

## The Gift of History

By Dennis A. O'Toole

**H**istory is an account of things said and done in the past. In this sense, each of us seeks to fashion and is part of a history—an account of where we come from, who we are, and how we got to be that way.

Communities, likewise, have a history. So, too, do nations, families, and human groups of every sort. In this sense, there is not one history, but many.

Historical accounts serve us in many ways. They can inspire us with stories of exemplary lives or caution us with tales of human folly and wickedness. Accounts of the past can inform and educate us by providing contexts and perspectives that allow us to make thoughtful decisions about the future. And histories have the power to delight and enrich us, enlarging and intensifying the experience of being alive.



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History is also a discipline, one that requires attention to the evidence, warns of the partiality of all accounts of the past—including our own—and offers methods for determining which are most tenable.

### ■ What History Organizations Give Us

History organizations help preserve, tell, and engage us in the stories of the past. All accounts of the past derive from memory and from the traditions, documents, images, artifacts, buildings, monuments, landscapes, and ruins that have survived. Since memory is fallible, and because all things eventually perish, preserving these traces of the past and providing access to them is vital to peoples' ability to experience history's gifts.

History organizations, in partnership with their communities, lead in preserving, researching, presenting, and interpreting the evidence of the past. By helping communities collect and conserve history's sources, and by joining with the public to study them and consider and debate their meaning, history institutions connect the people, thoughts, and events of yesterday with the active memories and abiding interests of people today.

By joining the present to the past through exhibitions, publications, public programming, aid to genealogists, websites, restorations, telecasts, conferences, school visits, interpretations, social media, and the like, history institutions help create the gift of history for present and future generations. They provide individuals of each generation a chance to search for their own answers, forge their own meanings, and decide on the significance of people and events of the past. In the process, they serve as places of individual learning and forums of civic engagement.

By connecting people with the past, history organizations make their communities healthier, and more

attractive places to live, work, and visit. They are themselves travel destinations, employers, purchasers of goods and services, and recipients of gifts and grants. Sometimes on a small scale, sometimes with much greater impact, history organizations are economic engines in their towns, cities, and regions.

History organizations, in these ways, make history a living presence in the lives of Americans and American communities. When building and conserving collections becomes a joint venture with the public; when access is open and portals are many; when individuals and groups craft and immerse themselves in narratives of the past; and when they raise and debate questions of significance, meaning, and truth in their welcoming, neutral settings, then history organizations foster democracy and nurture freedom.

### ■ The State of History and History Organizations Today

The hundreds of thousands of volunteers and tens of thousands of paid professionals who do the work of the nation's history organizations today work for institutions that enjoy a high degree of trustworthiness, patronage, and support from the public. This may be their most important asset. Yet it is also true that a variety of pressures are creating challenges and opportunities for history organizations of perhaps unprecedented magnitudes.

In *The Presence of the Past: Popular Uses of History in American Life* (1998), historians Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen present a clear picture of how Americans engage with the past and, incidentally, how they view the nation's history organizations. Working with the transcripts of in-depth interviews with 1,500 Americans, the authors report that the great majority of Americans—over 90 percent of the sample—engage regularly in activities that connect them with the past. They attend family reunions, take photographs and

videos to preserve memory, practice hobbies, and work on collections dealing with the past. The authors asked those surveyed when they feel most connected with the past. Second only to gatherings with their families, they cited visits to museums and historic sites most often as the situation that makes them feel most in touch with history.

When asked what sources of their knowledge of the past they most trust, Americans put museums and historic sites first—ahead of grandparents, eyewitnesses, college professors, history books, movies, television programming, and high school history classes. America's history organizations

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are ranked by the public as the most trustworthy source of historical knowledge available to them.

These findings, now more than a decade old, have since been corroborated repeatedly. For instance, in the Institute of Museum and Library Services's *InterConnections: A National Study of Users and Potential Users of Online Information* (2008), visitors to museums rated museums along with libraries as the most credible sources of information available to them in a society that is awash in information, misinformation, and opinion.

The high regard in which museums are held is reflected further in studies that have been done of the popularity and reach of museums. In 2009, the American Association of Museums published its triennial survey and report on the state of U.S. museums, *Museum Financial Information 2009*. Among its numerous, well substantiated findings are these: there are more museums in the U.S. than there are McDonald's restaurants or Starbucks cafes; Americans volunteer nearly one million hours a week of their time to museums; museums contributed approximately \$20.7 billion to the American economy in 2008; and, based on AAM estimates, American museums receive more than 850 million visits a year, more than all professional sporting events and theme parks combined.

