

THE **POWER** OF **Possibility**

By Kent Whitworth and Scott Alvey

Life in Kentucky's early days was much like what many of us might say about the history profession today—it was not for the faint of heart. Just as the settlers endured daily hardships in their struggle to survive, on many levels this is true of what we have faced in the history world, too. Yet after a prolonged period of financial distress and seemingly lackluster audiences, we once again see opportunities for real impact.

That's why Kentucky, and Louisville in particular, is the ideal setting for this year's AASLH conference. Louisville was settled by indomitable pioneers who, when the Falls of the Ohio threw up barriers to their dreams of traveling west, found power in the possibilities presented by their new situation. Communities sprang up as these enterprising few shifted their westward thinking to settle by the falls and offer provisions, rest, trade, and help for people who followed. Life handed them lemons and they made bourbon!



The Falls of the Ohio River at Louisville show their formidable nature, circa 1920.

Left: This Louisville postcard, circa 1907, shows the Falls of the Ohio along with an inset drawing of the fledgling river town in 1778.

We better get out of this back seat mindset and get out of it soon, because opportunity is knocking for us in a most unpredictable way.



Left: Through its “Piecing Together History” program, the Kentucky Historical Society takes collections out to communities and encourages people to make their own meaning from the past.

Division of Creative Services, Commonwealth of Kentucky

In fact, the entire commonwealth is defined by people who recognized new opportunities and seized the power of possibility. From Henry Clay to Hunter S. Thompson, Carrie Nation to Tori Murden McClure, and of course “the Greatest” Muhammad Ali, Kentucky consistently has produced people who were the motivators and innovators in their fields.

Louisville is a good example of how this has played out. Perhaps Hustin Quinn, Mayor of Louisville from 1921 to 1925, said it best, “Louisville has the thrift of the East, the hustle of the North, the optimism of the West, and the hospitality of the South.” Depending on your point of view, it’s either the southernmost city in the North or the South’s northernmost city. Louisvillians don’t mind being called either because they know that both reflect how their city is an amalgamation of ideas, people, and interests.¹

The same can be said of the history world. That’s why the impetus for this year’s conference theme—the number of challenges we all are facing and, depending on our perspective, how we react to them—is so perfect. Most people address new challenges by tackling them head on or by circumventing them altogether. If we look to history and take the lead of Louisville’s founders, however, the best approach is to not think in terms of challenges, but in terms of new areas of possibilities and opportunities. Rather than spend our days debating issues such as why does STEM get all of the public’s attention and how to get people through

our doors—saying the same things over and over again, just louder—we should instead be examining what we can do differently and more creatively so people see and understand our value.

Where are the areas of possibility and opportunity that exist within what we’re trying to accomplish through the study of history?

Look again at Louisville. It doesn’t have the advantage of being either East Coast or West Coast—it’s a landlocked city in a landlocked state in the center of the nation. But the city leaders long ago decided the location had the real opportunity, the real *possibility*, to become a logistical center. And that’s just what Louisville became. And that’s what we want people within our profession to learn to do—to see ourselves through the eyes of someone else and discover the opportunities that are there for the taking.

One of the things that makes the *Power of Possibility* theme so relevant is what we’ve endured the past several years while riding the financial freefall. Many of us have been fighting for our existence, but in the midst of that challenge there is real clarity. As Wendell Berry, renowned Kentucky novelist, essayist, and plenary speaker at this year’s conference, wrote, “The mind that is not baffled is not employed. It is the impeded stream that sings.”²

There is more innovation now than ever because just maybe we were a little too comfortable in the past. Back then, we didn’t have to ask if we truly were meeting real



Above: Farming was at the heart of the Shaker community, and experimentation and resiliency made their farms models of innovation and efficiency. Today, Shaker Village at Pleasant Hill encourages visitors to “discover backyard sustainability.”

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needs. We didn't have to think about, for instance, what the state is going to miss if the Kentucky Historical Society goes away.

Those are gut-wrenching questions, but they certainly bring clarity! Now the entire history field is trying to get these enormous issues right, and in the midst of that is unprecedented possibility. This topic is absolutely appropriate right now. In fact, it's essential, because as the economy gets better we may get a little more comfortable again and we'd better learn these lessons while we can.

We have an opportunity to transform the profession if, collectively, we examine the impact that we could and should have on society. How we react or don't react to this opportunity can tell us a lot.

