees received some expert guidance in advocacy on behalf of history. In *The Historian as Advocate*, the AHA’s government relations consultant Jessica Venable (Thorn Run Partners) led an interactive workshop on how to most effectively reach elected officials and convince them that historians’ work is worth protecting. This includes not only their professions in history but also the varied policy issues they have studied on which they can provide valuable historical context.

Venable began by asking participants what questions they had, receiving enough to fill four sheets of chart paper placed at the front of the room. These ranged from the general, like how historians can make their work legible to policymakers or how to identify potential partners on Capitol Hill, to the particular, like how to reach specific policymakers to share expertise in



A New Orleans–themed puzzle in the Exhibit Hall reminded attendees of where we'll convene in 2027.

areas such as climate change or reproductive health and how graduate students can participate in advocacy.

Venable emphasized the importance of shifting from being “petitioners to partners” in the policy process: Policymakers will be most inclined to work with historians if they can demonstrate value to them and their staffs. This value often comes from historians’ ability to explain the impact of past policy choices on the world. She introduced the four R’s of meaningful engagement and advocacy: relationships, respect, relevance, and reciprocity. Your ability to impact policy comes from continued, reciprocal relationships.

Venable got participants moving around the room in breakout groups working to craft an advocacy strategy, with exercises addressing different components of effective advocacy:

**Translation:** In order to communicate with officials, speak in terms policymakers will understand. Venable solicited some possibly difficult words and offered translations: “teaching” instead of “pedagogical,” “order of events” instead of “chronology” or “periodization.” Concision is also key, with Venable stressing the importance of paring down 30-page papers into one-page summaries, and class-length lectures into two-sentence “diagnostic history” statements. Each group

created a diagnostic history statement on a historical topic, stating what the historical record indicates could happen if a particular policy is pursued. In one example, a group shared that if the US government continued to restrict student speech on campus, student movements could lead to violence, pointing to examples from the French student protests of 1968 and the shooting of student protestors at Kent State University in 1970.

**Clarity and relevance:** Express your concerns in stark terms. Venable asked groups to briefly explain what a “day with” and “day without” a particular policy action would look like. A historian of global reproductive health put it simply: A day with adequate funding for maternal health programs in Africa has more women living, and a day without means they die.

**Tactical mobilization:** A group of advocates should include a researcher, a coordinator, and a constituent. Each breakout group proposed an “advocacy pod” including these three roles to match their chosen policy area. One group challenged themselves to compose an advocacy pod only of grad students who could speak about issues on their campus to the area’s congressional representative—a clear answer to a group member’s initial question about how students can participate in advocacy.

By the end of the session, attendees had an array of tools to guide their advocacy, communicate effectively with policymakers, distill their research down to the most relevant and concise information, and form and lead groups that can have an impact on policies that concern and affect historians and our work. Multiple attendees expressed how helpful the training had been and that they wished more people could have attended—and the AHA plans to offer more advocacy trainings in the future.

—BR

## ON TO NEW ORLEANS

The 140th annual meeting will be held January 7–10, 2027, in New Orleans. While the proposal deadline has passed, we hope that you will join us next year. Even if you haven’t proposed your own session, there will be many opportunities to participate—in workshops, drop-in sessions, and other events. **P**

BRYAN A. BANKS

# CANNONBALL PEDAGOGY

*Mnemonic Moments in the History Classroom*



After throwing a cannonball from the second floor, students spent months discussing the surprising activity's impact on the ground and themselves.

*Bryan A. Banks*

**IN MY MODERN EUROPEAN** History course, we spend quite a bit of time discussing warfare in 18th-century Europe to understand the dramatic escalations that would come in the centuries that follow. But on one particular day, class lagged. In an impulsive effort to drive home the destruction of those long-ago battlefields, I grabbed my cannonball—which I had once acquired off eBay as it was said to have been shot into the Polish countryside during the Napoleonic Wars—told the students to follow me, and walked out onto the second-floor breezeway. Overlooking a small patch of grass, I handed the cannonball to a student and told them to throw it. They looked at me with incredulity but after further encouragement threw it to the ground.

The impact was much greater than the divot in the earth the iron mass left. For weeks after, students walked by the divot and came into class talking about it. They noticed the smallest changes. After a rain, the water table swelled and the impact site softened. But students' conversations covered not only the surface level. They talked about the experience. They waxed poetic about the earth erasing human history. How battlefields, like the bit of grass, were artifacts worthy of interrogation. I made efforts to connect lessons in subsequent class sessions back to the cannonball. When warfare escalated in the era of my cannonball and still more in the 20th century, students used the cannonball's mark as a metaphor to express complicated ideas about atomic warfare and the environment. In one course evaluation, a student answered the question "What could the instructor have done to improve this class?" with "More cannonballs."

History classrooms need more "cannonballs," or what I often call "mnemonic moments" in my classes. Education theorists and researchers have explored the power of mnemonic devices for encouraging the retention of complicated information. They have also shown that active learning promotes critical thinking. I define a mnemonic moment, then, as an attempt to create a hands-on experience around which a student can form a strong memory and impression. They are unique and present students with an experience to mull over beyond the individual class session. They also force the educator to consider how to intentionally make a moment that will be remembered.

There are a range of approaches to getting students to learn actively. Flipped classrooms require instructors to provide most of the information outside of class, which then allows you to spend the entire class period on an active learning exercise. Think of a lab-based course with little to no separate instruction time devoted to providing information, and you have a sense of the flipped classroom model. This requires a

lot of work on the professor's part, and students lacking the intrinsic motivation to participate in class will find this approach frustrating. Similarly, using *Reacting to the Past* games or making your own has mixed results. Sometimes, such games went well in my classroom. Other times, the lessons the students clung to the hardest were based on their own perspectives and lacked an adequate understanding of those people the simulation intended for them to understand.

Rather than put all my eggs in the flipped classroom basket but still determined to incorporate more active learning in the classroom, I began increasingly to integrate mnemonic moments into my classes. Sometimes my efforts were overtaxing—I carefully developed and tried to orchestrate a moment, and it fell flat. Other times, as was the case with the cannonball, I came up with it on the fly.

What could the instructor have done to improve this class?  
"More cannonballs."

When a mnemonic moment works, it is a wicked experience for the students. In *Creating Wicked Students: Designing Courses for a Complex World* (2018), Paul Hanstedt argues that courses can and should be designed to introduce students to "wicked problems," or complex issues with no single answer. They should also encourage students to develop wicked solutions capable of responding to the knotty complications life throws at us. Hanstedt also encourages us to think about course design that presents students with wicked world problems strategically, so that the lessons learned will be remembered. With mnemonic moments, wicked problems can be reinforced by wicked memories. These moments should be complex and challenge students to think critically.

Here are the five basic lessons I've learned in pursuing mnemonic moments:

**Be a little wicked.** The moment must be "unconventional" to subvert the expectations of the student and challenge them to engage actively. In a class on prehistoric life, we explored the Lascaux Cave paintings to think about the invention of art, symbols, and even text. Students read about the cave paintings and how scholars have interpreted them differently. To show that they understood that complexity, I had them graffiti a nearby wall on a campus building with chalk. They walked by that wall every day on the way to class, and weeks later, with no rain, the chalk faded but remained visible. The

cave paintings became a metaphor for that class to think about how natural forces may accidentally preserve such art and also art's importance for forming human bonds in early nomadic communities. The students certainly bonded over the experience as well.

**Space these moments out to avoid burnout.** By this I mean: Do not overuse this tool. The law of diminishing returns will lessen the impact and insight students will receive. For me, in a class broken into four units, my ideal is one per unit. This gives me time to set the stage, cover the topics needed to take advantage of the mnemonic moment fully, and facilitate reflection on the moment before it is time to move on to the next unit. One semester, I aimed at one a week. By the mid-term, I had overextended myself, and the students had come to see these moments as perfunctory and therefore not as “wicked.”

## Wicked problems can be reinforced by wicked memories.

**Give students agency over the experience.** Reacting to the Past simulations are helpful tools in the educator's repertoire, precisely because they give students choices to make, but students can also make choices in shorter experiences as well. To teach students about how worker groups in 19th-century Europe banded together to fight for improved working conditions, I developed a game for students to play in a single class session. In this game, I own a factory and need to hire workers. Our imaginary laissez-faire government leaves me to my own devices, and the students must bid to work in my factory. If they do not bid and win the job, their life points diminish faster than if they get the job. I tell them the team that survives the longest wins. And off they go. Most of the time, they get so caught up in the competition they all starve at the same time and the game ends without a winner. Other times, they organize and demand standard wages and a social safety net. Still other times, the students protest. This game helps them to understand how revolutionary movements result from class tensions, limited resources, lack of government regulation, and so much more. They continue to reference the game and the choices they made when they encounter other topics in the class, like the rise of ethnic nationalism movements in the age of decolonization.

