



NOVEMBER 2023



Photo by Angela LeBlanc-Ernest

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PRESIDENT'S LETTER



Building on the past while looking forward

By Kelly Elaine Navies

It is with tremendous honor and humility that I step into the position of president of the Oral History Association. There is something poetic about leading an organization that began the year before I was born. I tip my hat to my predecessor, Tomás Sandoval, and look forward to carrying on his good work, including the

Indigenous Initiative.

Last month we converged upon the historic city of Baltimore and brought a wide array of sessions that highlighted Oral History As/And Education. Our program co-chairs, Benji de la Piedra and Zaheer Ali, share my passion for teaching and education and it showed in the diverse and thoughtful programming offered at the annual meeting. As a fifth-generation educator, I am committed to supporting and welcoming teachers from K-12 and beyond, especially in the face of contemporary challenges to academic freedom.

Our Local Arrangements Committee, led by Angela Rodgers-Koukoui and Tonika Berkley, infused the local programs with their homegrown love of Baltimore. We closed out the week with a rousing open mic and a block party, helmed by former OHA President Dan Kerr's Humanities Truck. However, none of this would have been possible without the strength of our new executive team led by Stephen Sloan at Baylor University's Institute for Oral History.

This is an exciting time to be a member of the Oral History Association! Our membership is growing and becoming more inclusive, not only culturally and ethnically, but also in terms of engagement with the practice and scholarship of this field. If you are a new member, welcome! Please bring your passion and expansive thinking to our organization, get involved, and join any caucus that piques your interest!

As oral historians, we are called to listen, to document the journeys of our fellow humans as we navigate our brief time on this planet. At this moment, in the midst of social chaos and upheaval, we must pick up our recorders and cameras and whatever device we have, to capture the moving saga of our times. I am enthusiastic about the new *Oral History Review* team, as I know they are ready to take on the duty of nurturing and guiding a publication for our scholarly analyses and creative output.

As we head into the holiday season, hold your loved ones close, and continue to listen.



DIRECTORS' COLUMN



New directory will help people find you

By Steven Sielaff

OHA is pleased to offer an exciting new benefit to our membership. The OHA website

now has a public directory called "Find an Oral Historian" which members can use to promote their services and their research. Through this directory, detailed member profile pages are searchable with advanced filters for member characteristics such as topical specialties, services provided, regionality, and language skills. You can view a beta version of the directory on our current website at <https://oralhistory.org/directory/>.

To assure a momentous launch, we need as many members as possible to update their profiles in the membership portal by the end of the year. While there will still be a private directory within the portal that only members can access, to be added to this new public directory, use [this link](#) and fill out the form, selecting which details from your profile to publish online by checking the appropriate boxes.

We will publish the official "Find An Oral Historian" directory alongside our new website at the end of December and will then update the information provided by the tool periodically thereafter to match the most current member information in the submitted forms. Members will have the option to add or remove items as they see fit with these future updates.

We're grateful to the Advocacy Committee for leading this project, at the request of the Independent Practitioner's Task Force, and with support from the Membership Committee. We hope this resource will support members in growing their creative and professional networks and strengthen our community. Since this is a new tool, we of course will welcome your feedback. After you have a chance to fill out the survey and the tool launches, you may send any thoughts or questions you may have about this public directory to oha@oralhistory.org.



Writer/performer Unique Mical Robinson hosts OHA's Open Mic Night at the Eubie Blake Cultural Center as part of the 2023 Annual Meeting

Baltimore conference at a glance

Historic Baltimore's Inner Harbor welcomed 658 oral historians last month to the 57th annual meeting of the Oral History Association. More than 120 conference sessions—plenaries, workshops, walking tours, a keynote speaker, roundtables, a block party and more—offered members ample opportunity to listen, learn, debate, celebrate accomplishments, set new goals, browse exhibits and enjoy one another's company. The 2023 conference attracted people from 18 countries, in addition to the United States.

This *Newsletter* includes highlights from various conference sessions, news about the Association, and reminders of upcoming events. More stories about conference presentations will also appear in future issues of the *Newsletter*.



