

History News

WINTER 2020 Volume 75, #1

The MAGAZINE of the AMERICAN ASSOCIATION for STATE and LOCAL HISTORY

A photograph of two women standing on a balcony with a white railing. The woman on the left is wearing a light-colored, patterned headwrap and a white, ruffled blouse with a floral skirt. The woman on the right is wearing a colorful, patterned headwrap and a brown, textured dress. Both women are looking towards the camera.

CONNER PRAIRIE'S
National Opinion Poll

*Self-Care and the
Mid-Career Professional*

Engaging Visitors
at the
Pearl S. Buck House

**Museum Theater
in New Orleans**

TECHNICAL LEAFLET:
Interpreting the Environment at Museums and Historic Sites



From the President & CEO

Public History, Generation by Generation

AASLH will be eighty years old this year, and the National Council on Public History (NCPH) has turned forty. We have common goals and overlapping memberships and should be working more closely together than ever.

In 1979, as the idea of a “public history” field was emerging, Jerry George, my predecessor as CEO forty years ago, said “I hope that ...AASLH can find ways to help extend a hand...and to become more useful to young people who are training to become ‘public historians,’ and to their professors.” His editorial, titled “Take a ‘public historian’ to lunch,” opened a themed issue of *History News* (May 1979) that introduced the newly named field to the state and local history community. “Some of you who for years have been doing, in a historical society or museum or archives or historic site or government agency, something that is now being called ‘public history’ will resent the implication that it is anything new at all,” he pointed out.

In the same issue, Larry E. Tise, director of the North Carolina Division of Archives and History, who would succeed George as head of AASLH in the late 1980s, explained the double origin of the public history field. First, a growing number of historians in the early twentieth century were working in federal and state archives and park services, museums, historical societies, and editorial projects, and this trend continued thanks to World War II and postwar expansion. Second, the academy-based, job-crisis-caused invention of the term “public history” emerged “from its twofold source as a possible cure for the job crisis and as a possible organizing principle for historians already working in the public and private sector.”

In March, NCPH was all set to mark its four-decade anniversary at its Annual Meeting in Atlanta. Despite the conference’s unfortunate cancellation due to the COVID-19 pandemic, there is much to celebrate about this fortieth birthday. At present there are some 160 programs in the U.S. and Canada that offer public history or related master’s degrees, five offering a Ph.D., and growing number of history departments with courses and even certificates for undergraduates. Besides institutionalizing, NCPH and its members over the decades have established “public history” as a flourishing sub-field inside the academy and beyond.

The relationship between AASLH and NCPH continues to flourish, and we have collaborated more in each of the past few years. Full disclosure: when I came to AASLH in 2015, I had been the Executive Director of NCPH for nine years.

That has helped in integrating the two sides of our shared public history community. So has the growing number of people who attend both conferences and read each organization’s publications. At the same time, the two associations are partnering on an expanding number of projects. Our jointly-produced online *Inclusive Historian’s Handbook*, launched last fall at inclusivehistorian.com, is an example. NCPH is also part of the AASLH Framing History project, funded by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, to study gaps between how the general public and we practitioners think about history and historical organizations. In addition, AASLH draws on NCPH members for special sessions and workshops, for our book series, and for 250th anniversary planning.

NCPH materialized as a nonprofit in 1980. AASLH was founded in 1940. About four decades before that, in 1904, the kinds of people and institutions who would one day cohere as AASLH had organized themselves as the semi-autonomous “Conference of State and Local Historical Societies” within the American Historical Association. Major movements in the historical community have happened every forty years. Are we due for another?

Cultural and political crises of the 1960s and ‘70s, the rise of the new social history, and the nation’s Bicentennial in 1976, as well as a job market crash for Ph.D.s, all configured to create conditions for the public history movement and NCPH’s appearance in 1980. There are parallels to each of those variables today, most positively the chance we all have to make something of the nation’s 250th commemoration between now and 2026. Will we see a major new formulation of public history work as the Semiquincentennial approaches? Maybe the 250th is a chance to fully link research and teaching by the majority of traditional academic historians with the insights, practices, and methods of public historians and public history practitioners. Perhaps the 250th can lead to an infusion of public history and public history institutions into *every* history classroom.

While ensuring that small and large history organizations thrive, we should use this once-in-a-generation opportunity to create a more truly unified history community for at least the next forty years.

