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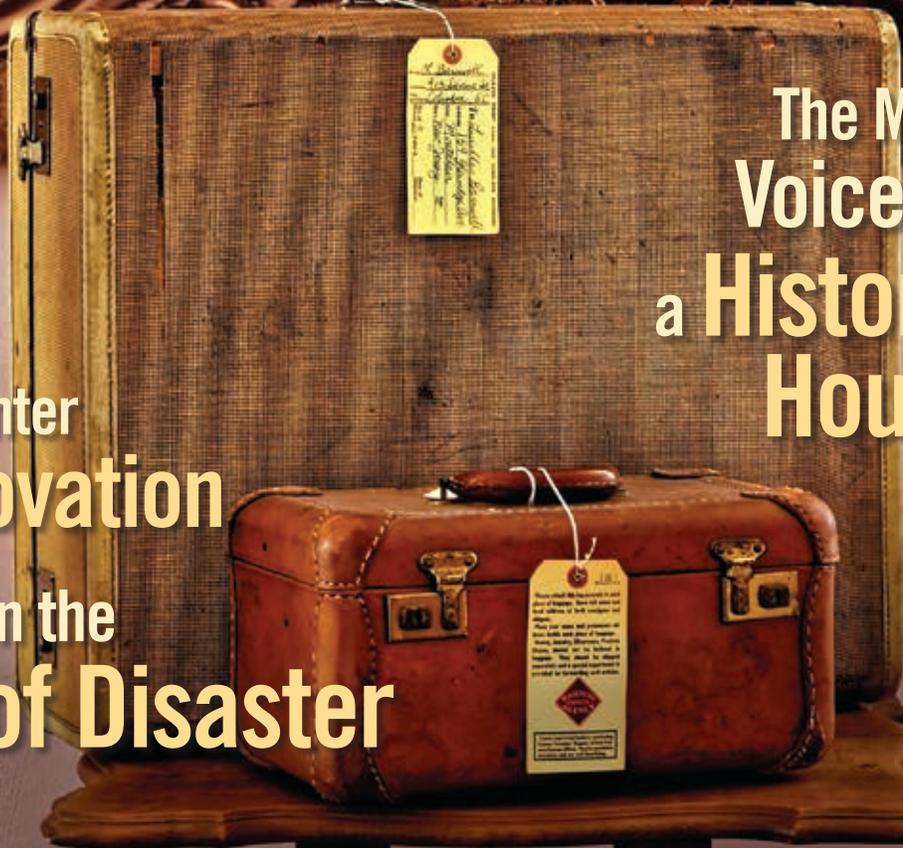
THE MAGAZINE OF THE AMERICAN ASSOCIATION FOR STATE AND LOCAL HISTORY



The Many Voices of a Historic House

The Museum as Center
for **Social Innovation**

Opportunities in the
Aftermath of Disaster





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ON THE COVER

The Montclair History Center reinterpreted its Crane House to more accurately reflect its rich and diverse history through the story of the African American YWCA that had used the house as its headquarters

from 1920 to 1965. The multi-faceted initiative celebrates the important role the YWCA played in the history of Montclair and in the hearts of its members.

Photo Jack Spear Photography, LLC

INSIDE: TECHNICAL LEAFLET

How to Find and Use Legal Records

By John A. Lupton

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HISTORYNEWS
THE MAGAZINE OF THE AMERICAN ASSOCIATION FOR STATE AND LOCAL HISTORY

History News is a publication of the American Association for State and Local History (AASLH). *History News* exists to foster publication, scholarly research, and an open forum for discussion of best practices, applicable theories, and professional experiences pertinent to the field of state and local history.

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History is Hot Right Now. Can That Help Save the Profession?

This past August I asserted in an op-ed in *Inside Higher Ed* that history was “hot” and wondered whether that could help save the profession.

The impetus for my piece was a perceived rising tide of interest within the media (traditional and social) in the perspectives of historians on both the 2016 presidential election and the entirety of the calendar year’s events. Indeed, within a span of twenty-four hours this summer, four articles had appeared in my Twitter feed that featured historians in major media outlets.

The first was a *New York Times* story about biographer David McCullough and documentarian Ken Burns. The two had asked several distinguished historians to state their case on why Donald Trump was, perhaps, the most troubling presidential candidate ever. The videos on Facebook have been viewed tens of thousands of times. The second was a piece by *Politico* that asked several historians to comment on whether the 2016 Republican convention was the worst in history. The third was from *USA Today*. It asked the president of the American Historical Association (AHA) if 2016 had been an unusual year for violence—to which he wrote that violence begets violence and as such it tends to ebb and flow. And the last was in *Slate*, by history writer Rebecca Onion, that asked several historians to comment on whether 2016 was simply the worst year ever. (Answer: it had nothing on 1347.)

In particular the election of Donald Trump as 45th President of the United States seemed to serve as a boon for historians. Not only McCullough and Burns, but historians at the University of Virginia’s Miller Center for Public Affairs, such as Barbara Perry, co-chair of the Presidential Oral History Program, and Nicole Hemmer, assistant professor in presidential studies, thrived by writing about Trump and conservative politics for *USA Today*, *U.S. News and World Report*,

The Atlantic, and *Vox*. Historians were asked to help answer how we got to where we are, and their perspectives were heard.

That led me to suggest that “history is hot.” Or rather, it was hot. In a traumatic and turmoil-filled year—weekly violence, racial tensions, political upheaval, a shifting world order and wars with no ends in sight—it seemed that society was collectively crying out for historical perspective. Publications from the *Wall Street Journal* to *Foreign Affairs* were asking historians to tell their readers whether a) yes, it was really as bad as it seemed or b) it has, at times, been worse and humanity has survived. I wrote last August that historians were the dispassionate voice amid the din that would allow us to calmly sit down in our chairs and reflect.