Mark your calendar for upcoming events, deadlines

Put these on your calendar now:

Jan. 1, 2024:

Deadline to submit paper or roundtable **proposals** for an OHA virtual summer symposium titled “AI in OH: How New & Evolving Technologies Will Impact the Profession.” The symposium is **tentatively scheduled** for the work **week of July 15, 2024**.

Symposium co-chairs Steven Sielaff and Sarah Milligan invite proposals that address varied AI-related topics, including: AI tools that aid oral history workflows; creative uses of oral histories with AI tools; ethical considerations surrounding AI and oral history; and “ruminations” on the future of oral history in “an AI-driven world.”

More details and information on how to submit proposals are here: <https://oralhistory.org/ai/> A program committee will review proposals and notify participants by March 1, 2024.

Feb. 23, 2024:

Deadline to submit proposals for the 2024 fall conference. Oral History: Bridging Past, Present and Future is the theme for the next, **Oct. 30-Nov. 2 at the Hilton Netherland Plaza in Cincinnati, Ohio**. The city itself boasts numerous bridges across the Ohio River that in turn inspired the conference theme.

Conference planners challenge oral historians to consider the past, present and future of their work and welcome proposals for panels and presentations in various formats that reflect bridges between oral history of yesterday, today and tomorrow. The complete call for proposals can be found at <https://oralhistory.org/2024-call-for-proposals/>. An online portal for submissions will be available in December.

March 31, 2024:

Deadline to submit papers for a special issue of the *Oral History Review* that will focus **on oral history and disability**.

The *OHR* invites members to consider contributions oral historians might make to disability studies and how they can add to a view of disability beyond the traditional, mostly medical, and socially constructed ones, what oral historians can learn about communication from people with disabilities and other disability-related topics. The *OHR* is also especially interested in multimedia submissions.

For more details, check out the call for papers here: <https://oralhistory.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/OHR-Spring-2025-Call-for-Papers.pdf>

Newly elected OHA leaders take office



FIRST VICE PRESIDENT
Sarah Milligan



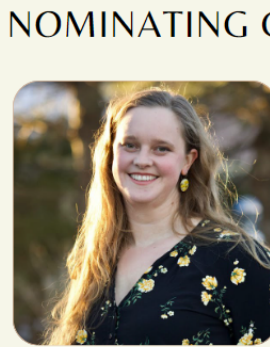
OHA COUNCIL MEMBER
Francine D. Spang-Willis

Oral History Association members elected a new first vice president, OHA Council member, three new Nominating Committee members and three new members of the Committee on Committees, all of whom began their terms at the Baltimore annual meeting. They are:

- First Vice President Sarah Milligan, Oklahoma State University
- Council member Francine D. Spang-Willis, Independent Oral Historian



Anna Kaplan



Christa Whitney



Cynthia Tobar

NOMINATING COMMITTEE *new members*

- Nominating Committee members: Anna F. Kaplan, American University and Independent Oral Historian; Cynthia Tobar, Independent Oral Historian; Christa Whitney, Yiddish Book Center



Bridget Bartolini



Eric Hung



Dao X. Tran

COMMITTEE ON COMMITTEES *new members*

- Committee on Committees members: Bridget Bartolini, Independent Oral Historian; Eric Hung, Music of Asian America Research Center; Dao X. Tran, Voice of Witness.

In addition, OHA Council accepted the resignation of Council member Zaheer Ali and appointed Carlos Lopez of the Arizona State Library to fill the remainder of his term.



Capturing voices authentically,
carefully, accurately, since 1990.



Photo by Eric Ames

Good-bye, Bethany, and thank you!

Sometimes, when that ideal job opportunity comes along, you just have to take it.

That's why the Oral History Association will say good-bye at the end of the year to Program Associate Bethany McLemore Stewart, who will

become Baylor University's music librarian, returning to her academic roots.

A Texas native, the flute and piccolo player graduated from Abilene Christian University, and then earned master's and doctorate degrees in musicology at the University of Texas at Austin, where her research focused on the role of women in 19th-century music. She also taught a wide variety of music and music history courses at UT Austin and at Baylor.

