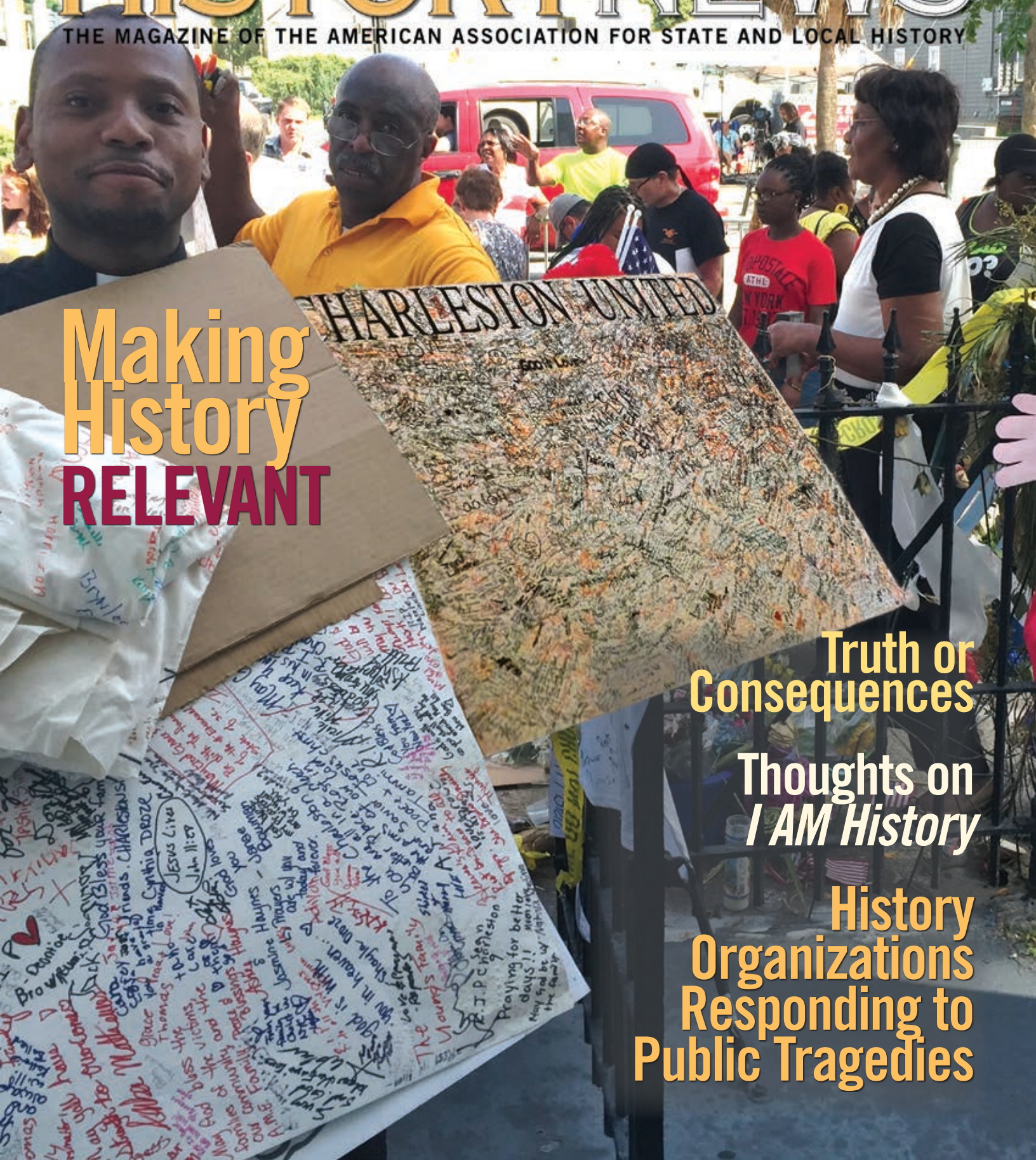


HISTORYNEWS

THE MAGAZINE OF THE AMERICAN ASSOCIATION FOR STATE AND LOCAL HISTORY



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TRUTH OR CONSEQUENCES

BY TIM GROVE

EDITOR'S NOTE:

The 2018 AASLH Annual Meeting conference theme *Truth or Consequences* emanates from today's headlines. The topic is not new for our history institutions, but its resonance seems more powerful today than at times in the past. AASLH invites you to come to Kansas City this September, where we will ask big questions, ponder our responsibilities, and learn from each other.