**Not all mnemonic moments are created equal, nor should they be.** Some moments may require more work than others. The factory work simulation described above took a fair amount of advanced planning. The cannonball did not. In my courses, I do not have four equally intensive exercises. When

covering the Columbian Exchange, I have two students come to the front of the class to participate in a game show. I show them an image of a thing, and they must tell me if it originated in the Americas or Afro-Eurasia. Before they each choose, the audience (i.e., their classmates) must yell out what they think is the correct answer. Ranging from diseases and people to animals and plants, and always ending with the Jerusalem artichoke, the examples challenge students to rethink the human-led environmental transformation. The game consists of six to seven images, and the students guess quickly. This game took more time to prepare and work through than the cannonball, but less time than the factory simulation.

**Afterward, ask students to reflect and explain why you chose to use class time for that exercise.** Reflection is as important as the lessons you hope they derive about the past. If students are to understand historical methods and how historians craft narratives from evidence, then model it for them in the classroom and explain it. In my Historical Methods class, I bring students to our campus archives. One semester, I had them pick a box at random and create an entire research project proposal based off that box. They chose their box through an experience that can only be likened to the television show *Supermarket Sweep*. They raced through the archives, selected a box, returned to their group, and then began reading, analyzing, and constructing an argument. It was exhilarating for the student and the professor. I explain to the students that research projects are everywhere, creative methodologies exist to help unpack most questions, and archives themselves need to be engaged with critically.

The emails I have received from former students turned teachers asking about how to incorporate mnemonic moments in their own classrooms has encouraged me to keep searching for and cultivating these moments (and to share them with readers of this piece). Other students report that mnemonic moments made history relatable. Years later, those students still approach me beyond the university to talk about our mnemonic moments. Long after the cannonball's dent in the landscape has faded, a student's memory persists and informs their everyday life. **P**

*Bryan A. Banks is associate professor and interim dean of Libraries and the Graduate School at Columbus State University.*

EAMONN BELLIN

# EMANCIPATION AND UNFREEDOM

*Controlling Labor in the Victorian Empire*



Belying the idyllic representation of this Guyanese plantation, Demerara experienced a rebellion by enslaved people in 1823 and large-scale labor actions by freedpeople and migrant indentured laborers in the decades after emancipation.

*Illustration in Thomas Staunton St. Clair, A Residence in the West Indies and America (1834).*

**A T A 2024** Commonwealth meeting, King Charles III guardedly acknowledged “painful aspects” of British slavery amid calls from Caribbean member states for reparations. At the same event, British Prime Minister Keir Starmer made a lawyerly distinction between his readiness to condemn slavery as “abhorrent” and his government’s unreadiness to make reparations for it. Such gnomonic remarks are not new. Visiting Jamaica in 2015, David Cameron advised that Britain and its former colony “move on from this painful legacy and continue to build for the future.”

This diffidence would puzzle the king and counselors’ Victorian ancestors. Having spent the 17th and 18th centuries building a colonial empire underpinned by slavery, Britain abolished the slave trade in 1808, deployed the Royal Navy against slave ships, and emancipated some 800,000 people in the Caribbean in 1833 and 1838. Prime Minister William Gladstone pronounced abolition “one of the great issues of the previous half century,” a case where “popular judgement” proved “more just than that of the higher orders.” The gulf between current discomfort and Victorian self-satisfaction stems, in part, from renewed confrontations with the financial legacy of slavery. Gladstone’s own father received over £100,000 in reparations for the 2,500 people he’d once enslaved. Another well-compensated slaveholder was Sir James Duff, ancestor of David Cameron, champion of the strategy to simply “move on.”

The gap between Victorian moral confidence (or complacency) regarding slavery and contemporary moral criticism (or defensiveness) originates in both the financial legacy of slavery and the troubled nature of freedom after 1833. During Queen Victoria’s reign (1837–1901), the emancipated and emancipating empire was shaped by unfree labor. After abolition, legally free but strictly disciplined indentured labor revived Britain’s colonial plantation sector at freedpeople’s expense.

Colonial slavery helped transform Britain into a world power under George III (r. 1760–1820). Britain conducted some 12,000 slave voyages and trafficked over three million African captives, four-fifths of them destined for sugar plantation colonies. Mass oppression garnered great wealth. By 1788, Jamaica annually received 500 ships, exported £2.1 million in value, and imported another £1.5 million from Britain. Over the course of the long 18th century, shipping to Africa increased tenfold, and shipping to London quadrupled.

Triumphant in the Napoleonic Wars, Britain was poised to enter another century of prosperity underwritten by slavery. Then, between 1833 and 1838, a popular abolitionist movement at home and enslaved unrest in the Caribbean pressured

Parliament to end slavery. Still, Britain was an antislavery empire in a proslavery world, a context that constrained the possibilities available to freedpeople and indentured laborers.

Eighty years ago, Eric Williams’s *Capitalism and Slavery* opened a debate about whether “profits or prophets” – the material or the spiritual – animated British abolitionism. Less debatable was the centrality of profits for politicians, investors, and former slaveholders *after* abolition. Plantation profits depended on manipulable and expendable labor – made so by terror and dehumanization. Abolition threatened to make labor autonomous and scarce. Freedpeople could negotiate hours and wages, and they gained leverage from the labor scarcity that resulted from their readiness to relocate: whether from plantations to small farms in colonies like Jamaica or to higher-wage colonies like Guiana. Between 1838 and 1840, 66,000 emancipated Jamaicans left plantations to acquire farms. Even in high-wage colonies like Guiana and Trinidad, the number of freedpeople working on plantations was halved in the 1840s.

## Britain was an antislavery empire in a proslavery world.

London policymakers and Caribbean proprietors saw the problem in terms of labor scarcity and autonomy. After shepherding abolition into law, Colonial Secretary Lord Stanley was showered with complaints from planters like Trinidad’s William Burnley, who grumbled that “want of labor, enables the laborer to do as he pleases,” causing “neglect and waste.” Writers like Thomas Carlyle amplified this grievance: “The sugar-crops rot round them uncut, because labour cannot be hired.” John Stuart Mill worried that freedpeople “can exist in comfort on the wages of a comparatively small quantity of work.” Mill’s solution to such indolence was immigration.

Failed attempts to substitute African plantation workers with Madeiran, Irish, and Chinese people were made before and after abolition. Gladstone’s father feared that the “influence of the climate was generally producing reluctance to labor” among Europeans. In the 1840s, labor’s misery in the Old World helped rebalance labor’s scarcity and autonomy in the New. British industrialization and discriminatory tariffs fueled economic contraction in India. “Since the introduction of European thread so superior in quality and cheap in price, scarcely a *charka* is to be seen in the country,” complained an 1835 column in the *Bengal Hurkaru*, an English-language newspaper in Calcutta. Indian labor was employed on Mascarene sugar plantations and supported Ceylon’s coffee sector. By equalizing sugar duties in the 1840s and increasing West Indian competition from Cuban sugar, the British

government motivated its colonies, especially Guiana and Trinidad, to pursue indentured labor. In the 1840s, 23,000 Indian workers immigrated to the British West Indies. That figure exceeded 100,000 over the following two decades and approached 300,000 between 1870 and 1917.

Compared to freedpeople, indentured laborers were both replaceable and controllable. “In civilized countries,” wrote Herman Merivale, undersecretary for the colonies from 1847 to 1859, “the laborer, though free, is by a law of nature dependent on capitalists; in colonies this dependence must be created by artificial means.” Slavery formerly supplied those “artificial means.” Indenture was another “artifice.” West Indian lobbyists criticized an 1838 indentured labor code, authored by abolitionist James Stephen, for limiting indentures to a year. Colonial legislation in the 1850s established five-year indentures, empowered governors to assign workers to plantations, and stipulated seven hours of field work per day and a six-day week. Laws criminalized laborers’ movement off plantations and levied fines and prison sentences for “malingering” and other blanket offenses. “Take a large factory in Manchester, or Birmingham,” Edward Jenkins observed in 1871, “build a wall around it, shut in its work people from all intercourse,” and one would have a colonial plantation.