Bethany joined the OHA when the executive office moved to Baylor, bringing her experience as an event planner, teacher, freelance editor and entrepreneur, all of which contributed to producing OHA's successful annual conference in Baltimore.

Throughout her year as OHA program associate, she also redesigned the *OHA Newsletter*, expanded News Blasts with timely updates for members, dug into an assessment of OHA archives, spurred a beefed-up social media presence, worked with graduate students and established recordkeeping processes leading to greater efficiency.

"The OHA owes a deep gratitude to Dr. Bethany McLemore Stewart for her outstanding and tireless contributions to better our processes and practices as a professional association," Executive Director Stephen Sloan said. "We wish her the best of luck in her new role but are sad to see her go."

Bethany said she's sad to be leaving an organization she considers family but is looking forward to taking on "a dream job," returning to her home discipline and having a chance to work with students.

As many OHA members can understand, when those dream jobs come along, particularly unexpectedly, you just have to move on.

Many, many thanks, Bethany! And good luck!

VOLUNTEER SPOTLIGHT



This month's volunteer spotlight illuminates a long list of OHA volunteers and staff whose collective efforts made for a successful annual meeting and conference in Baltimore.

They include:

OHA president Kelly Elaine Navies, who headed the conference team in her role as vice president;

Program Committee co-chairs Zaheer Ali and Benji de la Piedra along with their committee members, who created a jam-packed program offering intellectual challenges and time for fun;

Local Arrangements Committee co-chairs Tonika Berkley and Angela Rodgers-Koukoui along with Baltimore expert Linda Shopes and other committee members, who created opportunities for oral historians to go home knowing much more about the nearly 300-year-old city;

OHA Executive Office graduate assistants Katrina Gallegos and Chiara Osborne, who greeted conference attendees at registration with cheerful enthusiasm and problem-solving skills;

Scores of OHA members who volunteered (or were recruited) to chair program sessions and lead discussions; and

Executive Director Stephen Sloan, Associate Director Steven Sielaff and Program Associate Bethany McLemore Stewart, who, while not technically volunteers, devoted their energy, ideas and passion for oral history to creating a successful 57th annual OHA conference.

Awards highlight exemplary oral history work

Winners of annual awards for outstanding oral history work were recognized at the OHA conference presidential reception.

They are:

- **Book Award—*A Story to Save Your Life: Communication and Culture in Migrants' Search for Asylum*, by Sarah C. Bishop.** Based on interviews with asylum seekers, border patrol agents, immigration lawyers, judges and others, the book describes a dysfunctional asylum process and the critical role of asylum seekers' ability to tell their stories. Award judges included Jocelyn Gomez, Jeff Corrigan and Layla Vural.
- **Martha Ross Teaching Award—Courtney Major**, a high school teacher in Edina, Minnesota, was recognized for teaching students to analyze original archival documents, including oral histories, to make the study of history meaningful. She has mentored more than 30 National History Day qualifiers and incorporates oral history in student projects titled Minnesota's Ethnic and Cultural Diversity: Past and Present. The award committee was chaired by Lucas Wilson.



Arkansas People's History Project co-founders Acadia Roher and Anna Stitt accept Mason Multimedia Award from Outgoing President Tomás Summers Sandoval

- **Mason Multimedia Awards** (three awards presented)— 1) Ecuadorian journalist **Marcos Echeverria Ortiz** for his interactive documentary and oral history archive **“Where We Were Safe,”** which documents memories of historic, but now destroyed, Salsa music places in New York City. 2) Gallaudet University’s Schuchman Deaf Documentary Center project **“The Deaf Printers Pages,”** a digital exhibit describing the work of deaf printers at the Washington Post based on sign language interviews, photographs and other materials. Project participants who attended the reception included: **Jannelle Legg, Brian Greenwald, Zilvinas Paludnevičius and Janie Golightly.** 3) A multimedia web exhibit **“The Women’s Project: A Digital History,”** produced by the Arkansas People’s History Project. The exhibit traces the early history of a multiracial network of women tackling racism, sexism, homophobia and economic injustice in rural and urban Arkansas, beginning in 1980. Arkansas People’s History Project co-founders **Acadia Roher and Anna Stitt** attended the reception.
- **Article Award—“Gendered Banishment: Rewriting Mexican Repatriation Through a Transgenerational Oral History Methodology,”** published in *Latino Studies*, Vol. 20, Issue 3, September 2022, by **Marla A. Ramírez.** The article recounts her collaboration with Mexican American banished women, their children and grandchildren to construct a gendered transgenerational banishment archive. A book based on her work is forthcoming. Committee members included Adrienne Petty, Heather Fox and Rocio Gomez.



