

2014 NJ History and Historic Preservation Conference,  
June 5, 2014

Closing plenary address by John W. Durel, Ph.D.

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What a GREAT day we've had, 400 of us coming together to learn from one another about the important work that we do in historic preservation and public history.

How many of you think that the work you do is important?

If you did not raise your hand, see me afterwards for a little career counseling.

Here's the bad news: most people don't think that what you do is important.

They may think it's nice that you do it, but they don't think it is very important.

## SLIDE 1

### What If There Were No History?



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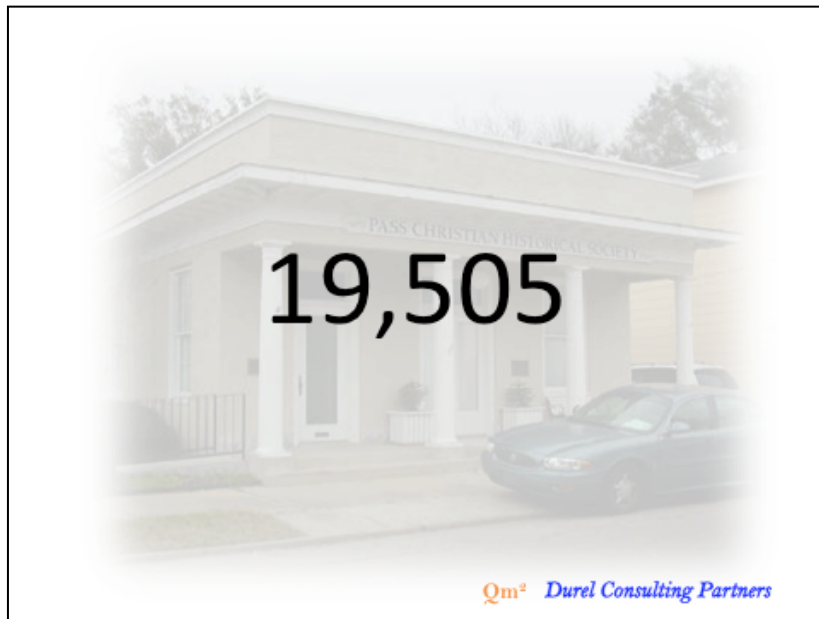
This is a photo of the Pass Christian Historical Society – before and after Hurricane Katrina.

2005 – My experience with Katrina – Pass Christian

A typical local history organization: volunteers save a building, use it to save items and papers of local interest, use it to tell the story of a community. This happens all across our nation.

Let's think about this question. What would be lost if volunteers didn't do this work? What would it be like to live in a community with no history.

## SLIDE 2



19,505 = official estimate from IMLS = history organizations that serve the public

- historical societies
- historic preservation organizations
- history museums
- historic sites/properties

55% of total of 35,144 museums

**Average of six in every county in the US**

History is everywhere, and yet it is largely invisible

Most people take history for granted

Engaging with history is an occasional past time

**Our challenge: How do we make our work visible?**

## SLIDE 3

### From Nice to Necessary

#### *Why is history*

*– both knowledge of the past and the practice of preserving, researching and interpreting evidence of the past –*

*necessary?*

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There is nothing wrong with being a pleasant pastime – but it's not enough

Anita and I work not only with leaders of history organizations, but also art museums, children's museums, science centers – all museum disciplines

About 6 years ago we first heard science and children's museum leaders begin to use the phrase "From Nice to Necessary."

We also noticed that use of the acronym STEM was becoming common. Ask: who can tell us what STEM means?

Increasingly STEM education is seen as necessary for jobs, innovation, economic development

And children's museums have begun to cite research about the importance of play for early childhood development.

Increasingly people recognize that early childhood is a critical time in our development, and that it is necessary to provide children with opportunities to be curious, creative, imaginative, to play with others, to master simple skills.

Over the past five years both science centers and children's museums have made significant strides to move FROM NICE TO NECESSARY

What about history? Is history necessary?