## Indenture was formed in slavery's shadow.

Indentured labor saved the plantation sector in Guiana and Trinidad. Sugar output increased in Guiana in the 1840s and 1850s, despite the loss of preferential duties, falling prices, and metropolitan depression. Yet some expressed concern that indentured labor was slavery by another name. In 1840, John Scoble helped scupper an indentured labor experiment in Guiana on John Gladstone’s estates by exposing worker abuse. Colonial magistrate George William Des Voeux published an exposé, *The New Slavery: An Account of the Indian and Chinese Immigrants in British Guiana*, in 1871. His colleague Joseph Beaumont condemned indentured labor as a “monstrous, rotten system, rooted upon slavery, grown in its stale soil, emulating its worst abuses.” Beaumont considered indentured labor insidious because it “presents itself under false colors, whereas slavery bore the brand of infamy upon its forehead.”

Indenture was not enslavement. Indian workers were recruited under the supervision of the Calcutta-based Protector of Emigrants. Many laborers extended contracts for a second five-year term. Close to three-quarters of migrants chose to remain in the West Indies permanently. Straddling freedom and unfreedom, indenture was formed in slavery’s shadow.

But if indentured labor was not slavery, it nonetheless contributed to the economic and political disenfranchisement of formerly enslaved men and women. Freedpeople in Guiana launched a three-month strike in 1847–48 protesting depressed wages. The strike was defeated in part because Indian and Madeiran workers mostly did not participate. In the 1860s, striking Indian workers, lacking Afro-Guyanese support, also were suppressed. To finance the transport of Indian workers, Guiana’s colonial government levied a high import tax targeting food purchases made by African and Indian Guyanese workers, subsidizing the very system that oppressed them.

Guiana and Trinidad were “Crown colonies” without a tradition of self-government. Jamaica had such a tradition, but its legislative autonomy was revoked in 1866, justified by the sugar industry’s decline. Facing the loss of economic and political choices a generation after emancipation, freedpeople, like migrant workers, lived a freedom beholden to the interests of the plantation economy that slavery had established.

Victorian triumphalism over abolition feels jarring today: The quickness to commend a moment of British virtue can encourage blindness to centuries of British cruelty. It is especially jarring that this move to forget the crime but celebrate its correction enjoys contemporary purchase. Nigel Farage, right-wing provocateur and possibly Britain’s next prime minister, groused in 2024 that perhaps Spain and Portugal owe Britain compensation for “the massive cost” the Royal Navy incurred in stopping their slave ships after 1808. Farage warned Starmer against “giving an inch” on slavery reparations, declaring: “The past is the past is the past. We are not guilty for it; we are not responsible for it.”

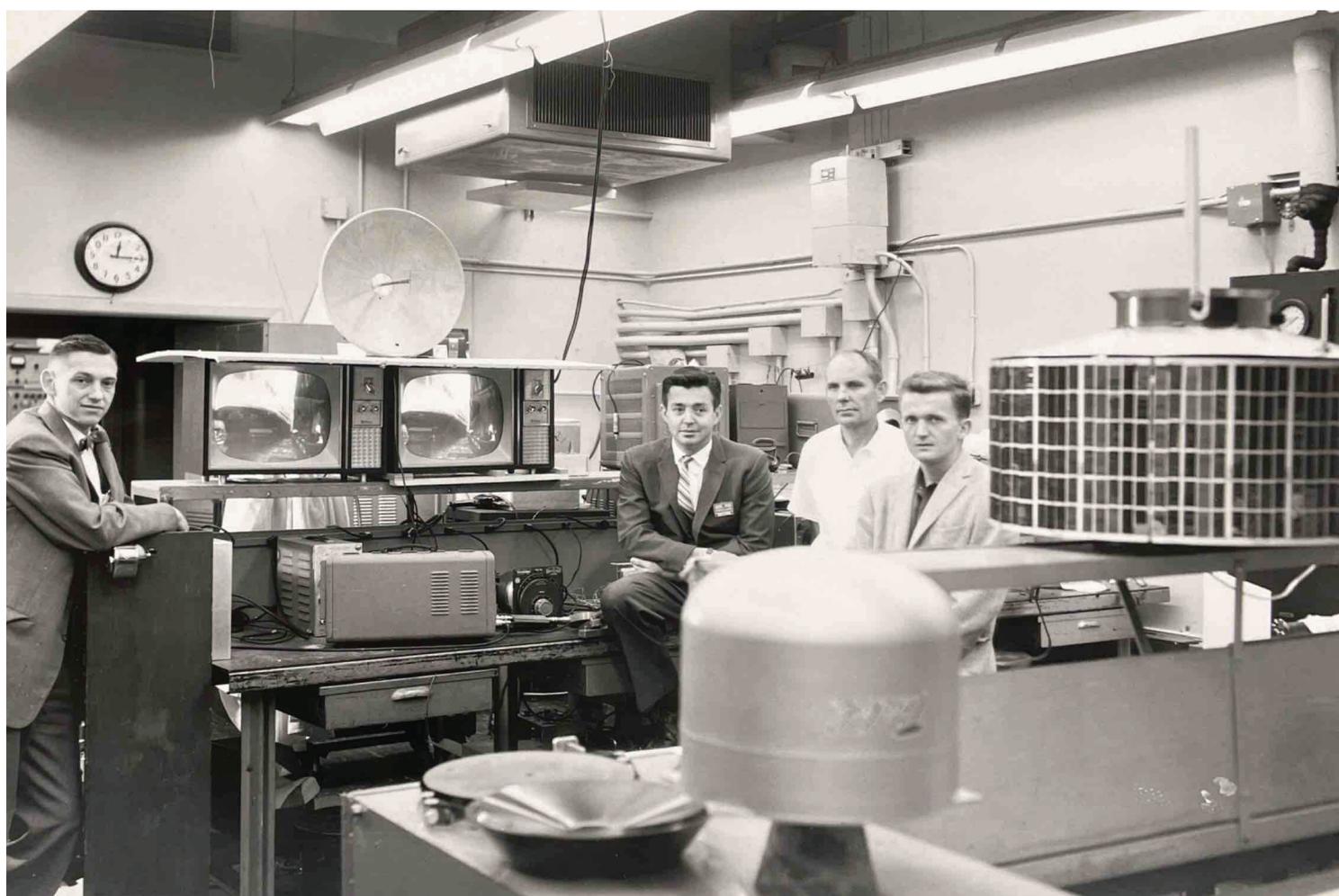
Broadening our gaze from the gap between Victorian self-regard and slavery’s injustices to include abolition’s shortcomings helps counter the popular but misplaced desire to sever past cruelties from present responsibilities. The adversities faced by emancipated people and indentured laborers underscore how freedom was defined by slavery’s precedent, its long shadow, and the plantation sector’s persistent interests. Abolition did not guarantee equal rights or opportunities. In the Caribbean today, ecological deterioration, governmental indebtedness, social inequality, and economic dependence continue to frustrate freedom. Rather than qualify or deny their culpability in past crimes, British monarchs and ministers should do their part to help mitigate enduring problems. **P**

*Eamonn Bellin is a history PhD candidate at Georgetown University.*

HARIS A. DURRANI

# ENGINEERING THE LAW

*The Complicated Legal History of a Satellite*



The team of Hughes engineers behind *Syncom II*—John Mendel, Harold Rosen, Tom Hudspeth, and Donald Williams—in their laboratory in Culver City, with one of the satellites they built for NASA under the Syncom program, circa 1963.

*Special Collections and Archives, University of Nevada—Las Vegas, Hughes Electronics Collection*

**WHEN I EMBARKED** on my doctoral dissertation, I set out to write a legal history of a single technological object: *Syncom II*, a stout satellite no wider than a bicycle wheel. Launched in 1963—six years after the Soviet Union sent earth’s first artificial satellite (*Sputnik I*) into space and six years before the moon landing—*Syncom II*, with its sister satellite, connected two-thirds of the planet’s surface and became the model for the first generation of communications satellites. The result of a partnership between Hughes Aircraft Company, the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA), and the Department of Defense, the satellite also became a tool of economic, political, and military power during the global Cold War.

Over the course of my doctoral work, I realized that the engineers behind the satellite—a team of four men experienced in military radar technology, mostly trained at the California Institute of Technology—believed law was crucial to the satellite’s development and, with varying success, used the law to their advantage. That engineers had the forethought to maneuver through the legal system is an insight with far-reaching implications for historians of law and technology, who stand to benefit from one another’s methods and objects of study. I learned this lesson while navigating a career from engineering to law and history.