Cliveden, a historic house property in Philadelphia, is actively changing the stories it tells. Built as the country home of the Chews, one of Pennsylvania's largest slaveowning families, the property was an important battle site in the American Revolution.

While the site long focused its interpretation on the family's stories and the Battle of Germantown, the potential to tell a wider array of the property's rich history remained.

Deeper study of the family records in recent years has revealed new stories of enslaved people who lived and worked on the property. David Young, Cliveden's executive director, tells of a board meeting where slavery was the topic. One board member asked, "Why are we talking about slavery all of a sudden?" Family descendant John Chew spoke up and said, "If this is the truth, then we need to be the place that tells it." Since then, Cliveden has become a place that embraces its whole story. An introduction video to the site proclaims, "Cliveden is a place that tells the truth, that American history is difficult." On the face of it, telling the truth may sound easy. But, when it comes to history, what is truth?¹

Truth is the foundation for trust. If you want someone to trust you, you must earn that trust by being truthful. This goes for any person, organization, business, or group. The degree to which someone trusts you changes with the degree to which you tell the truth.

Museums and historic sites consistently rank among America's most trusted institutions in an age where trust in public institutions and leaders continues to erode and truth sometimes becomes murky. According to a 2018 poll, as a

source for information, history museums and sites are more trusted than the Internet, teachers, textbooks, and nonfiction books. One study showed that 80 percent of survey respondents ranked history museums as being trustworthy, higher than family members, eyewitnesses, college professors, and movies and TV. Another ranked museums highest on the trust scale compared with other public institutions.²

When you think about the various purveyors of history, you realize that museums and history sites share company with a range of history tellers. They each have a format for conveying facts about the past. All of them prioritize truth to various degrees. With limited time, classroom teachers and professors usually follow a more structured approach and often focus on hard facts and discussion of why events happened. Truth may be important, but context and nuance are often lacking. Parents and family members naturally talk about their memories of the past during the course of everyday life. Memories are very personal and can be shaped by any number of things. They are also fallible. Popular culture

**"The truth."
Dumbledore
sighed. "It is a
beautiful and
terrible thing, and
should therefore
be treated with
great caution."**

**—J.K. ROWLING,
*Harry Potter and the
Sorcerer's Stone***

competes in a revenue-driven market and usually goes for the dramatic, with story as the focus. Truth may not be a priority, especially if it gets in the way of a good story.

Journalist Peggy Noonan recently reflected about truth in the TV series *The Crown* and in the movie *The Post*. Both took dramatic license to make a good story just a bit better. Noonan wrote, “When people care enough about history to study and read it, it’s a small sin to lie and mislead in dramas. But when people get their history through entertainment, when they absorb the story of their times only through screens, then the tendency to fabricate is more damaging. Those who make movies and television dramas should start caring about this. It is wrong in an age of lies to add to their sum total. It’s not right. It will do harm.” Moviegoers and television watchers may not research the historical accuracy of a story they’ve just watched, but they are perceiving what they see to be a degree of truth. And that’s the consequence of straying from fact.³

HISTORY’S CHANGING TRUTHS

If we continue to tell the truth, history organizations will maintain trust. But what is truth when our work is based on interpretation of the historical evidence and interpretations change? How do people know what to believe? Then again, do our audiences understand how we arrive at our conclusions? Do they care? Should they? Of course!

Some of this boils down to a lack of understanding about the historical process. In *Who Owns History?*, historian Eric Foner writes, “The basic difference between what historians think of their task and what much of the broader public thinks the writing of history entails [is that] historians view the constant search for new perspectives as the lifeblood of historical understanding. Outside the academy, however, the act of rein-

terpretation is often viewed with suspicion, and ‘revisionist’ is invoked as a term of abuse.” He adds, “The most difficult truth for those outside the ranks of professional historians to accept is there often exists more than one legitimate way of recounting past events.”⁴

Truth is often stranger than fiction, as the saying goes, and definitely more complex and nuanced. History is not just what happened in the past. As historians know, truth comes from careful

analysis of evidence. What evidence backs up the story? We in the history field know that truth is based on an underlying complexity, on multiple perspectives and sources. It is our responsibility to help our audiences see that complexity and to understand how we reach our conclusions based on solid historical research.