We know something about that in Kentucky. Looking back at the commonwealth in its pre-Civil War era, we were a leader in every sense of the word, from a business standpoint, an intellectual standpoint, and a political standpoint. Then we found ourselves in the back seat, got comfortable, and stayed there. Kentucky state historian and plenary speaker Jim Klotter consistently challenges Kentuckians to rise above the lost opportunities of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. And, now momentum is building on multiple fronts.

The history field is guilty of the exact same thing. We better get out of this back seat mindset and get out of it soon, because opportunity is knocking for us in a most unpredict-

able way. Who would have dreamed that yanking the rug out from under us financially would be the best thing that could ever happen? Yet we weren't going to come to grips with who we were and what we were really about until we were fighting for our lives and extinction was a real possibility. This annual meeting ought to be part collective kick in the pants and part pep rally to say, “Come on now, we've got to quit being our own worst enemies!”

So what does this mean to someone from Iowa or Maine or Texas? How can they take the lessons we're learning in Kentucky and transfer them to their particular place and needs? Kentucky's lessons aren't geographically bound. As a field we lost track of who we were trying to serve. The shifting of the financial rug didn't really tell us we must chop programs and activities. What it told us, emphatically, is that we need to concentrate on doing the *right* things. This is a challenge the entire field faces, not just folks in certain regions of the country.

This is where our keynote speaker and Stanford University professor Sam Wineburg's book, *Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts*, can be a great guide. He says our work isn't just about *telling* history, it's about *teaching* history. It's about how we want to interact with our intended audiences. How do we want to see ourselves, and what is the real value that we bring to a particular need or situation? That's what each and every one of us in the history profession needs to do. We must stop and ponder, “What do I want to accomplish?”

For the Kentucky Historical Society, this opportunity is about learning. It's about helping people be engaged with history and putting learning opportunities in their hands. Before the recent financial shakeup we were fairly passive in the way we wanted people to interact with us. But look at Louisville's example once again. What really sets the tone is a focus on service. The city talks about how Louisville's citizens collectively make the difference, not just city government or certain individuals alone.

What about us in the history field? It's time we collectively begin asking our users, our visitors, our researchers, “What can we do for you? How can you participate in this learning environment?” We should not be dictating what that learning environment looks like and what we think people need to learn.

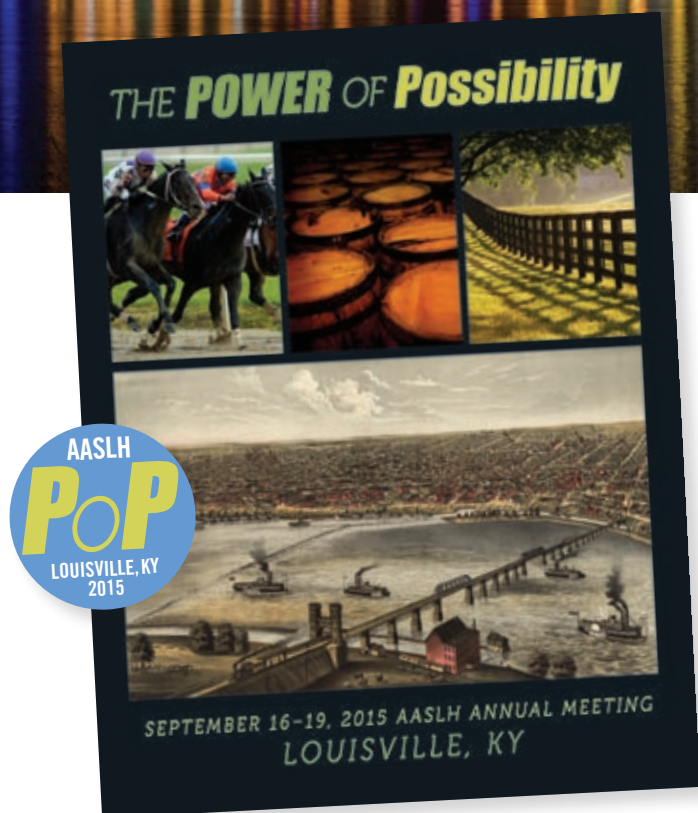
Most significantly, we have got to quit doing what we have often done—hope and wait for others to find us. Instead, we need to listen and to pay attention to the fundamental needs within our communities then figure out what history organizations, with our suite of assets and expertise, can do to help resolve them.

