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HISTORY NEWS

THE MAGAZINE OF THE AMERICAN ASSOCIATION FOR STATE AND LOCAL HISTORY

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Understanding and Interpreting the American Experience in World War I

If You Are Slowly Improving Citizens, You Get a Better City

Why Historical Societies Need Experts, Even When It Hurts

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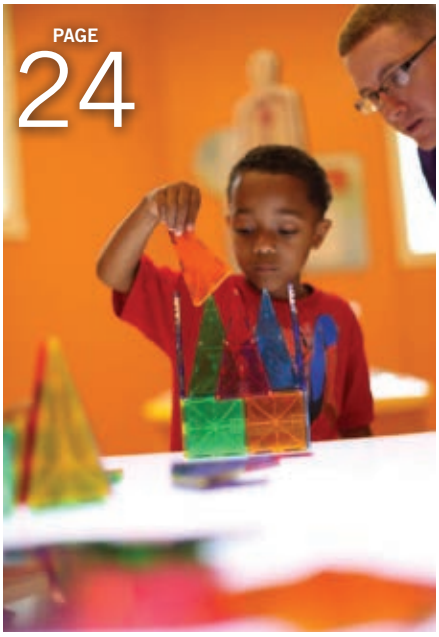

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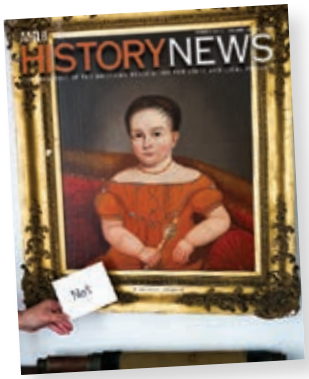

ON THE COVER

The Little Compton Historical Society uses a misidentified portrait to help visitors understand issues of curation and authenticity.

Photo Bart Brownell

INSIDE: **TECHNICAL LEAFLET**

Students and Community Organizations: Creating Productive Partnerships

By Anne Lindsay

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History News is a publication of the American Association for State and Local History (AASLH). *History News* exists to foster publication, scholarly research, and an open forum for discussion of best practices, applicable theories, and professional experiences pertinent to the field of state and local history.

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If You Are Slowly Improving Citizens, You Get a Better City

May 2016 *History Café.*

Cambridge Historical Society

By Heidi Legg and Marieke Van Damme

Editor's Note: The interview here is adapted from what originally appeared on *TheEditorial.com*, a site that publishes interviews around emerging ideas that change the ways we look at the world and how we live in it. Heidi Legg and her team believe there is power in putting the poet next to the scientist and the industrialist next to the artist and the philanthropist next to the techie; they call it the Power of the Weave.

As we scoured the city for Gen X voices bringing forward emerging ideas, Marieke Van Damme's name kept popping up as a change maker. The irony is that she is the director of the Cambridge Historical Society, headquartered on fabled Brattle Street, but a few houses away from the poet Henry Longfellow's house, where our first president, George Washington, camped out during the Revolution.

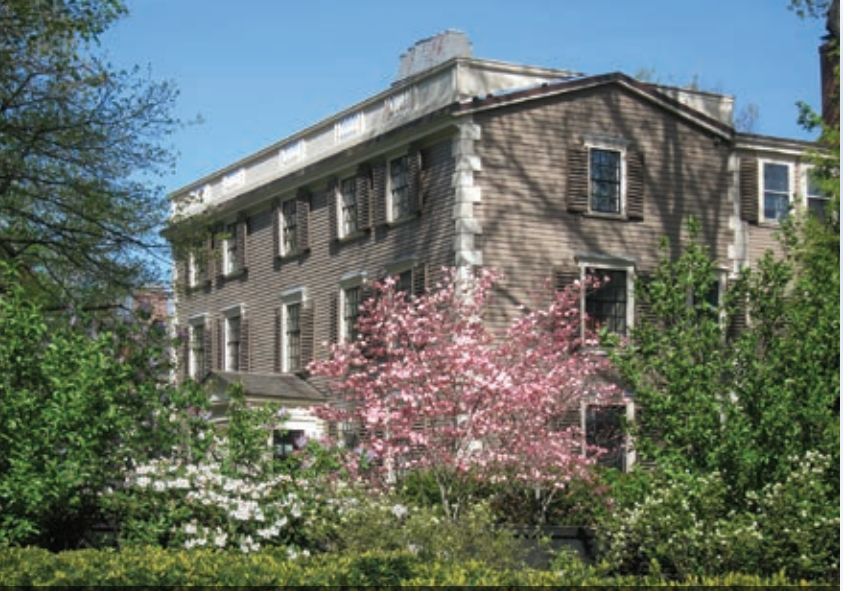
The Hooper-Lee-Nichols House, where we met for this interview, is a place one might think would be draped in old Cambridge. Aesthetically speaking, it is—I swear I see an old cat up in the top window when I pass by on my way into the square—but for Van Damme, the historic homes are only the launch pad. She is stirring things up by bringing this vintage society into modernity with annual themes that have sparked conversations around the housing crisis, the changing face and development in Harvard Square, and the emergence of Kendall as the poster child for change, all with a historical context of what it means for city-building and culture. She understands the power of competing for dollars and attention in a digital world, and we discuss new models of funding to give cities the pillars that create vibrancy and civil connection.