THE NEED FOR TRANSPARENCY

This is why transparency is so important. Truth demands transparency and an explanation of how we arrived at our conclusions. In scholarly works, this includes the endnotes

and the bibliography. Exhibitions and programs don’t utilize those formats. But shouldn’t we still find ways to explain how we’ve arrived at our conclusions? Or better yet, encourage our visitors to look closely at the evidence and help them draw some of their own conclusions?

All writers know the maxim, “Show, don’t tell.” This creates more engaging writing. All too often, our history institutions only do the latter. Tours and exhibitions typically tell what our researchers have concluded. They don’t ask questions, offer contrasting perspectives, show conflicting evidence. They don’t challenge visitors to draw their own conclusions. This passive approach leaves out the very actions that attract many of us to history: the digging into historical sources. When we direct visitors to look at our sources and to ask questions, we draw them into the historical process. We not only make the learning more active, but we begin to teach the skill of critical thinking.

One of the values of history, as outlined in the History Relevance initiative’s “Value of History” statement, is critical thinking: History teaches critical twenty-first-century skills and independent thinking. “The practice of history teaches research, judgment of the accuracy and reliability of sources, validation of facts, awareness of multiple perspectives and biases, analysis of conflicting evidence, sequencing to discern causes, synthesis to present a coherent interpretation, clear and persuasive written and oral communication, and other skills that have been identified as critical to a successful and productive life in the twenty-first century.”⁵

Years ago I worked on the National Lewis and Clark Bicentennial Exhibition that traveled the nation. One of the development team’s challenges was how to approach the story of Sacagawea, the young Indian woman who accompanied the explorers on their expedition. Her story is well known—or at least people think they know her. Visitors expected to see her story in the exhibition. (After all, an artist’s guess of her likeness is currently on a U.S. dollar coin.) But, the truth is that very little historical evidence exists about her. Her real story is murky. Though she is mentioned various times in the explorers’ journals, she didn’t serve as a guide to the explorers (a common misconception); two tribes claim her heritage. In the end, we acknowledged the lack of historical evidence and presented a variety of source materials—a baptismal certificate, various letters, oral tradition. We challenged visitors to draw their own conclusions about Sacagawea and posited questions to guide them. Visitors could then compare their conclusions with our historian’s conclusions. We wanted visitors to understand the need to look critically at a story they thought they knew.

The more we challenge preconceived ideas, the more people will question our motives and our sources. At some point our audiences will ask themselves, “Can I trust the teller?” With family history, it may be a case of blind trust: we believe Grandma is telling the truth; we don’t have a reason to question Dad’s recollections. With a history institution, trust may or may not be as easily earned. This questioning is vital to society. Stanford professor Sam Wineburg argues that “We need to raise citizens who ask themselves, ‘Is this true? Who is saying so? What’s the nature of the evidence?’” Taught in this way, he says, “History is a training ground for democracy.”⁶

A Few Good Men

Lt. Daniel Kaffee
(Tom Cruise),

“I want the
truth!”

Col. Nathan R. Jessop
(Jack Nicholson),

“You can’t
handle the
truth!”

The history process shouldn't be a mystery; it's a quest for truth. We need to include the public in this quest. When we don't have all of the answers, which is most of the time, we need to acknowledge it. In *Telling the Truth about History*, historians Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt, and Margaret Jacob write, "If the public is perplexed about the meaning of history and how it is interpreted, then historians are at least partly to blame. It is time historians took responsibility for explaining what we do, how we do it, and why it is worth doing." Explaining the process needs to be intentional and has costs. In exhibitions, for example, this requires setting aside precious real estate. It may mean you will not have room to tell all of the content you wanted to. But, in the end, isn't it worth it to educate people about critical thinking?⁷

TELLING THE WHOLE STORY

Another side to truth is in what's not told. Our visitors may not think about the fact that we make decisions all the time about what stories to tell. Whose story gets told and whose story doesn't? Do we share with our public how we decided to tell the stories we tell? What is the whole story?