It is a widely held assumption that law lags behind technology, always struggling to catch up to new developments. But law can also precede technology, “releasing energy” (as the legal historian J. Willard Hurst put it) for economic growth. Historians of technology have gone further, taking law as neither product nor trigger of innovation but as one of several factors—alongside politics, economics, and society—that are enmeshed with technology in an array of contingent relations.

But these grand narratives look different when engineers imagine and participate in legal practice. In *Syncom II*’s story, law was not only a driving, reactive, or contingent force in the satellite’s development. Rather, law itself was a conceptual object: The engineers of *Syncom II* internalized the very narratives about law that were later constructed around their project. Whether or not law in fact released energy, spurring technological development, the engineers believed it could. This idea sparked their legal imaginations and became central to the satellite’s development. Stitching it into *Syncom II*’s construction, operation, and maintenance, they transformed the relationship between law and technology as they prophesized and proselytized it.

To arrive at this knotty conclusion required combining the methods used by historians of law and technology: attention

to the internal work of law and lawyers on one hand, and technological objects and stories built around them on the other. I wanted to write about the satellite as an object around which a unique set of discourses traveled, transformed, or stabilized, shaping the satellite’s development much as the satellite shaped its world. I had in mind the classic debate in science and technology studies over New York urban planner Robert Moses’s bridges: What mattered was not whether Moses intentionally and effectively designed Long Island bridges as infrastructures of gentrification but how *stories* of Moses’s bridges were constructed.

These grand narratives look different when engineers imagine and participate in legal practice.

Researching extraterritoriality and US patent law, I worked back to the first major case on the subject, *Rosen v. NASA* (Board of Patent Appeals and Interferences, 1966), which applied US patent law to *Syncom II*’s location in orbit and its ground stations in decolonizing Nigeria and apartheid South Africa. Meanwhile, studying the law and economics movement led me to revisit its forerunners and critics—specifically Richard Posner, Ronald Coase, and Charles Reich—all of whom alluded to *Syncom II* in foundational works on regulation of property, communications and public utilities, and monopolies. Lastly, investigating postcolonial histories of space law, I discovered that claims lodged by developing nations over segments of orbit above their territories, formally articulated in 1976, originated in debates over a decade earlier, triggered by the launch of *Syncom II*. From my scholarly perch in the 2020s, these ostensibly unrelated threads gravitated toward the satellite, its legal detritus, just as the satellite itself (now defunct) continues to drift in a wobbling orbit above the Indian Ocean, one of the oldest existing pieces of space debris.

Legal disputes over *Syncom II* resembled the storied battles around Robert Moses’s bridges. The satellite triggered and invoked debates over patents behind the satellite design, government contracts and subsidies, legislation on public utilities and monopolies, frequency regulations, bilateral agreements over African ground stations, and outer space law. The four men (they were all men) behind *Syncom II* traversed a web of overlapping legal discourses, taking alternate positions depending on time, place, and the issue before them. When selling the design to Congress as the model for a statutory corporation meant to run the first generation of communications satellites, the Hughes men emphasized

their design's capacity to facilitate a global empire. But, when persuading representatives of developing nations to agree to overhaul international frequency regulations, they promised this new, global communications system would not repeat the exploitative practices of the past.

As I combed through archives in Cuba, the United Kingdom, Switzerland, and the United States, I saw that engineers at Hughes anticipated the satellite's legal worlds before participating in them. The design was devised in 1959 by a group of engineers in Culver City, California. Immediately after, the economics of the project were taken on by an army of managers and executives with engineering degrees. Everyone foresaw that the satellite would encounter an array of legal issues: public utilities legislation, government contracts, frequency regulations, agreements between NASA and the military, patents, permissions to operate ground stations abroad, and claims over orbital "real estate." The engineers turned to law as the crucible for realizing their design—both an obstacle to and a lever in its development. They were oracles, purveyors of the future. Looking out from 1959, they proved adept at what law professors call "issue spotting." Anticipating the satellite's future like a fact pattern in a law school exam hypothetical, they predicted nearly every legal dispute that would accumulate around the satellite. In part, they knew what to expect from the legal infrastructure of postwar research and development. But they were also transforming that infrastructure.

Everyone foresaw that the satellite would encounter an array of legal issues.

Oracles often create the future they foresee: The Hughes men created the legal worlds of the satellite as they foresaw them. They sought patents that would ensnare them in four decades of disputes in the Patent Office and courts; advocated rehauls of frequency regulations that would trigger powerful responses from coalitions of developing nations; and pursued agreements for ground stations that would raise as many suspicions of US meddling as they quelled. They also encountered foils: US and foreign judges, bureaucrats, executives, and diplomats, many of them former engineers who now occupied professions in the world of "formal" law. In these encounters, law was a double-edged sword. It did not provide an equal playing field in the contestations between public and private, or between the United States and its would-be foreign subjects. But it set conditions within which those

debates operated—conditions partly erected, for good or ill, by the men from Culver City.

Throughout, law was not an abstract category that struggled to catch up to the satellite's development. Nor was it merely one of several factors enmeshed in a set of relations with technology, as historians have found in other contexts. Rather, law was an object whose relationship with technology was reflexively conceptualized and maneuvered by the engineers behind the satellite. I arrived at this insight by toggling between histories of law and technology.

How unique was it to *Syncom II*'s story that its engineers thought about law? I once believed that it was particular to the novelty of the technology, or to the fact that aerospace and communications were heavily regulated. Now I wonder if the technology's novelty was one of those stories of the satellite that Hughes engineers promulgated to garner regulatory favors. After all, the prevalence of regulation preexisted but was also perpetuated by these men. Regulation in this story was used to establish legal certainty and secure commercial success rather than existing as merely a flat backdrop against which the Hughes engineers operated.

Perhaps it was not so extraordinary that engineers behind *Syncom II* directly engaged with the legal system. After all, I initially applied to law school after working as an engineering student at a Boeing satellite facility in El Segundo, California, where law seemed to be everywhere. I was halfway through my doctorate when I realized I had worked in a sister facility to the one that had built *Syncom II* more than 50 years earlier, acquired by Boeing when it bought Hughes in 2000. For many engineers, working out the law may be as ordinary as making the things it governs. **P**

*Haris A. Durrani is a Prize Fellow in Economics, History, and Politics at Harvard University. He was previously a law clerk in the US Court of Appeals for the Federal Circuit and a NASA Fellow in the History of Space Technology. He holds a JD/PhD from Columbia Law School and Princeton University.*

## GLOBAL STORIES

*In the March 2026 Issue of the American Historical Review*

The 131st volume of the *American Historical Review* opens with broad, global interventions of historical research, with articles in the March issue on Indigenous resistance, child removal, the intertwining of history writing and politics, and the genealogy of the word *nakba*. The History Lab includes a forum on the global history of abortion and a new #AHR Sylabus project, Authoritarianism 101: A Global History.

First is AHA president Ben Vinson III's address, delivered at the AHA annual meeting in Chicago on January 9, 2026. In "Reflections on Our Times: Higher Education in Focus," Vinson discusses what he calls the "massification of higher education" and argues that members of the academy, and historians in particular, have a unique opportunity to shape education. Amid the "polycrisis" of higher education, he proposes a nine-point agenda as a starting point, concluding that "change is ours for the making in these times, and that as colleagues, and as historians, we are poised to make a greater difference for a better future ahead."

In "Indigenous Women and the Politics of Maternalism in Nineteenth-Century Buenos Aires, Argentina," Hannah Greenwald (Gettysburg Coll.) examines the lived experience of women whom the charity organization Sociedad de Beneficencia displaced and forced to work as unfree domestic laborers for wealthy families. Greenwald shows how some women's calls to bring attention to their mistreatment forced Argentine political elites to question the nature of citizenship. She argues that this Indigenous resistance under settler colonialism provides insight into the complex relationships among gender, race, and social class in the construction of settler colonial nation-states, shedding light on Argentina's incomplete project to eradicate Indigeneity from its national borders.

"Domesticity in Precarity: Child Removal in Colonial India" by Jessica Hinchy (Nanyang Technological Univ. Singapore) focuses on the Sansi people and the separation of their children in British India, an area in the history of child removal that has not been robustly studied. She argues the story of child

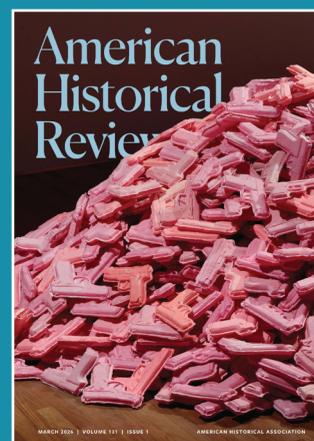
removal among Sansi—a socially marginalized, low-caste, and itinerant group deemed a "criminal tribe"—suggests that precarity can be both disruptive and productive of domesticity. The article proposes a framework of "domesticity in precarity" and suggests that interrogating the relationship between domesticity and precarity widens our view of the relationships and spaces that historically constituted the "domestic."