Many people think of Cambridge as one big permanent historical commission.

It's just one giant historical society. That's all we are—one important historical place. [laughs] It's great to have you at Hooper-Lee-Nichols House.

What is the Cambridge Historical Society's role in the city and how are you funded?

The Cambridge Historical Society is a different kind of historical society. We like to say it's one that you would never have experienced before, because our goal is to talk



Hooper-Lee-Nichols House, headquarters of the Cambridge Historical Society.

Cambridge Historical Society

about contemporary issues affecting the city today and offer historical perspective. We don't think that history equals nostalgia. It's about how history is still affecting our lives today, and that's how we hope to educate people.

Did you bring this attitude with you to this role as the new director, or was it here before you arrived?

When I was hired, the organization really wanted to have a change. It saw that old models of historic house museums and historical societies are in many ways no longer sustainable. Cambridge has a lot of history—the history's not the problem. It's the competition. It's the perception. Many historical societies across the country suffer from having a lack of funds that never allow them to professionalize.

What type of competition are you facing?

Ways for people to spend their time. It's a crowded marketplace. We are not a historical society in a small town in upstate New York where I'm from, for example. We are a historical society in a city that everyone in the world knows about. We're a fifteen- to twenty-minute walk from Harvard University, and not only do we compete within Cambridge, but we're a fifteen-minute Red Line train away from Boston.

What did you see here on Brattle Street that you wanted to disrupt?

I was given a mandate by the historical society to modernize. The society grew out of West Cambridge in 1905 by a group of historians who lived in the neighborhood. It was like a historian book club. They met in Harvard buildings and in their houses, and they collected some objects, but they never had a place. It wasn't until this house was given to the society in 1957 that they had a place and a mission. It was to share and reminisce about the history of Cambridge, but it was also to interpret this building. These are two different missions. So many historical societies suffer from this.

It's very confusing because you think of the society as being the building, but that's not who we are, and we're not only West Cambridge. Once I was hired, there was a whole strategic plan done that said, "We need to be for all of Cambridge and not just West Cambridge." That's a huge perception to overcome. Instead of just having events here at our headquarters in a beautiful building, in a place we love, we need to do more things out in the neighborhood so people know that we exist.

What and where are the events you are now curating?

When we decided that we were going to be talking about contemporary issues, I knew we had to be extremely focused, as we only have two full-time staff and a few other part-time folks. So we chose one theme a year. Everything relates to the theme. Last year our theme was *Are We Home?* and we talked about housing all year. It really resonated with a lot of people. It was the number one thing that people talked about when I came to Cambridge. Housing was the biggest issue.

We like to phrase the theme as a question because that gives people the opportunity to give feedback and participate instead of us being the mighty historical society that says, "We know everything about history. We're going to tell you this year's theme is housing. Sit back and listen." That is not our approach. We are more of an engaging institution and trying to get the experience of all Cambridgians to feed into our shared history.

Housing was such a pressing and big issue. It feeds into everything, and people are just dying to find a way to solve the problem. We didn't solve it, and it was hard. But we had people saying to us, "Thank you for raising this issue and allowing a place for discussion. Now what do we do?"

How else do you bring people together to talk about things in a non-political way?

We're pretty proud of our approach and we always talk about our humanities focus. We think like historians, and we think critically. We think about the reasons people make decisions, and we're always talking about empathy, which is not something you would expect a historical society to talk about, but that's the personality that I bring to an institution. We got here because people made decisions, so let's talk about that because we are now at a point where we have to make new decisions.

This year's theme is *What Does Cambridge Make?* So, what is Cambridge making?

We decided that the arc of the year is to see a past/present/future. At our annual meeting in late March, historian Sean Nichols talked about the manufacturing history of Cambridge and what it was like to be a worker here, which was fascinating. There were so many factories here. This was a city that made stuff—hardcore. It's just fascinating to think about it. We've romanticized manufacturing in this country: "There was a time we made things and wasn't that wonderful and people were put to work, etc., etc." There's this nostalgia around it. It was hard for people back then and that was their lives.