Introducing new *Oral History Review* team

By Holly Werner-Thomas,
OHR’s New Editor

I first want to thank the outgoing editors – Abigail Perkiss, Dave Caruso and Janneken Smucker – for all of their work and creative vision in making the *Oral History*

Review into what it is. We are going to be building on their work and also the work of the editors who preceded them, Kathy Nasstrom, Troy Reeves and Kim Porter.

Most readers won’t know this, but at one time, the *Review* mostly published project-based work. While it was good work, it didn’t necessarily offer new insights into the field, but rather reported on project-based research. The difference can be subtle, and the journal continues to receive many submissions that are project-based only. However, while using oral history to make an historical argument is an important component of oral history, as is oral history that documents events, especially when the written record is insufficient, the journal’s mission is to offer new insight into oral history practice, theory and methodology.

On that note, readers should know that we have several special issue and section ideas. The first special issue that we have announced is on oral history and disabilities, which is slated for Spring 2025. Please see [this link](#) for the call for papers and note that the submission deadline is March 31, 2024. Our other *ideas* so far include oral history and the arts, oral history and incarceration, oral history and climate change, and Indigenous oral history. But we are just starting out, so we’ll see.

Let me emphasize our renewed focus on multimedia. We cannot know yet how this will tie into OHA’s new website, which is to be launched soon, but we are making the interaction between the OHA website and what is now the *OHR’s* blog more explicit, perhaps with a

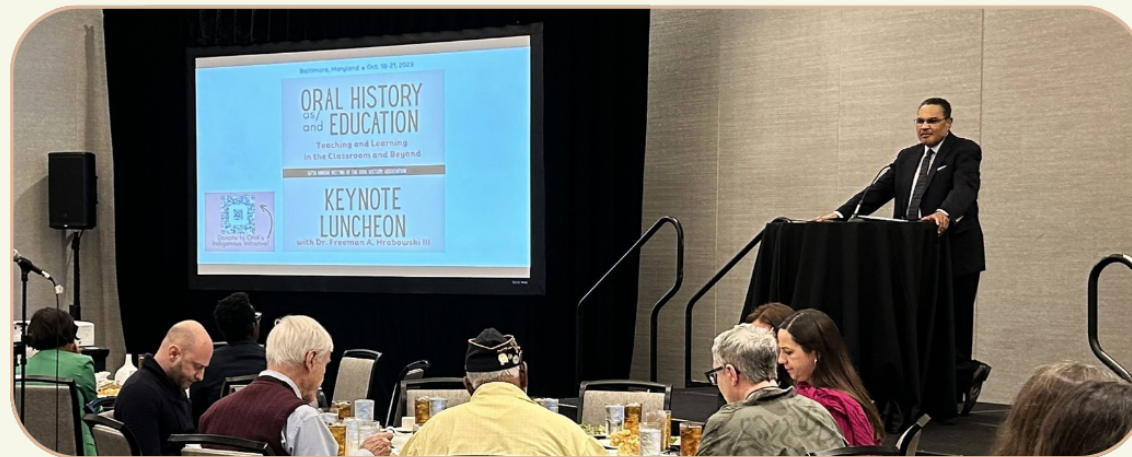
visual or link on OHA's landing page. The blog already uses graphics and audio and author interviews. We hope to build on what the outgoing editors have accomplished, but more than that it is too early to say. Stay tuned. The good news is, our current publisher, Routledge/Taylor & Francis, has the capability to showcase audio and even video in our digital issues. That is new and a considerable upgrade from before.

