

America Historical Association Annual Meeting 2023

Roundtable: Doing Accessible Digital History

Access Copy of Remarks

Also available at bit.ly/NB-AccessCopy

Abstract

Belolan will advocate for and discuss how to historicize disabled people in American history when doing any accessibility and inclusion work in history settings. Technical tools for accessibility and inclusion should be informed by the long history of inclusion and exclusion of disabled people in addition to the modern legal and moral reasons for considering disabled people in public- and academic-facing work we do as historians.

Presenter

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Remarks

Thank you for inviting me to be a part of this conversation and for all of you for being here today. Over the past few years, I have led or have been a part of workshops that focus on basic skill-building related to making cultural heritage settings more accessible for disabled people. I am going to talk a bit about how I use the history of disability—specifically, the visibility of disabled people in early America—to encourage people to make cultural heritage settings accessible for disabled people today. I usually talk to professional groups in the history field, broadly defined, such as those who work in historic preservation or small museums.

I usually focus on the basics. Some examples:

requiring people use microphones when presenting in settings like this one for people who might be deaf or hard of hearing

providing copies (often called access copies) of and/or links to remarks for people who might process presentations more effectively by following along or reviewing notes later

encouraging presenters to describe images or slides they might be using in full for anyone who might be blind or have low vision

insisting that conferences or other gatherings provide accessibility information such the number of steps up to a building, whether masking is required, etc.

putting the burden on yourself and not disabled people to provide or start a conversation about access

Of course, what you probably notice is that these simple accessibility measures benefit everyone, not just disabled people.

But, I don't identify as disabled. So, how did I get into this business?

My research in disability history

My work with small museums

First, my research. I would be happy to talk about the journey to the topic, but for the sake of brevity right now, I'll just tell you that my research focuses on the material and visual culture of disability in early America. I study things like wheelchairs and crutches (like this one) to get at the lived experience of disability before the mid-nineteenth century. When I was a grad student, I started presenting my research at conferences where I learned about disability justice and ways to use history to promote change today (in this case, to promote access and inclusion for disabled people).

Second, my work with small museums. As I was building my research and publication repertoire, I was working as a graduate assistant for the Museum Studies program at the University of Delaware. In that capacity, I was teaching and coordinating workshops that taught the basics about a variety of small museum topics from collections storage to podcasting. So, in a small museum context with limited resources, this might mean taking collections artifacts out of basements and putting them on the ground floor

on a shelf. I got pretty good at facilitating this sort of professional development (and still do that as part of my job).

I realized that the small museum community I was serving with these collections management workshops, for example, could really benefit from these new access-related skills I was learning at disability history conferences. So I started talking to these groups about access and inclusion. I felt a little out of my depth, but it turns out this was new info for a lot of folks. And that's when one workshop or talk started leading to another, and I started framing these workshops and talks in such a way that I thought would help these groups wrap their minds around the work: preservation and access for small museums and historic sites. Usually means providing access to collections for research. A historic house for a tour. But I wanted to make sure people thought about access in terms of disability by promoting the adoption of simple access tactics I mentioned a few minutes ago. In short, this was a logical way to integrate accessibility for disabled people into an existing museum framework (preservation and access).

If everyone embraced access and inclusion, we wouldn't be here today. I realized explaining the historical roots of WHY this access and inclusion was necessary and why the advocacy itself was necessary would be helpful. I talk about the Americans with Disabilities Act (1990), but I also talk about disability in early America—when disabled people were largely visible and well-integrated into everyday life-- but also in the 19th and 20th centuries when people were more likely to marginalize disabled people. In the 19th and 20th centuries, people restricted immigration to the US based on disability; they put people in institutions because of disability; they separated children in school settings due to disability. And more. This more recent history of marginalization has affected the way we think about disability so much today that there is an entire project by an activist named Alice Wong called the Disability Visibility project: <https://disabilityvisibilityproject.com/book/>. Check out the reading suggestions I have in the link on this handout to learn more from the historians and advocates who specialize in this history.

Another tactic I use in workshops is to bring in historical disability-related artifacts and photographs I collect. Perhaps my favorite artifact to talk about is this particular crutch but also crutches in general. As access tools, they

mean something different for everyone. Which I think is a useful thing to keep in mind in our contemporary context too.

For example, I have written about a man name James Logan who identified as a “cripple” after a fall in the early eighteenth century. He wrote a lot about being “confined to crutches.”¹ But when you consider other people who used crutches, they used them and thought about them in very different ways. Take, for example, one runaway man we can learn about from a 1799 Baltimore newspaper (I will quote and use the historic term used to refer to the runaway’s disability and race): “ABSCONED from the subscriber...a Negro Man named NATHAN, about 29 years of age...one leg is of no use to him in walking, it being withered, and very little larger than his arm; he hops along upon a Crutch, and a Shoemaker by trade, a good strong workman—Carried off with him a set of tools...”²

Nathan didn’t see crutches as confining; he saw that as tools for getting freedom. For disability then and now, context matters.