Sincerely,

John R. Dicht
President & CEO, AASLH



2021 21st Avenue S., Suite 320 | Nashville, Tennessee 37212
 615-320-3203 | Fax 615-327-9013
 membership@aaaslh.org | advertising@aaaslh.org
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EDITOR Aja Bain

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On the Cover:

Performers in "The Stranger Disease" interpreted the story of New Orleans's 1878 yellow fever epidemic for museum visitors in 2018. Photo courtesy of Josh Brasted.

Book Reviews

A Fool's Errand: Creating the National Museum of African American History and Culture in the Age of Bush, Obama, and Trump

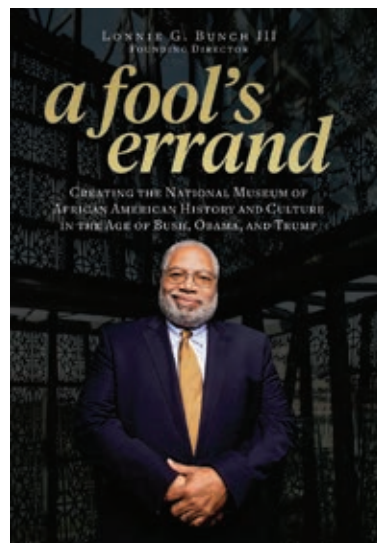
By Lonnie G. Bunch III
(Smithsonian Books: Washington, D.C., 2019), 288 pp.

Reviewed by LaNesha DeBardelaben

Secretary Lonnie Bunch's book is one of the most insightful and intriguing leadership books in current literature. In *A Fool's Errand*, Founding Director of the National Museum of African American History and Culture and Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution Lonnie G. Bunch III provides a roadmap for success in

institution building. Balancing a conversational and a scholarly tone, the book is accessible in style and highly inspirational. Bunch juxtaposes three themes: the weight of history, the importance of national memory, and the shaping of American identity in detailing what he calls "the process of museum making" (216).

With graciousness and relatability, Bunch transparently recounts the aims and visionary actions involved in planning, constructing, and managing a twenty-first-century national museum. Early in the book, Bunch clarifies his hopes for the museum, that it would be "a site of memory that could educate and inspire; a



museum whose collections, exhibitions, and scholarship would aid the visitor in better understanding the world they inhabit; an institution that would recenter African American history and culture as key to our understanding of who we are as Americans; and ultimately, a

building that was seen as a symbol of possibility, resistance, and resiliency on the National Mall in Washington, D.C." (x). The next 200+ pages chronicle the journey he mastered to get there.

Within twelve chapters, Bunch highlights several leadership experiences involved in creating the museum. The first chapter begins with his reflective thoughts on the 2016 grand opening of a museum "intended to help America confront its tortured racial past" (1). In the second chapter, Bunch remembers his early days in the role and the key relationships he built that placed the idea of a national museum on solid ground. Bunch shares insights in chapter three on ways the museum, without yet having a building, activated its interpretive and intellectual agenda and mission through thoughtfully constructed traveling exhibitions, programs, and partnerships. In chapters four, five, and six, Bunch writes authentically about the missteps and miracles of designing the museum, building the collections, and fundraising. Readers in these middle chapters sense the sacredness of moments recounted such as when the museum acquired Harriet Tubman's hymnal and a segregated streetcar. Chapters seven and eight highlight the delicacies of working with elected officials and developing exhibitions, respectively. The wisdom of balancing leadership with camaraderie is explored in chapter nine during his discussion on recruiting staff while chapter ten chronicles his experience in managing the construction of the nearly 400,000-square-foot monumental edifice. He devotes chapter eleven to reflecting on the museum's grand opening

A NEW SOURCE OF TOOLS AND TECHNIQUES TO HELP HISTORIC HOUSES ENGAGE WITH THEIR COMMUNITIES TO BECOME MORE RELEVANT



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"At times practical, at times thought provoking, *Reimagining Historic House Museums* is both a checklist for the basic operation of your museum, and a bundle of wildly divergent ideas to take your organization to the next level. . . . The go-to resource par excellence, for staff, board and volunteers in historic house museums, at every level of their career or engagement." —Remko W.T. Jansonius, *Vizcaya Museum and Gardens, Miami, FL, Board Secretary, DEMHIST*

Drawing from innovative organizations across the United States, *Reimagining Historic House Museums* is an indispensable source of field-tested tools and techniques drawn from such wide-ranging sources as non-profit management, business strategy, and software development. It also profiles historic sites that are using new models to engage with their communities to become more relevant, are adopting creative forms of interpretation and programming, and earning income to become more financially sustainable.