More generally, I'm excited, we're excited, to be working together and within the larger community. We are happy to be working with the new Executive Office at Baylor – they've all been so helpful there – and look forward to getting to know the people in the Council and learning from the committees. There is also some turnover on the Editorial Board and a new Editorial Board mandate coming soon, so also stay tuned for those exciting developments.

I also feel really lucky to have the people we do in place. We are quite a varied group. I used to work in publishing before I became a historian and oral historian. I am based out of Los Angeles but have lived all over. Our copyeditor, Robert LaRose, is a librarian at the central library in Washington, D.C. Molly Todd, our managing editor, is an academic historian based out of Montana. Our new book review editor, Sharon Raynor, is a professor of English and Digital Media in North Carolina, and Bud Kliment, our new media review editor, works with the Pulitzer Prize Board at Columbia University and used to manage a record store.

Let me emphasize the work the new book and media review editors are seeking and the fact that the journal needs reviewers! For all book reviews, please contact Sharon for more information and to contribute (and please, follow through with those contributions!): ohrbookrevieweditor@gmail.com.

Meanwhile, Bud is looking for *significant* applications of oral history in settings other than in books. For example, in music or theater pieces, museums or art exhibits, online archives, podcasts or other interactive presentations. Works to be considered ideally should be broadly available, with a lifespan that allows *OHR* readers to experience them, in person or online. The Media Review section will also be a wonderful place to showcase multimedia, so please always consider audio, video and visual elements when contributing. Bud can be reached at: OHRMedia@outlook.com.



Keynoter urges oral historians to think of sharing stories as a way to build community

Telling an audience of sometimes math-phobic oral historians that he's "a proud mathematician," keynoter Freeman A. Hrabowski III explained that math is about story problems. And stories are about building community.

"Everybody has a story," Hrabowski said, adding that because oral historians are in the business of finding and telling those stories, they have an important role to play in building community.

A native of Birmingham, Alabama, Hrabowski was a civil rights activist as a pre-teen, earned a bachelor's degree from Hampton Institute with highest honors in math by the time he was 19 and added a master's degree in math and a Ph.D. in higher education administration and statistics from the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign by the time he was 24.

Hrabowski retired last year after 30 years as president of the University of Maryland Baltimore County. He has received numerous awards and national acclaim for his academic leadership and for his success in developing national models for teaching math and science to students from diverse backgrounds. He continues to consult national organizations, universities and public schools on science and math education.

Hrabowski said all educated people need to look at themselves in a mirror and understand that people can become so enamored of what they know that they forget what they don't know.

"Being educated means knowing there is so much more to know," he said.

Too often, he suggested, scholars and people denigrated as coastal elites are more condescending than they think they are to people outside their environment, which leads to distrust and disrespect.

"When you talk to people without college degrees, you need to respect them as thinking human beings," he said.

He challenged audience members as teachers to reflect on their own experiences and understand their own stories so they can, in turn, inspire others.

New OHA Indigenous Caucus members describe goals

Four original members of the OHA's new Indigenous Caucus introduced themselves and the caucus at a panel session marked by laughter, seriousness and a commitment to create a space to build a critical mass of Indigenous oral historians.

Farina King of the University of Oklahoma, Sara Sinclair of Columbia University, Francine Spang-Willis of Appearing Flying Woman Consulting and Winona Wheeler of the University of Saskatchewan described their reasons for helping to form the caucus.

It boiled down, they said, to wanting a recognized space within the OHA in which Indigenous oral historians could support one another and particularly to encourage young Indigenous scholars to pursue oral history work within their communities.

In 2022, the OHA committed to an Indigenous Initiative, including building an endowed fund "to promote the success of Indigenous oral historians, as well as meaningful and ethical oral historical projects within Indigenous communities." (To learn more about donating to the Indigenous Initiative, go [here](#).)

"We have formed community," said Sinclair, who is of Cree-Ojibwe, German-Jewish and British descent. She said the focus is on supporting others and raising the visibility of Indigenous work.