A few months later, and with 2016 now behind us (we made it!), I have an opportunity to reflect on my own words. Have we remained hot? It’s an open question. Some evidence suggests no. As a nation we are now collectively reckoning with a Trump presidency and the effects of his cabinet appointments. Much of this rumination falls in the category of prognostication and, not surprisingly, the perspectives of historians have been substituted for perspectives of journalists, party activists, and pundits. Historians are useful when we need to place our contemporary dramas against a backdrop; when we need to analyze how decisions will impact the future, we are less called upon.

At the same time, however, history classes remain a “hot” topic. At least two recent articles, in response to an election season full of fake news articles, have suggested that more history classes are the antidote to what ails America. Historian Kevin Levin, writing for *Smithsonian.com*, asserted that the public lacks the skills and training to decipher what on the Internet is real and what is fiction. “The history classroom is an ideal place in which to teach students how to search and evaluate online information,” he argued. Writing a few days earlier in *Quartz*, novelist

and creative writing professor Marie Myung-Ok Lee stated, “History classes matter because they help students learn to question the stories that are handed down to us.” History courses, it seems, can be an antidote to demagoguery.¹

In mulling over where this leaves us, I return to a 2016 piece in *Patheos* that asked what exactly historians think we contribute in these trying times. Do we have special insights? Do we know lessons from the past that others don’t? Are we the true conscience of the nation? The author of the piece, a historian, was unsure. Yet it seems clear that in 2016, the news media and others seemed to think we offered much. There is scant mention that students should be taking more anthropology, philosophy, or sociology classes—although they should as part of a well-rounded liberal arts education. History seems to be the discipline so many of us return to. There is an agreement, among some at least, that historians’ voices contribute something meaningful, whether we know exactly why or not.

What continues to be interesting about this is that it occurs during a time of deep anxiety and concern about the future of history. According to the AHA, the number of undergraduate students earning degrees in history is dropping sharply, even as the number of students earning degrees in all fields continues to rise. History degrees now account for less than 2 percent of all undergraduate degrees earned.

History majors are not as diverse as they could be either: African Americans were just 5 percent of those completing history degrees in 2014. Latinos made up 9.7 percent and Asian and Pacific Islanders were 3 percent. In a country projected to be minority-majority by the middle of this century, history remains relatively homogenous.

And in August 2016, the historically black Lincoln University in Missouri deactivated its history program due to low numbers of graduates, low career

demand, and low student demand. Other HBCUs and regional colleges have threatened to follow suit.

Such statistics and anecdotes prompted James Grossman, executive director of the AHA, to write an op-ed in the *Los Angeles Times* in 2016 arguing that history is not a “useless” major. Whether students and parents will listen is yet to be known. *USA Today* has reported that student decisions regarding majors most often come down to money: the ability to find employment and earning power once employed. History has yet to convincingly make the case that its students will find employment, earn high salaries, and be able to repay student loans in a reasonable amount of time.

Thus we are still at a fork in the road. On the one hand, this past year has shown historians are in high demand for the perspective they offer in moments of deep societal anxiety and rupture. On the other hand, there are very real questions about who will serve as that voice in future crises. What might we do to help save the profession?

One obvious way is to maximize our visibility. Many young Americans may, for the first time, be hearing from historians and be seeing them in major news media outlets. Historians certainly appear in press all the time, but the difference now is the stage. The stakes of this presidential election were high, and nearly all of America is paying attention to media,

particularly in such a divisive and unusual election as this past year’s. It is an especially good time to be visible.

While being visible we also can demonstrate the core values of our profession. We can showcase the dispassionate wisdom and clarity of thought treasured by those of us in the discipline and sought by those outside it. In a climate of constant shouting and bickering, contemplative thought may not be for everyone. But it can offer a refreshing alternative and inspire younger folks that they, too, can be an impactful voice of reason when America needs it most.

The AHA, National Council on Public History, AASLH, History Relevance Campaign, and others have put forth many ideas on how to address declining enrollments. I won’t recite those here. But I will offer a few more suggestions that may help contribute to the discussion:

- In moments where we have greater exposure, let’s put forth as diverse a set of faces and voices as we can. Let’s ensure that minorities see historians not solely of one race, one gender, one religion, and one socioeconomic background, but many.
- Let’s also put forth a diversity of ages. Millennials want to see immediate results in their work and seek speedy advancement in their fields. History, in contrast, has an entrenched hierarchy that slowly promotes its own, rarely offers immediate results, and often privileges those most senior in their careers. Let’s ensure that

young people see young historians succeeding, being heard, and contributing meaningfully.

• Let’s find new ways to communicate, even as we’re holding true to our values. To draw on historical facts and speak from a place of deep knowledge does not limit us to prepared remarks or formal prose. Use this opportunity to evolve how we communicate—colloquially, vividly, through images as well as words, and across all platforms available to us—both for the good of our audiences and for the enthusiasm of new entrants into the field.

Some of these things are already happening, and I hope they continue with even greater intentionality. Historians have an opportunity now to showcase the best and brightest aspects of our profession. Recognizing that we do so against an uncertain backdrop of our own field, we can use this moment to help inspire the next generation of historians. After all, when calamity strikes, it is us historians that society turns to. ◉



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¹ Kevin Levin, “The Remedy for the Spread of Fake News? History Teachers,” *Smithsonian.com*, December 6, 2016; Marie Myung-Ok Lee, “History Classes Are Our Best Hope for Teaching Americans to Question Fake News and Donald Trump,” *Quartz*, December 2, 2016.

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