History is marginalized in our country. Children are not expected to learn it in schools, community leaders rarely look to it to inform today's decisions, and national leaders select and distort facts to support their positions. Sure, some people visit historic sites and history museums; and many more watch history-based movies. For them, engagement in history seems to be an occasional pleasant pastime, not something especially relevant to their lives.

In contrast, those of us who are active in the practice of history – whether as paid professionals or volunteers – believe that history is central to our lives, and that it ought to play a greater role in the lives of our communities and nation.

**Our challenge is not only to make our work visible, but also to demonstrate its relevance.**

## SLIDE 4

# HISTORY RELEVANCE CAMPAIGN

*A catalyst for discovering,  
demonstrating, and promulgating the  
relevance of history for individuals,  
communities, and the nation.*

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One of the things I do is to run the Seminar for Historical Administration, which meets every November for three weeks in Indianapolis.

In 2012 I was at dinner with several students and faculty members, and we started to talk about how science centers and children's museums were making the shift from nice to necessary, and we in the history field were not. That conversation was the genesis of what has become known as the History Relevance Campaign.

Early organizers included me, Tim Grove, National Air and Space Museum; Kent Whitworth, Kentucky Historical Society; Kim Fortney, National History Day; and Conny Graft, evaluation consultant and CW. We decided to start hosting conversations at various professional meetings, posing questions about of what makes history relevant today, and how we can change the

public's perception that history is nice to have, but not really essential.

We started to broaden the conversation in early 2013 by holding impromptu sessions at various professional meetings, asking others their thoughts. We had gatherings at AAM advocacy day in February; at the NCPH conference in Ottawa in March; at the AAM meeting in Baltimore in May; at National History Day in June; at the AASLH meeting in Birmingham in September; at the AHA meeting in DC in January, 2014; and most recently at the NCPH meeting in March.

We have broadened the core group of organizers to include John Dichtl, NCPH; Jan Gallimore, Idaho Historical Society; Lynne Ireland, Nebraska Historical Society; Terry Davis, AASLH; and Max VanBalgoooy, a consultant and formerly of NTHP.

The History Relevance Campaign (HRC) is an evolving entity. We didn't know what we were getting into when we started out. So this is a report on our current status, and a continuation of the discussion.

To be clear:

We do not conceive of ourselves as an organization. We have no intention of becoming one. We have no official affiliation, although both AASLH and NCPH have a strong interest in what we are trying to do. Rather, we see ourselves as becoming a network of individuals who are committed to public history, to seeing history play a greater role in our educational system, in our communities, in our nation, and in the lives of our fellow citizens. We see this network serving as a catalyst, working


through established history organizations, to help the history field make the move from nice to necessary.

We now have close to 200 people who have expressed interest in this work and have joined the LinkedIn group we set up; I hope that you will join as well. More about that later.

First I want to share our thinking about what makes history relevant today. We have decided to focus on SIX WAYS THAT HISTORY IS RELEVANT TODAY

## SLIDE 6 IDENTITY

Discover  
personal  
identity in an  
*intercultural*  
world



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Pictures of recent Cambodian immigrants, 19<sup>th</sup> century east European immigrant, Tuskegee Airmen

Through history people learn about who they are. Through the stories of their family they create a system of personal values



that guide their approach to life and relationships with others. They also learn the stories that have made us a nation, as well as stories of their own communities, and where they fit in the larger narrative.

The story of the United States is made up of many peoples who have come together over centuries to share a common destiny. Each group has its own stories, which become part of the national story.


Sometimes our stories are contested, reflecting the challenges of so many people coming together. These stories can motivate and empower people to have a better understanding of and respect for the perspectives of others, increased empathy, and a desire for continued knowledge as a basis for personal decision making.

History organizations over the past two decades have become very good at incorporating multiple stories in our collections and exhibits. Some history organizations have become effective in talking about the contested stories, and facilitating greater understanding among different groups.