But she added, with a smile, that she initially saw the Indigenous Caucus as a way "to meet Winona and Farina."

Wheeler, a member of the Fisher River Cree Nation in Manitoba, Canada, who is of Cree-Assiniboine-Saulteaux and English-Irish descent, has done extensive work on First Nations land claims. She said the first time she came to an OHA conference, she figured she was the only Indigenous person there.

"I was really kind of racist," she said, describing how she looked at people's skin tones, earrings and shoes to figure out if they might be Native. It felt lonely, she recalled, but at least there were lots of people doing community-based projects, which she appreciated.

Later, when she attended the 2019 OHA conference in Salt Lake City, she said she was impressed with the Indigenous participation and decided OHA could be a place where Indigenous scholars could encourage more young people, enabling Indigenous communities to do the work they need to do on their own terms.

King, who is of Diné (Navajo) and English and Northwestern European heritage, noted that oral history is a traditional part of how Indigenous people have communicated. “We just didn’t call it oral history,” she said.

Sinclair noted that while oral historians are taught about interviewing, “what it really is is witnessing,” she said.

In Indigenous communities, “it’s all about relationality,” Wheeler added. “We don’t do things by ourselves very well.”

Spang-Willis, who is of Cheyenne, Pawnee and settler descent, said she grew up seeing a responsibility to help those who come after you and to pass along wisdom from experience. “We forget we’re part of something,” she said.

Spang-Willis said that as a consultant, “a lot of my work is for white folks, it’s educating white folk.” The OHA Indigenous Caucus, she said, creates a space where Indigenous oral historians can have conversations among themselves.

Archival collections offer goldmine for exploring contemporary issues and create ties to new oral history projects

While some oral historians crave the excitement of creating new interviews and new projects, countless extant archival collections offer untapped goldmines of oral histories full of insights about contemporary issues.

In a conference session focused on oral histories of the environment, Oklahoma State University oral historian Tanya Finchum dug into the university’s Conservation Heritage Collection interviews with pioneers in land and water conservation efforts, many of whom described longstanding efforts to be active stewards of the state’s land and water.

One narrator, Clay Pope, noted that in his interview that cities developed in places where people could feed themselves. As a result, he said, “The best farmland in the world is under concrete.”

Oklahomans interviewed in the collection described efforts to improve soil health by planting cover crops like rye, radishes and turnips while others focused on educating people about restoring the health of streams, which in turn benefits wildlife and enables nature to revive itself.

Finchum noted that in addition to focusing on Oklahoma conservationists, interviews in the collection offer teachers the opportunity to enhance lessons on science and even enable students to explore careers.

Patrick Daglaris, also of Oklahoma State University, discovered in the oral history collections a plethora of tornado stories, so much so that he concluded tornado narratives, most often emerging in otherwise unrelated interviews, are an expression of regional identity.

Known for tornados and dust storms, the southern Great Plains state is “an inhospitable place,” Daglaris said. “Oklahoma is trying to kill you.”

The tornado stories generally are not about death, he said. Often they are stories passed down through generations, and the interviews illustrate how tornado stories can change over time. But the takeaways typically emphasize perseverance in the face of adversity.

That perseverance, in fact, marked by refusal to move away from the state despite the tornado danger has become a key feature of Oklahomans’ identity, Daglaris said.

That focus on resilience and perseverance also pervades a new oral history project that two New York State college professors discovered by coincidence on their first road trip on the Alaska Highway, from Dawson Creek, British Columbia, to Delta Junction, Alaska.

Despite challenges posed by mosquitos, permafrost, meltwater erosion and wilderness, the road was completed nine months after the War Department ordered its construction in February 1942, said Michael Paluzzi of the State University of New York Nassau campus. It was the first overland connection between Alaska and the rest of North America.

Diane M. Ferrero-Paluzzi, who teaches at Iona University in Westchester County, New York, said she and Michael discovered as they embarked on their own RV journey up the Alaska Highway that in informal conversations at gas stations people told personal tales of survival in isolated places that often mirrored the history of the road itself.