The prevalence of history in American popular culture—its wars, migrations, mysteries, heroes, catastrophes—provides further evidence that Americans have a real if imperfect grasp of their nation's past. The media, television, the Internet, Hollywood, and publishers are all hungry for content. History, they seem to believe, has it.

Still, there are worrisome signs and jarring realities confronting those who work every day to preserve, present, and interpret the past for Americans and their communities at history organizations. Consider these portents and realities.

Because education reforms such as the No Child Left Behind Act left history out of its requirements, the nation's history museums, historic house museums, and sites experienced stagnant or declining school attendance during the first decade of the twenty-first century, driving admissions and other earned income down. The recession that began in the last quarter of 2007 and the collapse of the financial markets that followed did harm to endowments and annual giving. Organizations dependent upon appropriations from local, state, or national governments



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saw support from these sources severely cut or eliminated. Operating funds shrank, capital projects were put on hold, school group visits dwindled. Doing more with less has become the new normal.

Digital technologies, now pervasive in homes, offices, and public spaces of every kind, pose another set of opportunities and challenges for history organizations. They afford history professionals and volunteers tools that can make collections, exhibitions, programs, and staffs accessible and interactive to degrees only dreamed of before. Some history organizations are learning how to wed digital technologies with other, more traditional means to carry out their mission of serving as exchanges for and connectors of people with the past. Remote visits to museums are ballooning. But are these technologically enhanced visits as

effective as traditional encounters in fulfilling the core mission of history organizations? And how best do we measure effectiveness?

Demographic trends are another force changing American communities and the history organizations that serve them. The Baby Boom generation is entering its retirement years; minorities are on the way to becoming the majority; couples working full-time steadily increase as a proportion of households; and women are completing college in great numbers and higher percentages than men, are having fewer children, and increasingly the primary earners in their households. These trends are making and will continue to make big changes in the makeup of museums' audiences, workforces, collections, and programs.

History organizations, along with museums of every sort, have long viewed young audiences as a key to



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their future success. From them must come future patrons, volunteers, and supporters, as well as the voters and civic leaders of tomorrow. Most young people today share with their elders a feeble understanding of American history. This situation is worsening. In the first decade of the twenty-first century, a powerful reform movement focused narrowly on testing for proficiency in reading and math with the result that history, science, and the arts were pushed farther to the periphery of the curricula of the nation's public schools.

What young people do possess in abundance, however, is a native ease with the digital, virtual world around them. They seek to inform and entertain themselves almost entirely via the Internet, with its proliferating sources, images, sites, and self-anointed authorities. Whether and how history organizations continue to find and be found by young people is a pivotal question for the future.

## ■ The Future of the Past

Each history organization faces its own particular set of circumstances and has its own distinctive mix of assets to work with as it goes about forging its future. Chief among these assets is the fact that a great majority of Americans regularly seek ways to engage with the past and find history organizations to be the most credible of all purveyors of history available to them. They are the most trusted keepers and tellers of the American story. This trust must be nurtured and built upon if history institutions are to thrive and their communities are to enjoy history's gifts in the years ahead.

People want, and communities need, what history organizations can give them: Real, tangible traces from the past and the human, flesh-and-blood stories they conjure and provoke; Accessible, welcoming places where families, friends, and strangers find food for thought, ideas to contend with, and moments of amusement and delight; Neutral forums where questions of significance, meaning, and truth can be raised, debated, and taken to heart by any who choose to engage; and A setting and a source where teachers and students can make direct, tangible contact with the American past.

If history organizations can meet these wants and needs, they will be healthy and their communities will be healthy with them. Knowing what those wants and needs in fact are is critical to success. Being able to articulate and measure the impact of means chosen to serve them is no less so. With informed, service-minded leadership, a compelling vision of history's value, a flair for forming and keeping strategic partnerships, and a commitment to learning and adjusting through trial and error, America's history organizations can be leaders in generating a new flowering of history in the land.

**Dennis A. O'Toole is President and Co-Founder of Cañada Alamosa Institute, Monticello, New Mexico. He can be reached at [dotoole@attglobal.net](mailto:dotoole@attglobal.net).**

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