Note that I use the word “intercultural” instead of “multicultural.” Doudou Diene – International Coalition of Sites of Conscience

## SLIDE 6 - CRITICAL SKILLS

Learn and  
practice  
critical 21st  
century  
skills



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This is where teachers come in: K-12, universities

Images from National History Day

The practice of history teaches research, judgment of the accuracy and reliability of sources, awareness of multiple perspectives and biases, analysis of conflicting evidence, sequencing to discern causes, synthesis to present a coherent interpretation, and clear and persuasive written and oral communication. All of these skills have been identified as critical to success in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

*Youth learn to think critically about complex societal issues through the practice of history. While STEM education is needed for solving future technological problems, history education prepares youth to address societal issues.*

The practice of history involves research of historical documents, artifacts and places, thinking critically about the evidence: (Is it authentic? Whose point of view does it represent? What's missing?) The next step is to craft an interpretation based on the evidence, being aware of one's own intentions. Finally the interpretation must be communicated clearly and persuasively. These skills are increasingly important for success in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

## SLIDE 7 – VITAL COMMUNITIES

Create vital,  
human  
communities



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Image from the National Trust for Historic Preservation.

No place really becomes a community until it is wrapped in human memory: family stories, tribal traditions, civic commemorations. In a word, no place is a community until it has some history. A place without history is simply a financial transaction. I give you money, you build me a house. I go

shopping in your store. In spite of the language of developers, who call their residential developments communities, and their malls “town centers”, without history these places are not communities.

A community needs stories, traditions, memories, memorials.

It is this sense of place that connects people, whether newcomers or life timers, to a particular place. This sense of place enables us to reach across generations, and can unite different cultural groups.

## SLIDE 8 - FIND SOLUTIONS

Use history to  
inform  
solutions to  
today's  
problems



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*By bringing history into discussions about contemporary issues, we can better understand the origins of and multiple perspectives on the challenges facing our communities and nation. This knowledge can clarify misperceptions, reveal*

*complexities, temper volatile viewpoints, open people to new possibilities, and potentially lead to more effective solutions.*

At the heart of democracy is the practice of individuals coming together to express views and take action. From the first Continental Congress to town meetings today, our democracy thrives when citizens exercise their rights to gather and speak freely. However, today we live in an increasingly partitioned world, divided and subdivided by race, class, gender, geography, religion, and a thousand other cultural variables. The multiplicity of media enables us to hear only what we want to hear and see only what we want to see. This fragmentation threatens our democracy.

## SLIDE 9 LEADERSHIP

Inspire  
future local  
and global  
leaders



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*History provides our future leaders with role models for facing the challenges of their time.*

It may be a parent, grandparent, or distant ancestor, a local or national hero, someone famous or someone little known. Their stories teach us how they met the challenges of their day, which can give young people the inspiration and courage to take action to confront the challenges of our time.

## SLIDE 10 LEGACY

Leave a  
legacy for  
future  
generations



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*The preservation of our history preserves democracy for future generations, giving them a necessary foundation upon which to build.*

Without the historic documents, artifacts and places that hold the stories of our nation, states, communities, and families future citizens will have no grounding in what it means to be an American.

## SLIDE 11

### GET INVOLVED

1. Branding/Strategic Communications Plan
  - Strategic messages, examples, media
2. Framework for Action
  - Governor's initiative
3. Pilot project to demonstrate relevance
  - Pew Center, Animating Democracy
4. Clearing house for evidence of relevance
  - Program evaluations
5. Network: get involved
  - LinkedIn Group

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## SLIDE 12

### GET INVOLVED

Developing History Leaders @ the  
Seminar for Historic Administration

Qm2 Executive Director Roundtables

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SLIDE 13

If you think your work is important, how will you to answer these questions?

What if there were no history?

Is history crucially important to our future, or simply a pleasant pastime?

Is our work necessary?