The University of Alaska Fairbanks oral history collections include various interviews about construction of the highway and related stories of survival, she noted.

Present-day travelers and people who traversed the highway and stayed routinely told the couple about how hard the trip was. But, Ferrero-Paluzzi said, they also would add, “but we had fun.”



Panelists share reflections on the reparative and educational roles of oral history

An OHA conference plenary session explored disparate perspectives on the power of oral history’s educational potential and its power to explore difficult community pasts.

Cultural anthropologist **Michelle Chatman**, an associate professor at the University of the District of Columbia whose work includes a focus on mindfulness studies, described oral histories that contributed to “Rigging History: The Untold Story of The Black Men Behind the Scenes as the Smithsonian’s Skull Crew, 1975 – 2000.”

The project involved interviews with about a half-dozen Black men from the South who had served in Vietnam and then found work as members of the behind-the-scenes rigging crew at the Smithsonian’s National Museum of American History.

One narrator, Chatman said, reported that before 1975, the crew members were not permitted to be in public spaces in the museum while visitors were in the building. But the oral histories revealed that despite a history of such treatment, the men became family for one another, she said, and those work families became a source of healing, encouragement and inspiration among them.

A tour guide at Monticello who now directs a project to preserve the oral histories of descendants of people Thomas Jefferson enslaved, **Jenna Owens** told attendees that the third president’s meticulous recordkeeping made it possible to identify by name some 600 known descendants.

Monticello’s Getting Word African American Oral History Project reflects a process of building relationships with those descendants and enabling their ancestors’ voices to be heard through them.

Owens said that in the immediate aftermath of emancipation, the formerly enslaved people did not want to talk about slavery. But the freedom stories passed down contain clues about their day-to-day lives and values and show they had a voice in their community, even if the slave owner didn’t recognize it, she said.

Owens said that 98 percent of visitors to Monticello are white and that sometimes they push back against tours that highlight the role of enslaved people on Jefferson's plantation. "But we're going to talk about it no matter what," she said. "Most people are actually grateful that we talk about it."

District of Columbia native **Corey Shaw** co-founded the Black Broad Branch Project in which oral histories and other historical research has led to efforts to seek reparations for two families whose free Black ancestors were forced off their land in 1928 to make way for development of the D.C. suburb of Chevy Chase, Maryland. The project has resulted in development of educational curriculum for D.C. public school students and new public signage recognizing the community's formerly enslaved founder.

Shaw described a similar research project in the Brown Grove community north of Richmond, Virginia, in the Reconstruction era whose existence has been systematically threatened by displacement due to changes in land use, first by construction of Interstate 95, which split the community, and later by construction of a regional airport, a landfill and encroaching suburban development. Earlier this year Brown Grove was listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

Shaw said finding a report that included a history of zoning in the county was key to pushing for efforts to acknowledge racism and displacement in the historically Black community.

Oral history is a tool for investigating such situations, he said, adding that people who have been harmed are entitled to investigations that center their voices.

Arts educator **Jody Stokes-Casey** of the University of Kentucky described her work with the Charleston Arts Revitalization Effort, CARE, a predominantly white community betterment organization in Charleston, Mississippi, a largely Black town of about 1,700 in the Mississippi Delta.

The community had no archives to speak of, Stokes-Casey said, so she started doing oral histories. Along with that was an arts-based effort that resulted in an exhibition of landscapes depicting the region.

One takeaway? She said you can't expect art, or oral history, for that matter, to accomplish grief counseling or cure segregation in the Mississippi Delta.

Bozeman, Montana, independent oral historian **Francine Spang-Willis**, who is of Cheyenne, Pawnee and settler descent, noted that oral history largely focuses on a human perspective. But she said she would have liked to interview the American bison, once virtually exterminated from North America, because of their impact on culture as well as their impact on the land.

"We had been living with bison for thousands of years," she said, but the accumulated knowledge from that relationship went away when the bison were virtually exterminated from the Plains.

Spang-Willis recalled a Cheyenne elder saying that "even the blade of grass has something to tell us."

