

## A Public Historian's Toolkit for Disability Justice

Monday, May 2, 12:00-1:00PM EST

### How to Use this

[This is a rough copy of my talk \(this link also includes the images; images also linked in this text\)](#). It's also linked in my profile. It's written in a conversational tone, and you will likely find typos! Follow along and click the links if you want to learn more or see an image up-close. This is available in word and pdf format in case you want to adjust the text size. Use the chat, but we will address discussion at the end of the session. If I miss something or you want to talk more, please contact me.

### Introduction

Thank you all for joining us today at the 2022 National Council on Public History Annual Meeting. My name is Nicole Belolan, and I am joining you today from my office at Rutgers-Camden, just over the River from Philadelphia. I am going to talk today about what I have learned from disability history, disability historians, and disability activists over the last twelve or so years. Feel free to enjoy the chat amongst yourselves – or use it to send me a message or question. If you want to contact me via email, you can do so at [nicole.belolan@rutgers.edu](mailto:nicole.belolan@rutgers.edu).

I'm going to talk about how I got interested in disability history; how accessibility and inclusion guide my work; and some examples of access and inclusion I like to insist on at the intersection of public history and disability history. You can access my talk at this link provided in the chat. It's hyperlinked and includes some of my favorite resources at the end.

First, some things I want to note:

I don't identify as disabled.

I work for Rutgers and NCPH, and I'm on the Board of the Disability History Association – but I am speaking for myself. Even though I'm not speaking for the organizations I work for and serve, I will be talking about how disability history and accessibility and inclusion intersect with my work.

Second, my work builds on that of numerous historians, public historians, community members, advocates, and activists, many of whom have been doing this—interpreting disability history and advocating for access and inclusion of disabled people—[way longer than I have](#). I have learned so much from them. Check out my reading list for some of my favorite works by them.

I also want to acknowledge we are meeting online only due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Thank you to NCPH for helping to keep its community safe. In addition, I want to acknowledge --because I don't think we as a society express this enough--that the pandemic is ongoing; that I personally worry about it and [how it is affecting people every day](#) even if the disease itself is not making people sick; that the pandemic is having [a disproportionate effect on people of color](#); and that many people have been characterizing the pandemic as something that will be [a mass-disabling event](#).

History can inform the decisions we make about this pandemic, future crises, the work we do as historians, and everyday life.

I'll start with some personal history.

3:00

### *How I Got Interested in Disability History*

I stumbled into disability history. I am and always will be an objects nerd – a material culture nerd. I wrote [my MA thesis on a woman named Ann Warder](#) who lived in Philadelphia the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Warder left behind [a collection of Berlin work patterns and small projects](#). Berlin work is a counted stitch technique for [pictorial needlework](#)---often made

from patterns that were disseminated through popular print like [Godey's Lady's Book](#). Berlin work was very popular in the US from about 1840-1880-something people loved to hate in the period and today. Took many forms – mottos “Home Sweet Home” -- and slippers, suspenders, book covers, and more.

You might be asking yourself, well, what is the connection to disability?

[Here is Warder \[Warder pic\] pictured lying down—reclining—on a sofa or in a bed with a pillow behind her \[SLIDE 1\]](#). Warder was chronically ill most of her life, and she used needlework to stay in touch with friends and family while she stayed at home. As I worked on this project, I started to wonder more about [how people used objects to get around—or stay in one place—if they were disabled](#).

My scholarship since then has been about the objects ranging from wheelchairs to adult cradles to crutches people used to live with and manage disability in early America. I encountered so many disabled people in early America through archival research and object study. I'll come back to how I use their stories in a minute.

### *How Accessibility and Inclusion Influences My Work*

I did not set out to be a [disability justice](#) advocate. When I say disability justice, I mean making sure disabled people are included—centering disabled people and disability history in what we do. I gave my first paper on disability history at a graduate conference about disability in 2011. The paper was objects people used to live with gout, a disabling disease, in early America. I [talked a lot about John Lukens](#), surveyor general of PA, ordered a custom roomy, low-slung carriage. The design made it easier for him to get in and out, and it meant he could remain active in public life. His lifestyle, of course, was supported in part due to his servants, his family, and Dinah, an enslaved woman listed among his property at his death in 1789. I talked a lot about gout-specific material culture, but also objects people with gout used AND people who had other types of disabilities—bed chairs, crutches, and more—and everything else in the household.

Disabled people don't just use objects for disabled people. SO, gout served as a sort of case study. Much of this research has focused on a period before the mass-marketing of furniture and other objects for disabled people.