Since 2015, co-editors **Kenneth C. Turino** and **Max A. van Balgooy** have led the popular reimagining historic house workshop for the American Association for State and Local History.

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and closes out the book with a final chapter on lessons gleaned from leading the first year of the museum's operations.

As a historian, Bunch is a master storyteller, using humor, emotional engagement, and inspiration across the pages. He discusses challenges and his vulnerabilities. These become lessons for us all. Bunch discloses the essentials of steadfast, effective leadership, noting "If I have learned anything in my more than 30 years in the museum field, it was to trust my instincts and to rely on the leadership skills that were sharpened and tested by my diverse work experiences" (192). This book is about so much more than how the national museum started. Readers will be better leaders having read this book.



LaNesha DeBardelaben is Executive Director of the Northwest African American Museum (NAAM) in Seattle, Washington, and National President of the Association of African American Museums (AAAM) Board of Directors. She can be contacted at LNDebar@naamnw.org.

Advocacy and Awareness for Archivists

By Kathleen D. Roe

(Chicago, Society of American Archivists, 2019), 160 pp.

Reviewed by Donna J. Baker

One of my last duties as an archivist in Kentucky was to host a Kentucky Council on Archives meeting where Kathleen Roe conducted an archives advocacy and awareness workshop. This was an unsurprising workshop topic if one considered that the Council of State Archivists named their annual advocacy award for her. Upon the start of her tenure as president of the Society of American Archivists in 2014, Ms. Roe issued an advocacy and awareness challenge for all members during her term, and revisited the importance of practicing advocacy and awareness at every oppor-

tunity in her presidential address "Why Archives?". Advocacy and awareness were familiar territory to Ms. Roe.

This work acts as a guide for developing sustainable awareness goals and initiatives for novice and experienced archivists alike. The introduction defines the key terms: advocacy delivers a purposeful message designed to bring about change to specific stakeholders, while awareness provides opportunities to bring about greater understanding of the archival enterprise. Roe clearly states why focused and intentional advocacy practices are essential to creating and maintaining successful archival programs. She also states what we know regarding public perceptions of archives on page 5: "Although many individuals have some idea of what archives are, their perceptions can be a bit hazy and, unfortunately, inaccurate. Those perceptions generally are not negative." Intentional awareness practices, then, will provide "a more balanced, informed view of the many values of archival records" for the public to understand and support. Roe defines the terms before outlining the history of establishing archival institutions, and then discussing how aforementioned misconceptions regarding archives affect support for archives over time.

Roe's experience as the Director of Archives and Records Management Operations at the New York State Archives, as well as her tenure as past president of the Council of State Archivists, informs the substance of this book. The lack of consistent fundamental support requires archivists to advocate regarding the necessity of archives with frequent, impactful methods, and this requires a thorough plan of action. Chapters 3 through 8 demonstrate the workflow archivists should adapt for their institutions for creating advocacy goals and initiatives; how to develop a concise,



powerful message for stakeholders; and what I believe is the most important aspect, identifying stakeholders. While all archivists should develop the skills to advocate for archives, successful advocacy and awareness initiatives must have allies who understand and value the

archives to help emphasize their importance and utility to others. Identifying proper stakeholders is key to disseminating the message an archival institution needs to gain support.

The book concludes with several appendices of resources, but "Appendix D: A Checklist for Planning Advocacy or Awareness Initiatives" is essential. Not only does it list the key steps and questions to include in planning, but it also reminds practitioners to evaluate and assess their progress as they implement their advocacy and awareness strategies.

Advocacy and Awareness for Archivists is a primer for how to bring awareness to the archival enterprise and is a title that all archivists should have on their required reading lists. Not only are Roe's workflows useful for early career professionals as well as seasoned archivists, but her insights also reinforce the many benefits of planning and implementing an advocacy and awareness program. This book can also assist other cultural heritage professionals to define and implement their advocacy and awareness goals.



Donna J. Baker is University Archivist at the Albert Gore Research Center at Middle

Tennessee State University in Murfreesboro, Tennessee. She was previously Head of Special Collections and Archives and Curator of the Appalachia-Kentucky Collection at Morehead State University in Morehead, Kentucky. She received her MA in History from Eastern Illinois University and her MSLS from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Contact Donna at donna.baker@mtsu.edu.