Ableism, or the exclusion of disabled people in favor of able-bodied people, has a long history, and we still grapple with it today. That’s why I usually start by talking about early American history and how relatively well-integrated and visible disabled people were in everyday life and explain how this changed over time. Use this history as a reason to work toward a more disability justice-centered present and future. When I say “disability justice,” I mean putting the burden on yourself and not disabled people to provide or start a conversation about access.

What are you doing or what will you do to make your practice of history more accessible and inclusive for disabled people?

Wherever you are on your access journey, I hope today’s discussion will give you some ideas for moving forward.

Please see the online access copy for a listing of some of my favorite readings in disability history that inform my work: bit.ly/NB-AccessCopy

¹ “‘Confined to Crutches’: James Logan and the Material Culture of Disability in Early America,” *Pennsylvania Legacies*, Vol. 17, No. 2 (Fall 2017): 6-11, https://issuu.com/hspannualreport2014/docs/legacies_fall17.

² “Fifty Dollars Reward,” *American* (published as American And Daily Advertiser) (Baltimore, MD), December 28, 1799, page 8. America’s Historical Newspapers.

Below, I listed just a few of my favorite works of disability history and tools for access and inclusion. Please also check out the hyperlinked material above. What are your favorites? [Let me know](#).

Douglas Baynton, *Defectives in the Land: Disability and Immigration in the Age of Eugenics* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2016).

Daniel Blackie, "Disability, Dependency, and the Family in the Early United States," in *Disability Histories*, eds. Susan Burch and Michael Rembis: 17-34.

Dea Boster, *African American Slavery and Disability: Bodies, Property, and Power in the Antebellum South, 1800-1860* (Routledge: New York, 2013).

Alima Bucciantini, "Getting in the Door is the Battle," AASLH Blog, American Association for State and Local History, January 22, 2019, <https://aaslh.org/getting-in-the-door/>.

Susan Burch and Hannah Joyner, *Unspeakable: The Story of Junius Wilson* (Durham: University of North Carolina Press, [2007] 2015).

[Susan Burch, *Committed: Remembering Native Kinship in and Beyond Institutions* \(Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2021\). Open access.](#)

Daniel Göransson, "Alt-texts: The Ultimate Guide," ACESS Lab, October 15, 2017, <https://axesslab.com/alt-texts/>.

Aimi Hamraie, "Mapping Access: Digital Humanities, Disability Justice, and Sociospatial Practice," *American Quarterly* 70, 3 (2018): 455-482.

Sarah Hendron, *What Can a Body Do?: How we Meet the Built World* (New York: Riverhead, 2020).

Sara Hendren, and Caitrin Lynch, *Engineering at Home*, <http://engineeringathome.org/>, accessed July 21, 2022.

Judy Heumann, *Being Heumann: An Unrepentant Memoir of a Disability Rights Activist* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2020).

Stefanie Hunt-Kennedy, *Between Fitness and Death: Disability and Slavery in the Caribbean* (University of Illinois Press, 2020).

Beth Linker, *War's Waste: Rehabilitation in World War I America* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2011).

Paul K. Longmore, *Telethons: Spectacle, Disability, and the Business of Charity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).

Laura Mauldin, *Disability at Home*, accessed July 21, 2022, <https://www.disabilityathome.org/>.

Mia Mingus, "Changing the Framework: Disability Justice: How our communities can move beyond access to wholeness," *Leaving Evidence*, February 12, 2011, <https://leavingevidence.wordpress.com/2011/02/12/changing-the-framework-disability-justice/>.

Aparna Nair and Kylie M. Smith, "Who Would Buy Real Patient Records from Closed Asylums on eBay," *Slate*, July 21, 2022, <https://slate.com/technology/2022/07/vintage-asylum-records-found-on-ebay-history-of-disability.html>.

Kim E. Nielsen, *Money, Marriage, and Madness: The Life of Anna Ott* (University of Illinois Press, 2020).

Katherine Ott, "Disability Things: Material Culture and American Disability History, 1700–2010," in *Disability Histories*, eds. Susan Burch and Michael Rembis (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2014): 119-135.

Ellen Samuels, "Six Ways of Looking at Crip Time," *Disability Studies Quarterly* 37, 3 (2017), <https://dsq-sds.org/article/view/5824/4684>.

James Sumner, "Adding captions (subtitles) to your video," July 22, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HbkPstO6hqM&t=632s>.

Jorge Matos Valldejuli, "The Racialized History of Disability Activism from the 'Willowbrooks of this World,'" *The Activist History Review*, November 4, 2019, <https://activisthistory.com/2019/11/04/the-racialized-history-of-disability-activism-from-the-willowbrooks-of-this-world1/>.

National Center on Disability Journalism, "Disability Language Style," <https://ncdj.org/style-guide/>.

Bess Williamson, *Accessible America: A History of Disability and Design* (New York: New York University Press, 2019).

Alice Wong, ed., *Disability Visibility: First-Person Stories from the 21st Century* (New York: Vintage, 2020).