After the talk, someone said to me, why don't you use your research to affect change as it relates to accessibility and inclusion for disabled people today? Actually, what she said was closer to, "what's the point if you aren't relating this to current disability justice issues?"

I...had no answer to that question! It's just not how I had been trained.

So, sounds simple, but from going to these conferences, I got a crash course in disability justice. And the values of this group have influenced just about everything I do.

I learned about distributing large-print versions of my talks at conferences...I learned about insisting on using the microphone...and so much more. At the same time, I was and continue to do a lot of workshops for people who work or volunteer at small museums and historic sites, usually about collections management and care using limited resources. And I realized no one was learning about accessibility for disabled people. Conveniently, [preservation and access](#) are two key tenants of museum work, so it's easy to slide access for disabled people into this existing framework. So I started sharing what I was learning from the disability field with others in my sphere. Lots of workshops I had been attending on accessibility centered the Americans with Disabilities Act as a starting place. [Don't get me wrong – we need the ADA](#). But, it scares people. And, it makes them think of [lawsuits](#) and money (important considerations, but the money part in particular is overblown. A lot of the tools I'll be talking about today don't cost anything). Second, I think because I was an early Americanist, I saw this as an opportunity to do what that person at the first conference was asking me to do – use my research to affect change. And, my research was not about the ADA.

One thing I was picking up on was that lots of people—historians included—thought disabled people were shut away in early America. In fact, they were very visible and integrated into everyday life. And, you don't

have to study institutions to get at that history (though that is obviously important history). It's everywhere (as cliché as that sounds). I think the best way to get at this fact quickly is by perusing runaway advertisements in early American newspapers.

8:00

“ABSCONED from the subscriber, living in the City of Baltimore, 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...” From: “Fifty Dollars Reward,” *American* (published as *American And Daily Advertiser*) (Baltimore, MD), December 28, 1799, page 8. *America's Historical Newspapers*.

But you can also look at any number of visual sources to get the picture too, like this circa 1805 Portrait of a man in a Wheelchair, which is in my own collection [SLIDE 2].

Or, this adult cradle [SLIDE 3], used by Martha Ward in Massachusetts. It's one of a few dozen extant adult-sized cradles people with a variety of disabilities used to stay integrated into family life at home. They're portable – you don't have to be stuck in a bedroom.

So, why don't lots of people today seem to realize there were disabled people in early America. Some of this, I think, must do with history. In the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, due to [ableism](#), people started moving disabled people into institutions in large numbers, restricting their immigration to the US, enacting laws to keep disabled people off the streets, and using words and phrases like “special education” to separate out disabled from non-disabled people.<sup>1</sup> I think this has affected people in that because of this history of separation, segregation, and marginalization, they fear disability and, in some cases, think it's [scary](#). Of course, this isn't a simple story – plenty of disabled people remained visible in daily life in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. But the fact is that people made and continue to make efforts to

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<sup>1</sup> I had a helpful conversation with Susan Burch about special education and implications on today. See also Sandra Sufian's new book for a discussion on the phrase. Sandra M. Sufian, *Familial Fitness Disability, Adoption, and Family in Modern America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2022).

keep disabled people out of public life. I really admire the work Alice Wong is doing today with the [Disability Visibility Project](#) – check out if you need help countering the impulse to ignore disabled people.

So, when I talk to groups about accessibility and inclusion of disabled people in public life today, I usually talk about the visibility of disabled people in early America and say, don't leave people out! Center disabled people and other marginalized groups when you do your work and the long history of disabled people in society. Disabled people have always been there.

And so, I do what I can to keep accessibility and inclusion, broadly defined, as the sort of base beat of everything I do.

11:00

*What I have experienced at Intersection of Disability History and Public History Today*

In academia, disability history seems to be expanding at a faster rate than when I first discovered the field. It was far less common to meet someone else working on early American disability history ten years ago. But, [it's getting a lot more common now](#). It's still more common to meet folks who work on nineteenth or twentieth-century disability history. People working on non-western history – also unusual. The exciting thing about disability history is that there is room for more of us. Some people were not totally sold that disability in early America was a topic when I started. I hope you don't get that reaction. Join us.

