



**2021 American Association for State and Local History/Arkansas Museums Association
Annual Conference
September 22-25, Little Rock, AR
*Doing History/Doing Justice***

What do we owe to one another? This question sits at the heart of the concept of justice, a notion so enduring that it is called forth in centuries-old founding documents as well as in current headlines and protest signs. In this extraordinary era, marked by profound reckoning with our complicated past, history institutions are uniquely positioned to engage in doing justice—to public understandings of our past, and as active agents in the world today.

The work of history institutions is justice work. Historic sites, museums, and archives help bring complexity and nuance to questions of right and wrong. Our work helps establish relevant facts, provides access to evidence, and weigh competing claims for rights, freedoms, access, ownership, and our duty to one another. We raise a range of perspectives and challenge ourselves and our audiences to evaluate and reconcile conflicting views. Far beyond matters of laws and courts alone, the call to uphold justice asks us to think about the meanings of belonging, fairness, responsibility, and equality; to acknowledge and redress historical wrongs and dismantle harmful myths; and to consider the impact of our actions today.

The theme of justice resonates throughout Arkansas' history. At the 2021 Annual Meeting, centered in Little Rock, we can witness the interplay between judicial procedure and social justice at the steps of Central High School, where the Little Rock Nine fought for their right to equal education. We can explore restorative justice through Rowher Japanese Relocation Center, where World War II detainees, after a decades-long campaign, secured reparations and commemoration. We can visit the Clinton Presidential Library to study the Good Friday Peace Accords, examining the processes of history, accountability, and reconciliation that brought an end to long, violent conflict in Northern Ireland.

Doing Justice TO, AS, and IN History

This meeting will take an active orientation – how do history organizations and practitioners DO justice? We will look at how we do our work and how people are impacted by our work, unpacking the notion of “justice” in all its dimensions. The program committee seeks proposals that follow a three-part framework: doing justice TO history, AS history, and IN history.

Doing Justice TO history can mean revealing formerly hidden stories, creating new access to historical resources, reframing narratives, or recentering overlooked historical players. We are inspired by examples like:

- Jamestown Settlement, where the recent exhibit *Tenacity* foregrounded the stories of individual women whose influences on the colony's development had never been told
- *Revolutionary Spaces*, the merger of Boston's Old South Meeting House and Old State House, combining resources to do justice to stories of our national origins

- *The Chronicle of African Americans in the Horse Industry*, an online archive documenting African American work in equine trades, from the International Museum of the Horse

Doing Justice AS history means taking on the concept of justice, through explorations of law, the courts, fights for equality and civil rights, and social justice. Examples include:

- History Colorado, where the exhibit *Women/Work/Justice* explores “the intersection of human, civil, and economic rights” for women in the workforce, from advocating for safety to organizing for better wages and working conditions
- The Bay County Museum in Florida, where a new exhibit spotlights the landmark 1963 Supreme Court case *Gideon v. Wainwright*, guaranteeing the right to legal representation without charge
- The Wisconsin Historical Society’s “Social Action” collection, archiving material related to movements for free speech, students’ rights, GI rights and resistance, and more

Doing Justice IN history means recognizing our organizations as historical actors in their own right, playing roles in unfolding events. As Ken Yellis and Avi Decter write on the AASLH Blog, “If we have something to say, we should say it. If there is something we can do or give, we must do and give. If there’s a way to get involved, we should embrace it.” We will explore how museums are responding to the present moment, not just externally, but internally as well: What does justice look like *within* history organizations? We’ll explore strategies to build internal racial equity, consider stakeholders in planning and content development, and rethink fundraising strategies.

- Greensboro History Museum’s “History Happening Now” initiative, inviting residents to record responses to the pandemic, racial justice uprisings, and other current events
- The History Museum of Mobile, which accepted a statue of Confederate Navy Admiral Raphael Semmes after it became a target of protests and was removed from a city park
- The Chicago History Museum, where student activists are partnering with museum staff to increase the representation of LatinX stories in collections and exhibitions

“What time is it on the clock of the world?”

Activist Grace Lee Boggs (1915-2015) often opened conversations with this question. By asking it, we situate ourselves in history, placing our present into a longer context of cycles of change and continuity. In recent years of social tension, strain, and unrest, the “clock of our world” has been ringing with a wake-up call that asks all people to understand and engage with the histories that have so largely defined our present moment. For history organizations, it is time to look thoughtfully at ourselves and our roles in these processes. Together, in our 2021 meeting, we have the opportunity to consider how our work intersects with justice, and what we as museums owe – to the past, to our field, and most importantly, to our communities.

Michelle Moon
2021 AASLH Program Chair