What did we make here?

Oh, we were making lots of things! Candy is a popular thing that we made. We have Squirrel Nut Zippers and Necco Wafers.

We actually held our second live event at Novartis in the old Necco Factory, and as our sponsor, they gave out Necco candy. It was fun to think about what the space symbolized, as our event was "The Great Rewire: Cancer, Genetics, and Urbanism."

Do you like Neccos? I like to do a poll about whether people like Necco Wafers and most people say, "No, they're kind of gross, but I appreciate them." I love them. I could eat them all day. In Cambridge, we also made glass. Cars—there used to be a Ford factory. We made rubber hoses, collars, and soap.

We also had a gentleman named Ed Childs come. He is a dining services worker at Harvard who organized some protests and some union activity, and it was really interesting to think about what it was like for workers back then. They didn't have great worker rights and their quality of life was different.

You had Childs in to speak? That's such a great call.

We thought that was a little edgy, but that's what we're trying to do. And it was interesting because Nichols, who teaches at Harvard, was talking about someone in one of his classes who works in finance. He works like eighty hours a week, and Sean's response was, "You should join a union," which is so funny because it seems like a thing that's over. It's fascinating. It raised a lot of questions.

What are the demographics of your audience?

Different people show up to different events. We have this series that we call *History Café*, which I blatantly stole from *Science Café*. I thought it was a great idea. Regular scientists came and tried to communicate to the public what they're working on and breaking down the barriers of science communication. I thought, "Why don't we do this for history?" So, we have *History Cafés* that take place in bars and in various locations around the city that are third spaces, welcoming spaces, similar to the cafés of the past. We're talking about squares and taverns, that kind of thing.

Who is the audience?

We have different ages. Our membership is an older group, typically over fifty, white, very well educated, have lived in Cambridge more than five years or so. A lot of them show up, but we've been getting a lot of younger folks, too. For us, younger is late twenties and up. This is what I love about *History Café*, the mixture of people of different generations talking, and it's so great because where else do you get that? People interact and you get to know the other people in your group and it's so wonderful because of course cafes are set up non-theater style. You're naturally going to ask, "Oh, is this seat open?" and then you start talking to people, and I love it. It's great.

So the city of Cambridge does not fund you at all?

Nope. Not for operations. For special projects we apply for funding like anyone, but that's grant funding.

Is most of your funding individual or grant?

It is individuals. Philanthropy makes up the bulk of our operating support, and it's primarily individuals.

How would you encourage readers to be involved?

We like to think the programs that we do for the people who live in the city make people more empathetic and people think more about their neighbors in a way that they haven't before, and you don't get that anywhere else. You can't go to a city hall meeting and suddenly feel a connection with another person.

My experience is that people are stressed out there—at least in front of the city's historical commission, which is different than you.

People are totally stressed out, and we like to think that our events are a "stop-and-think" and "pause-to-discuss" and there is a conversation that you don't get at other places. You have people thinking in a different way—in an empathetic way—and in that, they become better citizens. If you are slowly improving citizens, you get a better city. We like to think that's our end goal.

Historic Necco factory in Cambridge.

Cambridge Historical Society

As you know, this interview is part of our Gen X series, and we were interested that you're taking on a lot for a historical society. Gen Xers seem to like tension and texture. Do you seek that out as you revitalize the society?

I don't look for tension. I think that this is an obvious thing that we should be doing. There's a growing field of public history, in which you can now get a degree, and there are some great programs in the area using history. It's not a thing that's static and out there. You have to use it, and that makes so much sense to me.

As a Gen X person, I've been in between the generations in my roles and it's fascinating. It's totally fascinating. There are older people who think of history in a certain way and that's fine, but I've run into so many of our members who are just energized by what we're doing and say, "Yes, finally someone gets it. We're on board."

What is it about Gen X that makes us unique and seekers of startups and disruption? Maybe it's technology driven?

Yes. And Gen Xers also have to really be able to communicate between generations, which means you have to be thoughtful. I have someone who's a Millennial involved with our organization. She's like, "I just can't come to meetings, especially if there's any Boomers there." I get it. I go to a lot of those meetings.

But as Gen Xers, we have to work with the Boomers, as they are the demographic that precedes us. We don't have that luxury to dismiss them, nor does that make a lot of sense.

Yes. I said, "But I have to go and I have to communicate with them and share what younger people want." I sit at meetings and tell them, "A lot of people get their information digitally." Everyone was like, "What?" Here I am as the youngest person saying that. This is ridiculous. How do I speak for young people?