Stefania Tutino (Univ. of California, Los Angeles), in "Ideological Biases and Professional Standards: History Writing and Politics in Seventeenth-Century Catholic Europe," focuses on the Dominican friar Abraham Bzowski, or Bzovius (1567–1637). Tasked with continuing Cesare Baronio's *Annales Ecclesiastici*, a historiographical project of post-Reformation Catholicism, Bzovius produced 12 additional volumes in his life, which were all controversial. Tutino discusses the conflicts that Bzovius's work provoked and demonstrates that though his name might be unknown even to most early modern historians, his case elucidates crucial aspects and insightful considerations on the ways in which history writing and politics are intertwined today.

In "Nakba: Catastrophic Ideation and the Meanings of Disaster (1895–1948)," Adrien Zakar (Univ. of Toronto) delves into the formation of *nakba* in Arabic as a concept of disaster and a social practice of catastrophic ideation. Stretching into the Ottoman past, Zakar charts the layered genealogy of *nakba* prior to its use for the events of 1948 in Palestine. His research reveals how catastrophic ideation foregrounded persistent idioms in Arabic, Turkish, Armenian, and English beginning in the 19th century to mark varying degrees of political urgency and exceptionality. With this analysis, Zakar examines how the Nakba of 1948 Palestine prompted a generation of Arab intellectuals to redefine standards of selfhood, sovereignty, and objectivity.

The March History Lab opens with a forum on the global history of abortion. In "Traveling Abortions," Lynn M. Thomas (Univ. of Washington), Mytheli Sreenivas (Ohio State Univ.),

The cover of the March 2026 issue features a 1977 art installation by 25-year-old art student FX Harsono. Harsono was among the leaders of the Black December movement against the authoritarian state in 1974 Indonesia and an organizer of the New Art Movement's foundational exhibitions, the subject of Mark Philip Bradley's #AHRsYllabus module in *Authoritarianism 101: A Global History*. *What Would You Do If These Crackers Were Real Pistols?* shows a massive pile of hot-pink crackers shaped like pistols on the exhibition floor. Harsono intentionally used everyday objects to push back on what he saw as outdated notions of artistic creation and originality. Harsono also wanted to draw viewers closer into the work itself and create a space where they could critically reflect on contemporary society at a time when the military's control severely limited free speech, prompting viewer responses to the question he used to title the work: What would you do if the pistols were real?



Natalie L. Kimball (Coll. of Staten Island, CUNY), Lina-Maria Murillo (Univ. of Texas at Austin), and Sarah Mellors Rodriguez (Emory Univ.) challenge the narrow view of abortion as a national saga of the recent past and foreground traveling histories of abortion over fractured domestic landscapes and across international borders. The collection of essays highlights three forms of travel: the movement of abortion seekers and providers; of beliefs, ideas, and social movements that sculpted the landscapes that abortion seekers and providers traversed; and of technologies, including the international development and circulation of vacuum aspiration and birth control foam. Their focus on movement foregrounds that abortion debates in different communities and countries need to be understood in relation to one another, because practices and politics routinely crossed boundaries and borders.

Two History Unclassified pieces are featured in this issue. In "Exchanging the Pen for the Camera," Matthew Pehl recounts his experience making a documentary short, *Cowboy Strike*, on a labor conflict in late 19th-century Texas and his collaboration with a contemporary songwriter. The filmmaking process raised a series of dilemmas and opportunities for historical interpretation distinct from written scholarship, and Pehl argues that the production of nonfiction film offers scholars a powerful exercise through which they might rethink their subjects, and even the nature of the past itself.

Bethany Johnson (Univ. of North Carolina at Charlotte) also turns to creativity in her essay "The Poetry of Failure." Using poetic inquiry as a method to get "unstuck" in the face of waning inspiration, Johnson extracted and artfully rearranged words and phrases from institutional records and reports, letters, and logbook entries of influenza orphans at Girard College. Her short, haiku-style poems allow the reader to reflect on how poetry and historical analysis connect us to the depth of human experience.

The issue rounds out with a new #AHRsYllabus project. *Authoritarianism 101: A Global History* offers teachers and students a broad perspective on the history of authoritarianism. The *AHR* commissioned teaching modules that explore a singular instance of an authoritarian past from 30 historians of Africa, Asia, Europe, Latin America, the Middle East, and North America. Temporally, the resulting modules range from the 17th to the early 21st century, with the majority concentrating on the long 20th century. Six appear in this issue, and all modules will be available free to read on the project website, along with supplemental materials like project-wide reading lists.

These six cover a wide range of places and circumstances. Three offer lessons on the 1970s: Barbara Weinstein (New York Univ.) looks through the lens of a striking 1970 photograph of then student activist and later Brazilian President Dilma Rousseff facing a military tribunal; Samuel Fury Childs Daly (Univ. of Chicago) examines testimony at the state trial of Fela Kuti, an Afrobeat musician and opponent of the 1970s military government in Nigeria; and *AHR* editor Mark Philip Bradley's module features a provocative installation by a dissident artist in 1970s Indonesia (the issue's cover features a detail of this work). Turning to the 1930s, Lauren Stokes (Northwestern Univ.) focuses on Adolf Hitler's 1933 "Law to Remedy the Distress of the People and the Reich" speech and Louise M. Young (Univ. of Wisconsin–Madison) draws on an oral history with a Japanese woman living in Manchuria to explore why she came to support Japan's military authoritarian government. And finally, Adrian Chastain Weimer (Providence Coll.) considers how representative governments defended themselves against royal authoritarian practices through a 1665 New England town's petition to Charles II. **P**

*Sarah Muncy is managing editor of the American Historical Review.*

# ACTIONS BY THE AHA COUNCIL

June 2025 to January 2026

Through email communications from June 10, 2025, through December 22, 2025; at teleconferences held on October 8 and 16, November 24, and December 10, 2025; and at meetings on January 8 and 11, 2026, the Council of the American Historical Association took the following actions:

- Endorsed the Organization of American Historians' *Statement in Response to Secretary Order 3431 and Censorship of History in the National Park Service*, opposing the secretary of the interior's order to the National Park Service to revise educational materials, exhibits, and programs to avoid "ideological bias." The order "represents a clear and troubling intrusion into the integrity of historical presentation within the National Park Service."
- Appointed Katrina Jagodinsky (Univ. of Nebraska–Lincoln) and Jesse Kauffman (Eastern Michigan Univ.) to the 2027 Annual Meeting Program Committee.
- Approved Ashley Rogers (Whitney Plantation Museum) and Sharlene Sinegal-DeCuir (Xavier Univ. of Louisiana) as co-chairs of the Local Arrangements Committee for the 2027 annual meeting.
- Approved the *Guiding Principles for Artificial Intelligence in History Education*.
- Signed on to the American Council of Learned Societies' *Statement Regarding the White House Review of Smithsonian Institution Museums*.
- Sent a letter to Governor Kim Reynolds in support of the State Historical Society of Iowa Research Center in Iowa City, slated for closure in December 2025 because of state budget cuts. The AHA alerted Iowa members to this issue.
- Sent a letter to Texas State University president Kelly Dampousse opposing the termination of historian Thomas Alter's employment without due process after Alter made political comments in his capacity as a private citizen at a nonuniversity event.
- Signed on to a letter from the Coalition for International Education to Secretary Linda McMahon calling for the Department of Education to continue to fund Title VI and Fulbright–Hays programs offering grants for international educational exchange.
- Submitted public comments to the *Federal Register* regarding the proposed visa restrictions for international students and scholars.
- Sent a letter to Rutgers University president William F. Tate IV and chancellor Francine Conway expressing concern about threats made against Professor Mark Bray that extended to his partner, Professor Yesenia Barragan, both faculty members in the university's Department of History.
- Approved filing an amicus curiae brief for the *Harvard v. Department of Homeland Security* lawsuit that is challenging the government's revocation of the university's Student and Exchange Visitor Program certification.
- Adopted a policy on Expectations and Guidance for Conducting Business of the AHA Council.
- Approved updates to the AHA Communications Policy.
- Adopted the AHA Advocacy: Call to Action to members highlighting the Association's advocacy efforts in the past year.
- Established the Ad Hoc Committee on Academic Freedom.
- Established the Ad Hoc Committee to Aid Palestinian Historians.
- Approved updates to the AHA Council Conflict of Interest Policy.
- Revised AHA Bylaw 5 pursuant to Article V to outline a core process for the removal or suspension of a Council member, and adopted corresponding procedures for addressing Council member violations of AHA policies.
- Expanded the Ad Hoc Committee to Aid Palestinian Historians to up to nine members, as needed, to allow for flexibility in ensuring relevant expertise.
- Decided not to place two proposed resolutions on the 2026 business meeting agenda and issued the Response to Proposed Resolutions: Taking Action to Support Historians.