In a 2001 interview Sam Wineburg said, “We need to raise citizens who ask themselves, ‘Is this true? Who is saying so? What's the nature of the evidence?’ Taught this way, history is a training ground for democracy.” History could be poised to take its rightful place after all, but it will not come without its challenges.³

Several school systems nationwide are attempting, quite frankly, to dilute history by rewriting the AP courses to focus only on the positive points of our nation's history and omit the accounts of civil unrest. But of course civil unrest is how

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— HUSTIN QUINN, Mayor of Louisville, 1921–1925



our nation came about in the first place. This is where skills-based learning comes in, yet we've strayed from that. We deliver content, certainly, but teaching should not be about how you look up things in the stacks or how you write out notecards. Instead, it's about inquiry. How do we encourage people who want to better understand the news or the environment so they can ask the questions Wineburg raises? That's the skills-based process history research teaches. But as historical organizations, how do we get to the kinds of activities that allow this to naturally happen?

The real irony of the situation is that while certain school systems are saying we've got to contain this content or it's

going to get away from us, they also are acknowledging the power of history.

As Wendell Berry wrote in *The Art of the Commonplace: The Agrarian Essays*, "All good human work remembers its history." Our challenge is to refocus these school systems from trying to control history's content to instead seeing the great advantage of a next generation for which history has sparked curiosity and encouraged an inquisitive nature, one enhanced by the skills embedded in the historical process.⁴

Wineburg is right. *That* is the core of American democracy, and yet we're totally missing the point. We're afraid of tackling the controversial—and potentially polarizing—conversations.

How do we overcome this? We can start by creating dialogue around good information and solid research and by informing people. These conversations are tough, but they lead to constructive change. Research over the last fifteen to twenty years makes it clear that people trust museums when it comes to providing what they should know about the past. There's this unbelievable high ground just sitting there for the taking, yet many of us continue to play it safe. We're still reeling from budget cuts, and all the while we're often deaf to opportunity pounding on our doors.

The 2015 Louisville AASLH annual meeting speakers will address issues and opportunities with both candor and conviction. After all, Professor Wineburg challenged the status quo of history education with his award-winning book, and author and farmer Wendell Berry is described by the *New York Times* as "the prophet of rural America." And Awards Banquet speaker, Carol Kammen, wound up writing the "On Doing Local History" column after sending



Rich Hoyer

an irate letter” (her words) challenging AASLH to include more history in *History News*.

Possibilities come in all shapes and sizes, and there is not a segment of our field that won’t be directly impacted by this broader conversation that’s taking place. As Carol Kammen writes in her introduction of *Zen and the Art of Local History*, “People come to local history from many different positions. Some just liked history, some wanted to understand place. Others came from an interest in architectural preservation, genealogy, or civic engagement—from other hobbies or pursuits. Some become interested because of a connection with community. There is no single path into local history.” Hopefully you will find someone or something that resonates with you and you’ll be inspired by that insight.⁵

That’s part of what the History Relevance Campaign is addressing, which is something we’ll discuss at the conference, as well. We’re developing a common vocabulary that helps us explain who and what we are. We’re also developing a common voice that tells people history is not just a body of knowledge, but that there is value to it for them personally, for their community, and for the future. If you would like to know more, please check out www.historyrelevance.com.

In many respects, our role really hasn’t changed that much over the years. It’s just that we no longer can be so rooted in old behaviors that we lose sight of who we’re trying to serve. Museums have always been places that gathered artifacts and information, and we talked about how to make it all accessible for people to use and make knowledge from. No, our roles have not really changed that much. But our audiences have changed: from the way they want to use what we provide them and the way they want to make meaning out of

things, to how they want us to interact with them. So rather than existing in the traditional realm and hoping that maybe if we keep doing what we’ve always done one of these needs will intersect with our audiences, we should disengage from all of that and figure out what the needs truly are and plant the flag there. That’s the Power of Possibility.

Kentucky is a great backdrop to explore how that is happening here and, in some cases, how it hasn’t. Once again we’re a microcosm for the field as a whole. None of us has a crystal ball, but we’re all learning important lessons and we’re having a greater impact collectively than ever before. We hope our colleagues will come and experience organizations of all shapes and sizes across the commonwealth and beyond that are working hard to help address the needs of our communities. We believe you will leave inspired and invigorated by the possibilities! ●



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¹ Quoted in *The News-Herald*, Franklin, Pennsylvania, 12 October 1926.

² Wendell Berry, “The Real Work,” <http://on.aaslh.org/BerryRealWork>.

³ Judy Lightfoot, review of *Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts*, <http://on.aaslh.org/LightfootWineburg>.

⁴ Wendell Berry, “Feminism, the Body, and the Machine,” in *The Achievement of Wendell Berry: The Hard History of Love*, by Fritz Oehlschlaeger (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2011), 13.

⁵ Carol Kammen and Bob Beatty, eds., *Zen and the Art of Local History* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014), xiii-xiv.