Will historical institutions die off?

No. I think that the young and emerging museum professionals get it. They totally understand it. They're natural connectors. They're all on Twitter. They're all connected digitally. They go to Meetups. Meetups didn't exist when I was in museum school.

I think that it is so key to getting things done to be able to communicate with a lot of people.

What characteristics—diplomat, communicator, for example—do people trying to revive your field share?

Technology has made the world smaller, and when you see that happening, you want to make connections with other places and collaborate, and I think collaboration is a huge part of this. We try to have a collaborator for all of our events and other institutions where we can tap into their audience or vice-versa. I see the library doing that, as well, and also bringing in people who have different perspectives that you wouldn't think of as the typical historical society speaker or library speaker. The library is not only bringing in authors. We're not just bringing in historians.

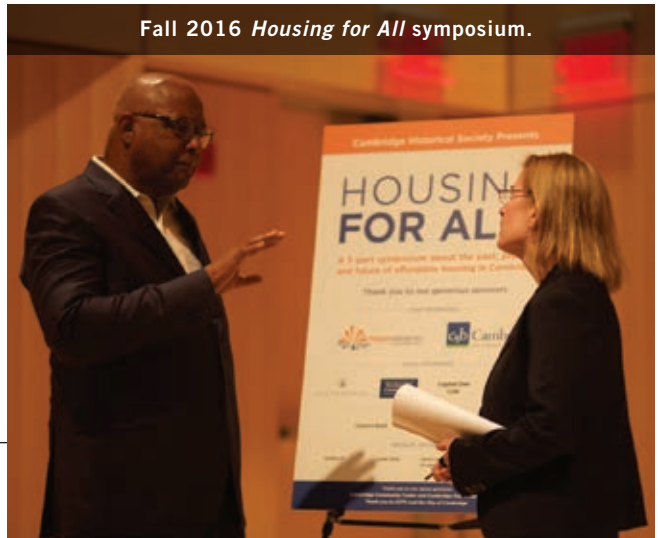
The Cambridge Public Library recently invited *TheEditorial* to bring in some of our interviews and it was great. I think the mashup of hyper-local historians, writers, and media is essential and I can see all of these Gen X-led initiatives bubbling to the surface in a very dynamic way.

I'm going to take liberty to go off here, but how can the nonprofit category sustain so many of these pillars of a society: history, journalism, libraries, housing? And need they all be not-for-profit? When does a society hit a tipping point to realize these initiatives need funding models to stay alive?

It's so hard because the competition is fierce, and there's a lot of discussion about getting rid of incentives for people to give money, especially the wealthy, which is just crazy. We rely on people of all philanthropic levels. There are folks who send us $35 a year, and that's a sacrifice for them. We like to have people give so that it shows that there's real commitment, and that is all under threat today.

I was really concerned after the election that a lot of our funding would go toward more pressing social issues. Maybe instead of us, they're going to give to the ACLU, etc. There is a lot of competition. Those are all so important.

But historical societies are in it for the long haul, and I like to think that we've gotten to this position because historical societies were focused on other things. We were not necessarily having discussions like we should have been, holding and not analyzing the past as hard as we should have been. We were putting up plaques and monuments, which were, yes, very important physical reminders of our history, but you have to bring people together. You have to create understanding and empathy and concern and all of these emotions about the place where you live, about the place you care about, or else what's the point? Now we have this historical amnesia about what's happened in our cities and what's happened in our country. It's just bonkers.



Fall 2016 *Housing for All* symposium.

Cambridge Historical Society

We know people want to live in vibrant places. How do we reinforce that these types of institutions and initiatives deliver that?

History teaches critical thinking and when funding for those essential skills gets cut, we see ourselves in a position like we're in now in America. On this, I speak for myself. I don't speak for the historical society.

What is coming up?

We have a few *History Cafés* coming up. We had a great one on craftivism about a group of young women organizing around craft during and after the Civil War. For our next event we're partnering with the Cambridge Arts Council, a city agency, for their latest project on the Cambridge Common called *Common Ground.* We have a *History Café* coming up at the Hong Kong [Restaurant] in June with a couple of the artists, where we will look back at the historical use of the Common.

In July we had a walking tour of North Cambridge where we talked about clay. It's a fascinating place where bricks were made. There was a community of Irish brick workers and then it turned into a dump. Danehy Park was literally a dump; now it's a beautiful park. We asked what all that means for a neighborhood and what's the future? We began with the walking tour and then had a discussion at Jose's Mexican Grill.

The Hong Kong in Harvard Square and Jose's Mexican in North Cambridge! Those are legends.