For many years, visitors to historic plantations in the South did not hear much about the enslaved communities who lived and worked on them. In Colonial Williamsburg, one of America's premier history destinations, the discussion of African American history has evolved over the years. In the eighteenth century, at least half of the city's residents were people of color, many of them enslaved. Yet in the organization's early years, historical interpretation focused almost exclusively on its white story. Today, visitors hear multiple perspectives and are challenged to put themselves into the shoes of many types of historic characters. They hear enslaved characters talking about hard decisions they confront related to the desire for freedom. The concept of freedom becomes richer and more meaningful with the added context.

There are various reasons why stories have not been told in the past: sometimes it is intentional, sometimes it's due to lack of evidence, and sometimes we simply do not know. Telling the truth might mean acknowledging the stories that weren't told and explaining why.

In 2004, the National Lewis and Clark Bicentennial Exhibition took a vastly different interpretive approach to the expedition than in previous exhibitions. The expedition's story had usually been told in the context of the natural world. The explorers were once identified as the first people to see a grand world of new animals and plants as they traversed an exotic, unpeopled landscape. The bicentennial exhibition instead examined the cultural landscape. Working with tribal advisors, the development team attempted to show various tribal perspectives and the vast trade networks Lewis and Clark traversed. The team worked to present a view from the river and from the riverbank. Lewis and Clark made many assumptions based on the lens through which they looked. Their assumptions were often wrong. It is a universal truth that we all make assumptions and get it wrong at times. It was a step closer to the whole truth.

Staff members at Monticello, Thomas Jefferson's home in Virginia, are making changes in the stories they tell as they restore the site's slavery landscape. The man who wrote "all

men are created equal" in the Declaration of Independence held hundreds of people in bondage over his lifetime. For many years, Monticello has offered dedicated tours about the plantation's enslaved population. But the organization made national news recently when it announced its intentions to restore one of the quarters of Sally Hemings, an enslaved woman with whom Jefferson fathered at least six children. The restoration allows staff to more completely tell this complex story. This is an example of building on truths. If Monticello chose to ignore recent scholarship, it would simply not be telling the whole story.

CHALLENGES TO TRUTH

Clearly, a part of the past can include baggage. Historian John Fea writes that the past can shame us. "The story of human history is filled with accounts of slavery, violence, scientific backwardness, injustice, genocide, racism, and other dark episodes that might make us embarrassed to be part of the human race. If our fellow human beings can engage in such sad, wrong, or disgraceful acts, then what is stopping us from doing the same?" As part of our job, public historians need to help the public navigate the complex reactions that come with telling and processing truth. Fea writes of a certain humility that comes with studying the past. History done well

helps people to be empathetic with people from the past, an attempt to step into their shoes and try to look at the world as they did. According to historian John Lewis Gaddis, "Getting into other people's minds requires that your own mind be open to their impressions—their hopes and fears, their beliefs and dreams, their sense of right and wrong, their perceptions of the world and where they fit within it."⁸

As we attempt to understand another person's world, we gain empathy for them. Empathy, of course, is not the same as sympathy. Sympathy is feeling compassion or sadness for someone's hardship. Empathy is an understanding of a person's motivations for a decision or action—not necessarily an agreement with their motivations. It is striving to understand their point of view.

Part of the complexity of the past is the multiple ways to look at a person or event. By widening perspective, we can help encourage visitors to stretch their thinking. As Appleby, Hunt, and Jacob write, "Even in a democracy, history involves power and exclusion, for any history is always someone's history, told by that someone from their partial point of view.... The effort to establish historical truths itself fosters civility. Since no one can be certain that his or her explanations are definitely right, everyone must listen to others. All human histories are provisional; none will have the last word." We start to gain empathy when other perspectives make sense to us and we can understand why someone acted in a certain way.⁹

"Whoever is careless with the truth in small matters cannot be trusted with important matters."

—ALBERT EINSTEIN

CONSEQUENCES OF NOT TELLING THE TRUTH

Are there consequences to avoiding the complexity of the past? What do they look like? How is society impacted when we fail to show multiple perspectives and the gray areas of history? What are specific challenges to showing complexity? Are there costs?

A risk of telling the truth is that some truth is ugly and may not be something easy to hear. But if education is at the core of our mission, then we must find ways to speak about tough topics in ways that are thought-provoking but not offensive or condescending.

