

Editor's Corner

Engaging the Past

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We begin this issue with the third installment of our series, “Commemorating the 250th Anniversary of the American Revolution” (see Part 1, “Considering the Revolution: Indigenous Histories and Memory in Alaska, Hawai‘i, and the Indigenous Plateau” and “Decolonizing Museums, Memorials, and Monuments” in the November 2021 issue, and Part 2, Jean-Pierre Morin’s “Considering the Revolution: The Identities Created by the American Revolutionary War,” in the February 2023 issue). The articles build upon on the public plenaries of the annual meeting of the National Council on Public History (NCPH), co-hosted by the National Park Service (NPS) and NCPH. These conversations will, as Morin writes, “contribute to larger discussions during NPS’s commemorations of the American Revolution’s 250th anniversary about its changing interpretation and its continuing relevance to the American people.”

The current installment, “The Rhetoric of Freedom: Remembering Slavery during the Semiquincentennial of the American Revolution” by Sylvea Hollis, in her words, “focuses on the rhetoric of freedom during the age of the American Revolution. It examines the question of how to commemorate war and independence while simultaneously remembering the pervasiveness of chattel slavery.” Hollis, associate professor of African and African American History at Montgomery College, convened four historians, two who work in universities, and two who work in historic sites, to discuss the centrality of slavery in what would become the United States in the Revolutionary War era and how public historians can effectively interpret the complexity of the interplay between slavery and freedom during and after the war. Hollis argues that the most meaningful public engagement emphasizes *process* along with *product*, allowing visitors to understand how historians construct knowledge of the past. She ends by spotlighting the Aiken-Rhett House, an urban plantation mansion in Charleston, South Carolina, as an example of the kind of best practices that she and other panelists hope to see more often.

In the next piece, “Commemorating in Place: Reflections on the Meaning and Experience of Holocaust Tourism,” Joanna Auerbach grounds a very personal experience of traveling to Holocaust sites in Germany and Poland in theoretical frameworks of memory, landscape, and tourism. By forefronting the personal, the experiential, and the physical, Auerbach pushes back against the paradigm of “dark

tourism” to argue that being present in spaces of violence allowed her, as a descendant of camp survivors, a process of “contemplation and commemoration.” Yet strikingly, she finds evidence of the Holocaust, especially in Poland, most tangibly in absence—the “Jewish nonpresence” evident in Polish cities. We intend to publish more personal, reflective essays in the future.

As public historians continue to push boundaries of historical scholarship and dissemination, the issue includes two articles exploring the possibilities of new media. The first, Benjamin Jenkins’s “Recasting Uncle Billy: r/ShermanPosting, Digital History, and the Meaning of the American Civil War in the Twenty-First Century,” demonstrates the specific ways in which users of Reddit engage with Civil War history and contemporary life as a way of engaging the public with history. Focusing on the subreddit r/ShermanPosting, Jenkins argues that users “recast” or reimagine United States General William Tecumseh Sherman as a “a champion of American diversity in the twenty-first century and a staunch opponent of the divisive political rhetoric that has taken hold among radical right-wing groups.” Recognizing that the historical Sherman had a more complex legacy than this implies, Jenkins nonetheless maintains that by posting about, arguing about, and discussing Sherman, the Civil War, and the Lost Cause, redditors engage in complex conversations to draw meaning from the past.

Next, one of the issue’s two Reports from the Field discusses the possibilities of video games and public history. Darren Reid, in “Video Game Development as Public History: Practical Reflections on Making a Video Game for Historical Public Engagement” provides historians practical advice of how to develop historically sophisticated video games. Drawing on work he did in creating a video game, *Ab Uno Sanguine*, based on his dissertation research, Reid argues that even with no experience and no budget, “historians can combine the wealth of available scholarship on game design with modern indie game development tools to harness the video game medium as a method of public history.” His practical, step-by-step advice should inspire many readers.

We conclude with a second Report from the Field by Idaho State Historian HannaLore Hein, “Informing Policy and Responding to Crisis: The Making of ‘Idaho’s Response to the 1918 Influenza Pandemic—ISHS Briefing Paper No. 1.” Hein wrote the briefing paper, which won the National Council for Public History’s Michael C. Robinson Award for excellence in consulting in 2020, in response to Idaho Governor Brad Little’s request for information on the state’s response to the flu pandemic of 1918 to help create his state’s response to COVID-19. The Report examines “what can happen when historical context can be developed quickly enough to inform public policy decisions in response to a crisis.” We include the briefing paper as well, for reference for readers of the report and as a piece of exemplary grey literature.

Finally, we thank our departing editorial board members, Rebecca Bush, Patrick Grossi, Lynn Kronzek, Gregory Martin, Kyle T. Mays, and Harvee White. Please join me in welcoming new members Michelle Magalong, Angela Sirna, and Stephen Vider.