In public history, people have been interpreting disability history at least since the 70s if not earlier. Katherine Ott, a curator at the Smithsonian, is perhaps the best-known practitioner of disability history and material culture in public history settings (also a great presenter if you get a chance to see her). Exhibitions and other projects related to disability and accessibility are becoming more and more common. I have been doing what I can to include disability history in *The Public Historian* (see [Touch this Page review](#) and ["Printing the Past"](#)). We've also published disability-related pieces on *History@Work* (see the ["disability history"](#) and ["accessibility"](#) tags). You might be interested in [this language guide](#) we developed recently. I have

also worked hard to make editing and writing accessible and sustainable for authors and editors I work with. Incorporating disability history into what I do is critical, but so is advocating for what assistant professor of English Travis Lau calls “[an ethic of editorial care](#).” Everyone benefits from access and inclusion.

I’ve referenced the advocacy work I’ve been doing, and so now I want to talk briefly about some accessibility and inclusion tactics I like to stress and encourage people to adopt. I’d love to learn more about you like to stress when you’re advocating for accessibility and inclusion for disabled people too.

### *Physical Space*

When I talk to people about accessibility, the first thing that usually comes to mind is physical access to public space for wheelchair users. Great. One thing I have said, with trepidation, a few times in public settings like this, is that I want to talk more about developing more creative or independent physical access to historic structures, many of which are [exempt from some physical access requirements](#). Historic buildings embody many values from the past. Do we think enough about whether the historic buildings we care for today embody disability justice? Are historic preservation and physical accessibility mutually exclusive? This tension is of interest to me particularly since so much of the research I’ve done on disability in early America has been at historic sites or with collections that people used in domestic settings. So, I suppose this tool I am offering is more aspirational than practical, but what I don’t want to keep seeing is people saying alternative access is enough. ([I do love Aimi Hamrai’s work on access on college campuses in particular, by the way, if you want a blueprint for how to rethink access broadly where you live or work-very intersectional](#)).

### *Workshops, Conference Panels, and related Programming*

I have assisted with a few online conferences and conference panels over the last few years, and I try to advocate for accessibility in those settings too. I want to talk briefly about access copies and live captioning.

Thank you to NCPH for providing live captioning for this event. And, thank you to our captioner! If you are not already familiar with this service, it's called CART – Communication access real-time translation. It's done by a human – in this case, remotely. We have all witnessed what a mess automatic captioning can make. In some cases, the event planners will only provide the captioning for my particular session and, despite the fact that they are aware of how much better the captions are, they don't continue to offer either [live or manual captioning](#) as something they build into their public programming. Now, there is some disagreement about live captioning, even among the folks on this panel. But it's something I remain sold by and wish more event planners would either make standard or at least offer it as an option upon registration. Some [people consider manual, live captions a form of independent access](#).

Second, I try to advocate that people provide access copies, or copies of a talk or talk outline. This can take a variety of forms, including providing [an access copy](#) of a talk like I did. This happens, ideally, ahead of time (sorry), but providing one during the session or afterward is, I understand it, also acceptable. The most common objection to this, by the way, is that people are concerned about sharing unpublished work. Access copies make it easier for just some people to follow along for a variety of reasons, and they are a great insurance policy in case you are in a situation where there is no captioning...subpar captioning...or if your interest goes out.

### *Programming*

Finally, I want to talk a bit about assessing accessibility needs of the people you're serving through programming. All events should include [some kind of information about accessibility](#) (including the COVID-19 protocols and precautions) and a way to let the organizers know if you need some access tool in particular, such as ASL translation. It's always great to make people acknowledge whether they do or do not require specific accommodations –



in other words, they should have to click a box either way when you register for something. I encountered some good language as to how to do this recently for an online workshop about [alternative text](#) – something else I care a lot about but don't have time to go into today unless you want to talk about it in the discussion.

### *Bottom Line*

The most important thing to keep in mind, which you have likely heard from others, is that access looks different for everyone, and you should include whomever your audience is in the planning of your project, conference, or whatever it is. What I have said here today is not necessarily what people will need in every situation.

### Conclusion

I am not an expert on any of these things. I had a hard time choosing what to focus on. The more I drafted, the more I wanted to include. Every editor's worst nightmare. Regardless, I hope you found this helpful in your own work. But this work is, I have to say, in some cases, like pulling teeth. I tried not to dwell on particularly negative experiences doing this but rather give some tools to build your own disability justice skillset.

Someone said to me recently that they didn't think disability has had its moment yet. I agree. I ask myself every day what I can do to help advance disability history and accessibility and inclusion.

What will you do?

I would like to leave the last few minutes open for discussion.

### Resources

Below, I listed some of my favorite works of disability history and tools for

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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," Axess 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).

*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).

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

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/>.

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 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (New York: Vintage, 2020).