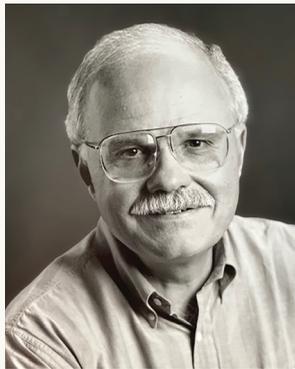
- Approved the minutes of the June 7 and 8, October 8 and 16, and November 24, 2025, Council meetings.
- Updated AHA Bylaws 12 and 15 with the following changes, to take effect at the adjournment of the 2026 business meeting:
  - Changed deadline to submit resolutions for consideration at the business meeting from October 1 to September 1 to provide sufficient time for review before the regularly scheduled fall Council meeting.
  - Clarified format of signatures required for submitting resolutions to ease logistics of confirming membership status.
  - Clarified criteria required for resolutions, specifying that they must adhere to the Constitution's Article II: Purpose, rather than the *Guiding Principles on Taking a Public Stance*.
  - Specified formatting requirements for resolutions submitted for consideration at the business meeting, prohibiting motions or resolutions with extensive preambles and/or seeking multiple actions, as recommended in *Robert's Rules of Order*.
  - Adjusted when and where resolutions are announced, to provide flexibility for Council review of resolutions and sufficient time for members to make travel arrangements to attend the business meeting, if desired.
  - Clarified Nominating Committee policies, which were approved by Council in 2016 but had not been referenced in the bylaws.
  - Clarified that all candidates for election must acknowledge and abide by Council policies and expectations.
- Approved the minutes of the December 10, 2025, Council meeting and the interim meeting minutes from June 10 to December 22, 2025.
- Approved the 2026 committee appointments, including a slate of candidates to be appointed to the Working Group on Small Liberal Arts Colleges.
- Renewed the Ad Hoc Committee on Artificial Intelligence in History Education for three years.
- Approved updates to the policy on AHA Oversight of the *American Historical Review*.
- Approved the nomination for the 2027 James M. Banner, Jr., Lecture (to be announced in fall 2026).
- Approved the nomination for the 2026 Honorary Foreign Member (to be announced in fall 2026).
- Reappointed Mark Bradley as editor of the *American Historical Review* for a five-year term to begin August 2026.
- Approved rules of debate for the 2026 business meeting.
- Vetoed the “Resolution in Solidarity with Gaza” and the “Resolution Opposing Attacks on Core Principles of Education,” which were passed by members at the 2026 business meeting.
- Expanded the Ad Hoc Committee to Support Academic Freedom to up to nine members, as needed, to allow for flexibility in ensuring relevant expertise.
- Updated the charge of the Committee on International Historical Activities and expanded the committee to up to seven members to better reflect and serve the Association's international activities and needs. **P**



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## Evan Burr Bukey

1940–2024

Historian of Europe;  
AHA Life Member

Members of the University of Arkansas history department, along with a broad transatlantic community of scholars, look back with gratitude and wistfulness on the life and legacy of Evan Burr Bukey, professor emeritus, eminent historian of modern Central Europe, lifelong AHA member, and one of the university's most cherished academic personalities. The memory of Evan—his intellect, quirks, kindness, and incomparable wit—remains alive in the halls he animated for nearly four decades.

Evan seemed fashioned from an earlier academic age. Students and colleagues recall him gliding into class dressed like a Brooks Brothers window display, his tie of the day drawn from what he sheepishly admitted was a “shameful number” of neckties. He delighted in appearing every bit the professor one expects from Hollywood's golden age films: erudite, dryly funny, and brimming with enthusiasm for whatever archival gem he had recently unearthed.

Born in Cincinnati, Ohio, Evan grew up in a household shaped by education and service. His mother Dorothy was a teacher. His father Norman, an engineer in peacetime and a US Army lieutenant colonel during World War II, stationed the family near the Carolina coast, where antiaircraft blimps and warships filled Evan's imagination. Some of his earliest memories, he later wrote, fused the spectacle of global conflict and sparked a lifelong interest in the history of Nazi Germany.

Evan carried that fascination into his academic life. After earning his undergraduate degree at Ohio Wesleyan University—where he formed lifelong friendships and fraternity ties—he completed his master's and PhD at Ohio State University. There he also met the love of his life, Anita Fishpaw. They married in 1963 and embarked on their first European adventure together during Evan's Fulbright fellowship in Göttingen. That was the beginning of a shared, lifelong cartography of international friendships, scholarly exchanges, and return visits.

Joining the University of Arkansas history department in 1969, Evan made Fayetteville his home for over half a century.

By 1986, he was a full professor; by 2008, professor emeritus; and through it all, he remained a teacher's teacher. His students admired and feared him in equal measure, as the Fulbright College noted when he was awarded the Master Teacher in 1997: They praised him “even while they groaned a bit about his tough standards.” Evan also taught at the US Military Academy at West Point and served as a visiting fellow at Cambridge University's Wolfson College, where his dry wit and impeccable suits were, one suspects, equally appreciated.

Yet it was Evan's scholarship that left his deepest imprint, as he was one of the foremost authorities on Austria during the Nazi era. His first two books, *Hitler's Hometown* (Indiana Univ. Press, 1986) and *Hitler's Austria* (Univ. of North Carolina Press, 2000), won widespread acclaim, including the National Jewish Book Award and the Austrian Cultural Book Prize. In his later works, *Jews and Intermarriage in Nazi Austria* (Cambridge Univ. Press, 2011) and *Juvenile Crime and Dissent in Nazi Vienna, 1938–1945* (Bloomsbury, 2020), he moved seamlessly from political to social history. In 2014, Bukey received Austria's highest scholarly honor, the Karl von Vogelsang State Prize, sponsored by the Austrian Federal Ministry for Science, Research and Economy—an award his family remembers him accepting with characteristic modesty and a half smile suggesting he found the whole business slightly too grand.

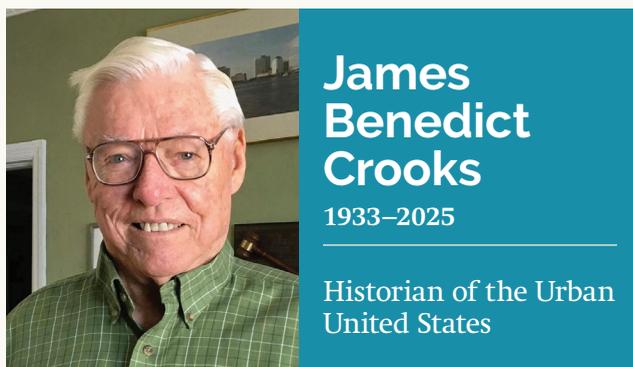
Even after retiring in 2008, Evan remained a constant intellectual presence, continuing to publish, review, mentor younger colleagues, and serve the German Studies Association and the Conference Group for Central European History. He also enjoyed the university swimming pool and sauna, where lively discussions unfolded in his familiar mix of banter and playful solemnity.

Evan is survived by Anita; their children Ellen Bukey Langley (Mark) and David Burr Bukey (Beth); his brother David Bruce Bukey (Rachel); grandchildren Sebastian, Robin, Lauren, Kathryn, and Gretchen; and several nieces and extended family members. All continue to share the stories, quirks, and gentle mischief that made him unmistakably himself. More than a year after his passing, we remember Evan with enduring affection. His scholarship remains foundational, his teaching unforgettable, and his humor, sometimes professorially dry, sometimes unexpectedly playful, still very much alive in the memories of those who were lucky enough to know him.

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Alessandro Brogi  
University of Arkansas

*Photo courtesy Bukey family*



James Crooks, professor emeritus at the University of North Florida, died on August 17, 2025. He was 91 years old.

Jim, as everyone called him, took an unusual path to the professoriate. Born on September 27, 1933, in Glen Rock, New Jersey, he graduated from high school in 1950 and attended Yale University, lettering in football. He interrupted his studies to serve as an army paratrooper before returning to Yale to earn his BA in American studies in 1957. In 1958, he married Laura Naomi Ward, who became a lifelong partner in education and activism.