In the new National Museum of African American History and Culture, an exhibition panel reads: “Five hundred years ago a new form of slavery transformed Africa, Europe, and the Americas. For the first time people saw other human beings as commodities—things to be bought, sold, and exploited to make enormous profits. This system changed the world.” Just to the right of this text is a lone quote: “We’ve got to tell the unvarnished truth”—John Hope Franklin. The museum’s founding director, Lonnie Bunch, often recalls Franklin’s full quote: “If you tell the unvarnished truth, people will be changed.”

The truth is that humanity has potential for good and bad. If a historian’s job is to ask questions and to uncover truth, then the questions we ask must include why. Historian Tony Judt writes, “The historian’s task is not to disrupt for the sake of it, but to tell what is almost always an uncomfortable story and explain why the discomfort is part of the truth we need to live well and live properly.” He

argues, “A well-organized society is one in which we know the truth about ourselves collectively, not one in which we tell pleasant lies about ourselves.” Museum exhibitions in the future will most likely interpret difficult recent events that horrified our nation. They will look at the event, the impact on the community, the response, and ponder the question of why.

We cannot avoid asking why. Museums of the Holocaust, of civil rights, and of slavery are willing to ask the tough questions.¹⁰

So, what are the consequences of **not** telling the truth? Several come to mind:

- *Trust can erode.* An institution can’t assume that just because it enjoys a great deal of trust from the public in a given time, this trust will remain high. The trust relationship, based on truth, must be maintained and nurtured.
- *History becomes one dimensional.* The richness and complexity is lost along with the nuances that provide insight into humanity’s motives and secrets. The diversity of life is stifled.
- *Society is dumbed down.* By only presenting an easy story, the public is not encouraged to think critically and to ask hard questions. Society fails to understand connections between past and present and the possibilities to end dan-

gerous established thought patterns. Both the accomplishments and failures of the past must be studied.

- *The ugliness of the past is ignored.* When this happens, society loses out and fails to have an understanding of how it got to the present point.
- *Community ties fray.* An imbalance of trust results if there is a perception that some communities receive different treatment than others, that some community stories are more important than others.

It’s a given that our history institutions must tell the truth. But the nature of that truth is up to us. As educational institutions, our goal is to help the public better understand

the past and learn its lessons. “The making of history is a dynamic process,” writes Sam Wineburg. “What happened in the past wasn’t fated or meant to be. It occurred because human actors shaped their destinies by the choices they made, just as people today shape their futures by the choices they make.”¹¹

Our responsibility to truth extends beyond the obvious. If we want history to be relevant, we must tell the whole story in all its complexity (to the degree that we can), ask tough questions of the past, and help the public understand why we reach the conclusions we do. And teach some empathy along the way. By teaching people to take a closer, critical look, we are contributing to the health of our democratic society. ●

“You shall know the truth and the truth will set you free.”

—JESUS, *John 8:32*

“In a democracy, history thrives on a passion for knowing the truth.”

—*Telling the Truth about History*



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In addition to serving as the chair of the 2018 AASLH Program Committee, Tim is also author of *A Grizzly in the Mail and Other Adventures in American History*, and co-author of *The Museum Educator’s Manual*. He also originated and wrote the “History Bytes” column in *History News*. He can be reached at authortimgrove@gmail.com.

¹ Email to the author from David Young, January 18, 2018.

² AASLH 2018 broader population sampling, conducted by Wilkening Consulting; Bob Beatty, *An American Association for State and Local History Guide to Making Public History* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017), 227.

³ Peggy Noonan, “The Lies of *The Crown* and *The Post*,” *Wall Street Journal*, December 28, 2017.

⁴ Eric Foner, *Who Owns History? Rethinking the Past in a Changing World* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2002), xvi-xvii.

⁵ See historyrelevance.com/value-history-statement/.

⁶ Beatty, 112.

⁷ Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt, Margaret Jacob, *Telling the Truth about History* (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 1995), 9.

⁸ John Fea, *Why Study History?* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013), 61; John Lewis Gaddis, *The Landscape of History: How Historians Map the Past* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 124.

⁹ Appleby, et al., 10.

¹⁰ Tony Judt, “Postwar: An Interview with Tony Judt,” *Historically Speaking: The Bulletin of the Historical Society*, VII, no. 3 (January/February 2006).

¹¹ Sam Wineburg, *Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001), 160-61.