Likewise, she said, when bison come back to the land, they will bring back the information that has been lost if people are willing to recognize that they, too, are part of an ecosystem in which every element has a story to share.



4 university professors analyze battle over teaching the past during plenary session

Book bans that target people of color and the LGBTQ community. Falsehoods about slavery. Conservative groups that target college professors. The challenges to what and how to teach, from kindergarten to graduate school, was the focus of a Saturday plenary session featuring four college professors whose work has focused on aspects of African American history.

Make no mistake, warned **Karsonya Wise Whitehead** of Loyola University Maryland, the nation is now experiencing a “coordinated effort and campaign” to erase parts of American life.

The University of Florida’s **Paul Ortiz**, director of the Samuel Proctor Oral History Program, said that in his state, academic freedom is not something professors have ever been able to take for granted. But their efforts at the University of Florida are bolstered by the fact that they are unionized, he said, noting that union strength helped win a standing injunction against the state’s Stop WOKE Act, which restricts classroom discussions of race and gender issues.

Oral historians, he suggested, are well positioned to cultivate allies for their work because they have connections to communities that also have struggled.

Morgan State University professor **Daryl Scott** emphasized that history has to be taught in schools in such a way that does not “do violence to the past.”

North Carolina State University professor **Nishani Frazier** added that it’s important to put history to work in communities and to look for the silences in our history. That’s where oral historians come in, she said, because they can “bring silences to the front.”

Whitehead suggested there also may be creative ways to resist the culture war at a grassroots level. Books may be banned from classrooms, she noted, “but they’re not banned in laundromats and barbershops.”

Formerly incarcerated oral historian challenges audience to rethink research process

Troy Gaston is a Ph.D. candidate in political science at the University of Illinois, Chicago. He also has been in prison.

And he decried the disconnect he’s found between the academic world’s perspective on research, especially as it relates to mass incarceration and the public policies that feed it, and the lived experiences of people caught in the poverty-to-prison pipeline.

“Whose perspectives are prioritized in the research process?” he asked, noting that the nature of the prison system itself prevents scholars from getting a complete picture, which always will result in incomplete policies.

Gaston is one of the National Public Housing Museum’s Oral History Research Corps members whose project, titled “Narrating Through the Carceral Divide,” aims to bring the voices of incarcerated people to public discussions of prison reform.

Little scholarly literature exists that is based on research “with the people most affected by the carceral system and their loved ones, Gaston said. “You ain’t talked to nobody with the lived experience.”

Public policy research also is skewed by stereotypes, he suggested, noting that research about the impact of the war on drugs, for example, typically has focused on the number of Black and Latinx people incarcerated for drug crimes. But there’s plenty of “white boys” and rural people in prison for methamphetamine-related crimes, Gaston said, adding that if scholars are going to do research on incarceration, they need to “include all of these voices.”

Gaston argued that using oral history can challenge prevailing stereotypes about mass incarceration.

“Incarcerated people have their findings, too,” he said, but the prison system itself creates barriers, often profit-motivated, that make it difficult to communicate privately with incarcerated people.

Pointing to oral history’s commitment to sharing authority, Gaston suggested that oral history methodology can be an important tool “to critique the prevailing narrative” about the nation’s system of incarceration.



Annual business meeting highlights

Early risers who attended the 6:45 a.m. annual business meeting on Saturday, Oct. 21, got coffee and continental

breakfast to go along with Oral History Association updates, including:

- OHA membership of 1,189 sets a record.
- As part of OHA’s diversity efforts, free memberships were offered to 10 historically Black colleges and universities.
- OHA has 41 partner members, whose dues were increased from \$450 to \$500 annually.
- A website redesign is underway and will be in place soon.
- Work on the OHA archives at the University of North Texas is continuing under the leadership of the OHA History Task Force.
- The OHA endowment fund totals \$731,000, of which 5 percent was drawn down this year to cover transitional expenses.
- OHA is finalizing a memorandum of intent to partner with the National Park Service.
- The presidential gavel was passed to Kelly Elaine Navies.

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