We are hitting all the good spots. Then in September, we have a few *History Cafés* that are going to help us warm up for the fall symposium, which will be about biotech and Kendall and the future of making in Cambridge. We've all seen incredible change in Kendall Square and we're trying to make sense of it. So come on the walking tour. Also in September, we have a *History Café* called "Apothecary Now." It will be a conversation with a research scientist from Alnylam and a third-generation Cambridge pharmacist.

Does one have to be a member?

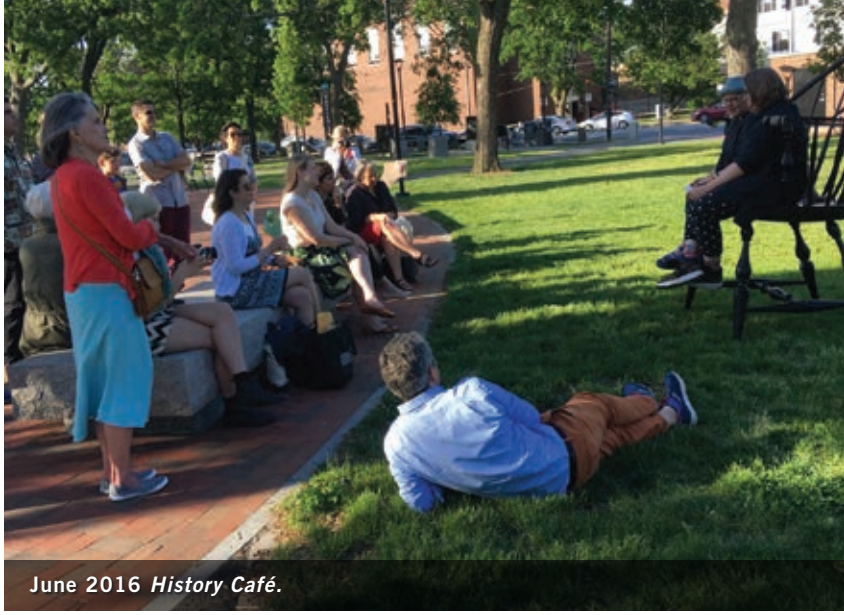
They don't have to be a member, but we sure love our members. They get extra special attention and maybe a few extra Necco Wafers. You can go to the website. Follow us on Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram for all of our events.

Do you see other historical societies around the country doing things you admire?

There are a lot of organizations that are trying to be more progressive with their thinking, and they're usually larger humanities councils or libraries, but as a small local historical society, we're pretty unique.

Whom do you go to for inspiration in your field?

We're spoiled in New England to have a lot of great museum thinkers. There are so many wonderful museum people who are educated and progressive, and there's something about being here in Boston—a place that is not progressive in many ways.



Cambridge Historical Society

June 2016 *History Café.*

If there are progressive museum thinkers in Boston, why haven't they changed much yet?

Sometimes you just need to be in the right place. I was brought on with the mandate of, "We want change." On my interview for this job, I said, "We live in Cambridge. It's a very interesting and diverse place with a lot of great history. If I wanted to put on an exhibit or a program around how the Boston Bombers were from Cambridge, how would you handle that?" I saw some raised eyebrows but for the most part, everyone said, "Yeah, we'd be open to discussing that." So I thought, "All right. I have a place that can embrace my ideas," and they're all pretty progressive too. It's so funny to think that you're going to be disrupting the historical society. You're going to be talking about stuff that's happening today. People aren't going to react well to that. You know what? People love it. I get so many comments like, "People always think history ends with the Revolution around here," and instead people want to talk about the 1960s in Cambridge.

Look at Harvard Square today and what's happening: buildings are under attack and our historical nature is being threatened, and what does all that mean? People love it, and so we're talking about it and people are embracing it.

Heidi Legg is the founder of *TheEditorial.com* where she interviews people along the Harvard, MIT. and Kendall Square Corridor around emerging ideas. From here, she gathers these visionaries together for live events to discuss ideas around disruption, new eras, realities, and utopias. She can be reached at heidilegg@gmail.com.

Marieke Van Damme, mvandamme@cambridgehistory.org, has worked in nonprofits for more than fifteen years, starting as an Americorps VISTA volunteer in Alaska. Her museum career began in collections and evolved into historic site management and administration/fundraising. She is currently the Executive Director of the Cambridge Historical Society in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and serves proudly on the board of the New England Museum Association. In 2014, Marieke launched *Joyful Museums,* a project studying workplace culture. She tweets from @joyfulmuseums and co-hosts the podcast *Museum People*.