Following a stint at Connecticut General Life Insurance, a line of work he did not relish, Jim began graduate studies in history at Johns Hopkins University, completing his PhD in 1964. While at Hopkins, he took part in the 1963 March on Washington, where he heard Martin Luther King speak. His wife Laura remembers this as having “a profound influence on Jim’s community involvement for the rest of his life.” The rising tide of the civil rights movement made a deep impression on his scholarship, teaching, and politics. Though those politics were unmistakably liberal, Jim had a knack for making his points in reasoned nonpartisan fashion. He preferred doing so over a satisfying meal and a glass of red wine.

If the start of Jim’s career was belated, his rise was steady. In 1964–66, he was a visiting lecturer at University College Dublin before he returned to the United States as an assistant professor at Hollins College. In 1968, he published his dissertation as *Politics and Progress: The Rise of Urban Progressivism in Baltimore, 1895 to 1911* (Louisiana State Univ. Press).

In 1972, Jim became a founding faculty member at the University of North Florida (UNF), the state’s newly opened campus in Jacksonville. During a 29-year UNF career, he served as department chair, assistant dean, and interim dean of the College of Arts and Sciences and was awarded a Fulbright fellowship to Hyderabad, India. UNF recognized Jim with its highest honor, naming him a Distinguished Professor in

1992. Jim’s commitment to social justice shaped his teaching in fundamental ways. He developed courses on American cities and suburbs, urban children, and an honors seminar on American poverty. In all these courses, he encouraged students to engage with community agencies focused on issues of poverty and homelessness.

Jim also became a prolific historian of his adopted hometown, writing *Jacksonville: The Consolidation Story, from Civil Rights to the Jaguars* (Univ. Press of Florida, 2004) and *Jacksonville After the Fire, 1901–1919: A New South City* (Library Press, 2018). Race figured prominently in both narratives, Jim’s thesis being that modernization and political reform worked to the advantage of the white elites who managed and implemented these reforms rather than racial and other minorities whose progress was, at best, uneven.

That unevenness bothered Jim. After his retirement in 2001, he served on the Jacksonville Community Council, the United Community Outreach Ministry, the Jacksonville Human Rights Commission, and JASMYN, an organization advocating for LGBTQIA+ youth in the region. In 2010, he completed *Creating a University: University of North Florida Faculty and Staff Remember 35 Years*, a history of the university he had done so much to shape. Into his 90s, Jim continued to research and write on the history of Jacksonville and mentor the graduate and undergraduate students he employed as research assistants.

Jim worked tirelessly to leave behind a better world than he inherited. In his later years, he fired off frequent editorials for the *Florida Times-Union*, weighing in on the impact of campaign rhetoric on K–12 students, warning against xenophobia, and highlighting JASMYN’s work to provide LGBTQIA+ youth safe places to congregate and talk. Despite his enormous impact on his communities, he still keenly felt the unevenness of the progress he sought to effect. At his funeral, his daughter Sarah Crooks said, “My dad was a big guy,” whose life and career were animated by a desire to contribute to a more just and equitable world. “In some ways, he died unsatisfied.”

In addition to Sarah, Jim is survived by his wife, Laura; sister Betty Wilkin and brother-in-law David Wilkin; sister Marian Downie and brother-in-law Stephen Downie; son Peter Crooks and daughter-in-law Tina Crooks, and numerous grandchildren and great-grandchildren.

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David Sheffler  
University of North Florida

Photo courtesy Crooks family



## John E. O'Connor

1943–2025

Historian of Film and Television; AHA Life Member

John E. O'Connor, professor emeritus in the Federated Department of History of New Jersey Institute of Technology and Rutgers University, Newark, died on December 9, 2025, at age 82.

John was born in Manhattan and raised in Westbury, New York. He earned his BA at St. John's University (1965), his MA at Queens College (1968), and his PhD in American history at the City University of New York (1974), under E. James Ferguson. John began teaching history in 1969 at what is now New Jersey Institute of Technology (NJIT) in Newark, where he would spend his entire career, moving up the ranks to professor. In the 1980s, John founded, ran, and offered courses in NJIT's first liberal arts major, Science, Technology and Society (originally called Man and Technology).

John began his career as a historian of New Jersey. His first book, based on his PhD dissertation, was *William Paterson: Lawyer and Statesman, 1745–1806* (Rutgers Univ. Press, 1979). Considering that Paterson had been New Jersey's second governor, a US senator, a Supreme Court justice, and a key contributor to the Constitution's formation, he had received surprisingly little scholarly attention before John's book. He also published on the history of Newark, in collaboration with Charles F. Cummings. In 1976, the two served on the Newark Bicentennial Commission and soon after published *Newark: An American City* (Newark Bicentennial Commission, 1979). Another collaboration, a 1984 article in *New Jersey History* on Bamberger's department store and the culture of consumption in the decade leading up to the Great Depression, received the William Adeed Whitehead Award from the New Jersey Historical Society.

In December 1970, John's career took a fortuitous turn when he and Marty Jackson founded the Historians Film Committee. Its first newsletter, dated March 1971, explained its primary purpose: "to further the use of film sources in teaching and research" by historians. This was the origin of *Film and History: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Film and Television Studies*,

which has remained in print continuously since that time, in affiliation with the AHA since 1975. This was also the start of John's work in the field that would define his career.

In 1974, John and Marty produced *Teaching History with Film*, a pamphlet in the AHA's Discussions on Teaching series, which John expanded in 1987 to include television. John and Marty's 1979 edited volume, *American History, American Film: Interpreting the Hollywood Image* (F. Ungar; expanded ed., Continuum, 1988), followed a similar pattern, with John editing the companion volume, *American History, American Television* (F. Ungar, 1983). Throughout the 1980s, while editing *Film and History*, John continued to produce valuable publications in this field, including *The Hollywood Indian* in 1980; an *American Historical Review* article in the December 1988 issue on the importance of film and television study for understanding the past; and a major edited volume, *Image as Artifact: The Historical Analysis of Film and Television* (R. E. Krieger for the AHA Institutional Services Program, 1990), which begins with three foundational chapters by John on his methodologies. Many historians who came of age after 1990 credit these chapters with shaping their approach to film analysis.

Then, in 1991, tragedy struck. On the day he was scheduled to fly to Russia for a conference, John suffered a massive brain hemorrhage. After surgery and a long period of rehabilitation, he was able to return to teaching and scholarly editing but his abilities were greatly impaired. As John was recovering, the AHA (of which he was a life member) established the John E. O'Connor Film Award "in recognition of his exceptional role as a pioneer in both teaching and research regarding film and history." First awarded in 1993, it recognizes "outstanding interpretations of history through the medium of film or video" in dramatic features and documentaries.

Beginning in the late 1990s, with support from his wife Mary and his son Will, John collaborated with Peter C. Rollins on a series of influential edited volumes on film and television history, mostly published by the University Press of Kentucky: *Hollywood's World War I* (1997), *Hollywood's Indian* (1998), *Hollywood's White House* (2003), *The West Wing* (2003), *Hollywood's West* (2005), and *Why We Fought* (2008).

Besides his scholarship, John will be remembered for his affability and punning wit. He was a fine colleague and a loving husband and father.

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Richard B. Sher  
NJIT and Rutgers University, Newark (emeritus)



## Janet M. Theiss

1964–2025

Historian of Early Modern China

Janet M. Theiss, an associate professor at the University of Utah, made foundational contributions to the study of Chinese women, gender, law, and politics in the Qing era. She died on November 2, 2025, after an unexpected aortic rupture.

Janet grew up in a household characterized by sociability, service, and learning. Her father, Norman Theiss, was a Lutheran pastor, and her mother, Judith Eheim Theiss, was a music educator and elementary school principal. Janet grew up in Chicago before the family moved to Silver Spring, Maryland.

Janet loved ideas. At Swarthmore College, she majored in history and minored in English. An honors seminar on modern China taught by Lillian Li inspired Janet to shift her focus from Europe to China. Upon earning her BA in 1986, Janet undertook intensive Chinese language study at the University of Michigan. She then studied at Sichuan University, where she witnessed tumultuous student-led democracy demonstrations in 1989. After returning to the United States, she earned her PhD in history in 1998 from the University of California, Berkeley.

Janet joined a critical mass of scholars working to dismantle historiographical stereotypes of female oppression in pre-20th-century China. Janet's first monograph, *Disgraceful Matters: The Politics of Chastity in Eighteenth-Century China* (Univ. of California Press, 2005), dissected the popularity of the female chastity cult. "Chastity" meant lifelong sexual fidelity to a husband or fiancé, and chastity martyrs could be canonized and commemorated. To uncover the experiences of non-literate women, Janet analyzed criminal cases involving sexual assaults or the adjudication of female virtue. Her findings combined meticulous historical analysis with exquisite sensitivity to the voices of people in the past. She showed that Qing emperors promoted the chastity cult as the pillar of a civilizing agenda meant to reform both men and women. But women also deployed chastity norms in ways that subverted patriarchal interests. At the extreme, some women committed suicide when family heads insisted on hushing up

"disgraceful matters," for they knew their deaths would trigger criminal charges against their assailants.

Janet's monograph project in progress, titled *Scandal and the Limits of Self-Invention in Eighteenth-Century China*, was centered on a scandal that ended the career of Zhejiang governor Lu Zhou and destroyed two elite lineages linked by marriage, the Feis and the Wangs. Madame Fei bribed Governor Lu to conceal her adultery, and both facts were exposed after he was impeached for corruption. The case became an empire-wide cause célèbre. Having pieced together this complex story, Janet was using it to illuminate the tensions between public virtue and private passions in Qing political and social life. In four published articles, Janet analyzed the elite-official networks that made bribery irresistible, the struggle between loneliness and loyalty in marriage, the narrative conventions of love letters, and how women used poetry to imagine their gendered selves.

Janet was deeply committed to teaching, service, and outreach. During her 28 years at the University of Utah, she offered diverse courses on Chinese and East Asian history and advised numerous graduate students. She was an institution builder, serving as the founding director of the university's Asia Center and transforming it into a Title VI National Resource Center. Nationally, she led the revival of the Society for Qing Studies and oversaw its journal, *Late Imperial China*, as co-editor and associate editor. She served on numerous professional boards and committees, including the AHA's Committee on the John K. Fairbank Prize and most recently as chair of the East and Inner Asia Council of the Association for Asian Studies. She also collaborated with Barbara Molony and Hyaeweol Choi to produce two works for a wider academic audience: *Gender in Modern East Asia: An Integrated History* (Routledge, 2016) and *The Oxford Handbook of Modern East Asian Gender History* (Oxford Univ. Press, 2026).

Janet was at home in the world, whether poring over documents in Chinese archives or accompanying her husband, archaeologist Bradley J. Parker, to sites in Turkey and Peru. Bradley predeceased her in 2018. Janet is mourned by an international community of colleagues, former students, and friends who remember her as a remarkable historian and person: adventurous, resilient, generous, affectionate, and humorous. She is survived by her daughter Tabitha Parker-Theiss, her father Norman and her stepmother Mary, and her sisters Jennifer and Tamara. The Center for Chinese Studies at the University of California, Berkeley, has established a memorial fund in her name.

Yi-Li Wu  
University of Michigan

Photo courtesy Tobie Meyer-Fong

MIKHAIL SVIRIN

## THE RED-WHITE-BLUE BAG

You can buy this bag at the dollar store or order one from Amazon for a few bucks. Made from cheap synthetics, it is unpretentious and functional: a simple pattern, a sturdy handle, and a practical zipper. And yet this ordinary object has become a powerful symbol for millions of people worldwide and has appeared on high-fashion runways, in museums, and even on monuments.

The red-white-blue bag originated in East Asia. Its story began in Japan in the 1960s, when a new fabric was produced from polyethylene. The resulting material was widely used for industrial purposes, especially in construction. In the 1970s, manufacturers in Taiwan exported the material to Hong Kong, where a local tailor and fabric merchant, Lee Wah, decided to make bags from it. His product was water resistant, durable, and well liked by Hong Kong citizens, who started to use it for everyday needs and travels to mainland China.

Later on, the red-white-blue bag surfaced in West Africa. The 1970s economic boom attracted migrants to Nigeria from other parts of West Africa, but a decade later, oil prices crashed. In 1983, the Nigerian government ordered expulsions: Roughly two million undocumented migrants, including nearly one million Ghanaians, were scapegoated and forced to leave the country. Most did not have enough time to pack their belongings, and the red-white-blue bag—affordable and spacious—was all that they carried. The bag immediately assumed its new local name—the “Ghana must-go bag.” Gradually, the bag’s use spread across the African continent, every time emerging in places where people had to abandon their homes and move.

By the early 1990s, the red-white-blue bag had made its way to the former Soviet countries. When the Soviet Union collapsed, its citizens rushed abroad to shop for deficit goods and resell them. Unemployment pushed millions into shopping and sometimes working in this informal trade. China, Turkey, Poland, Germany, or Finland—whichever foreign country lay closest became the destination for those looking to import

cheap goods. Newly emerged post-Soviet countries, which had been “free” from capitalism and “speculation” for decades, right away turned into a huge bazaar. For going back and forth, novice entrepreneurs earned the name shuttle traders, or *chelnoki*, and the red-white-blue bags in which they transported goods were named *chelnok bags*.

Since the 2000s, the red-white-blue bag has transformed into a cultural icon. Hong Kong artist Stanley Wong created the *Red White Blue* series, featuring an apartment covered by red-white-blue fabric. Dan Halter and Nobukho Nqaba made similar exhibitions about the bag in Africa, featuring flags, world maps, and a figure of a crawling human—all made from the bag’s fabric. Ukrainian artists Sergiy Petlyuk and Oleksiy Khoroshko decorated spaces with neon-lit red-white-blue bags, while Russian street artist Slava PTRK painted graffiti, inscribing bags into a Soviet cartoon. In some post-Soviet countries, the bag was commemorated in monuments to shuttle traders. The Boris Yeltsin Presidential Center included a *chelnok* bag in an exhibition on the 1990s. When Louis Vuitton, Céline, and Balenciaga started to sell rebranded red-white-blue bags and clothing for hundreds of dollars, the bag became a Westernized commercial product and a high-end accessory.

Today, the red-white-blue bag evokes a multitude of pasts. In East Asia, particularly in Hong Kong, it symbolizes the working class, local culture, and the city’s dynamism. In Africa, the bag stands for involuntary migration, poverty, and uprootedness. In post-Soviet nations, the bag is one symbol of the Soviet collapse, the “wild 1990s,” and national heroism during the transition to a market economy. Once a mere carrier of goods, the red-white-blue bag now carries multiple names and meanings, reflecting, like a mirror, its ties to people: global or local, personal or indifferent, about “us” or “them.” But for many around the world, it is just a bag—either a cheap carryall or a fashion item. **P**

*Mikhail Svirin is a PhD student in history at the University of Chicago. He studies modern Russia, the Soviet Union, and post-Soviet states.*



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# AHA Awards



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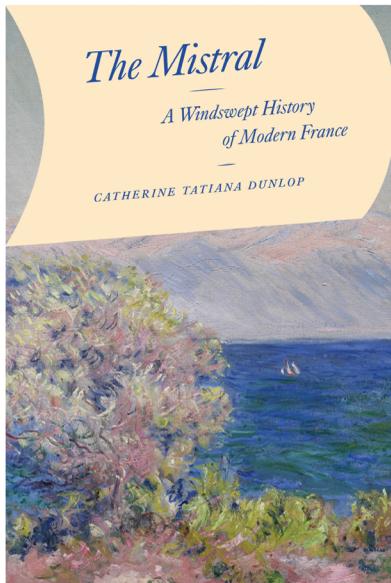
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# Eugen Weber Book Prize

The UCLA Meyer and Renee Luskin Department of History is pleased to announce that

## Catherine Tatiana Dunlop

is the winner of the 2026 Weber Book Prize for her book *The Mistral: A Windswept History of Modern France* (University of Chicago Press, 2024). A prize for the best book in modern French history (post-1815) published in the past two years, this award is named for the eminent French historian Eugen Weber (1925-2007) and brings a cash award of \$15,000.



*The Mistral* is a chilly wind that blows from the north to the south through southern France and has historically been a mighty and uncontrollable force. Dunlop shows how it resisted efforts by the state to control it, and how it was embraced as a kind of patrimony by the Provençal people. Dunlop uses a rich panoply of sources and materials, ranging from archival documentation from Avignon, Arles, and Aix-en-Provence, to painting, literary sources, and scientific studies to craft an engagingly-written book that will not only interest scholars, but also the general public in terms of its implications for the future of the climate and climate change.



**Katie Hornstein** was awarded Honorable Mention for her book *Myth and Menagerie: Seeing Lions in the Nineteenth Century* (Yale University Press, 2024).



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