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Interview of Alaina Scapicchio

Alaina Scapicchio 00:00

It was really as we were doing the archival research for the park service that I got into the witchcraft topic because we were doing work in Westmoreland County , which is where the birthplace, George Washington's birthplace is, and we were at the county courthouse there where they have, again, all these archival records and you know looking at 17th, 18th century documents, and we came across a record from the order book there, right that the court uses ordering Lawrence Washington, who is George's grandfather, to build a ducking stool on his property. And a ducking stool was this device; it typically was either used for punishing women or it could be used for discovering witches.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 00:48

[Intro music fades in] Historians and Their Histories is a podcast by the Massachusetts Historical Society. It introduces listeners to our community of researchers. We learn about the paths they took to become a student of the past and the projects they are working on at the MHS. I am Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai, the Director of Research at the MHS. Today, we are sitting down with Alaina Scapicchio, a PhD candidate at the University of South Florida, and a recipient of the Andrew W. Mellon Short Term Fellowship from the MHS. You and I have at least two bits of our past in common.

Alaina Scapicchio 01:26

Okay, I know one of them. You mentioned it that this was your first fellowship as well.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 01:32

That's correct. That's right. So, the MHS is the institution that gave us both our first external fellowships from our home institutions and secondly you know podcasts.

Alaina Scapicchio 01:46

Yes, a little bit I do. I do.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 01:49

Would you like to reflect on both on the fellowship experience of getting a fellowship and of podcasting as a method of public history?

Alaina Scapicchio 01:58

Yes. Okay, so, yeah, so this is my first fellowship. I am in the third year of my PhD program at the University of South Florida, and it was, you know, it was about that time. My research, as we will discuss later, obviously, is up here and I'm in Florida. So, I was like, okay, I need to get up there for an extended period of time. I had traveled up to Massachusetts in the summer of I believe it was 2021 to do some research for my thesis when I was doing my master's program. And, and, yeah, it was, it was wonderful. And I did that at the Phillips Library [of the Peabody Essex Museum] and I was like, but I was looking, and there's a lot of material here. And so I went and applied and actually, this is very special to me because I applied for this actually right when my grandmother passed away last year and she, as we will also talk about, she was very influential to me in kind of getting into history, and so to have kind of written this application during a difficult time and then to have been accepted to it was like felt very rewarding. So, I'm very excited to be here. And it also, I'm sure, as you know in grad school there's a lot of imposter syndrome, so getting an outside source to say, hey, we think this project is, is, you know, decent, and we want to help you with it was, was wonderful. So, it's very exciting to be here.

Alaina Scapicchio 03:13

Yeah, and then podcasting so when I was an undergraduate, I did some archival research with my mentor and my advisor, Dr. Philip Levy and a peer of mine Lady Bulilan. We were doing some archival research in Virginia. Dr. Levy was working on a historical resource study for the National Park Service. He is a scholar of Washington memory George Washington, and so for the George Washington Birthplace National Monument, he was working on this historical resource study, and that was Lady and I's first experience doing any kind of archival research. And as students interested in public history, we decided that, you know, we're learning all of these new things about, you know, what to do, the etiquette of archives, practical tips, things like that, and also just going into places that I think most people don't know that anyone off the street can walk in right to an archive, and all you have to do is learn a quick few things and then you can use these materials. You can look at things from the past that are absolutely insane and amazing. And so, we wanted to really share that with the world. And so, yeah, we began working on a podcast. It is called Bring a Sweater: Lady and Alaina's Archive Adventures. And I was actually re-listening to it in preparation for this

and it is funny to hear the development because obviously that was several years ago now, and I was an undergraduate and I think it's fun. It's approachable and I think it's an easy way, you know, podcasts became popular very quickly. I think people, you know, you get tired of listening to music all the time, so on your commute to work or whatever, you want to listen to an audio book, you want to listen to podcasts. And so, I think it's a way to really invite, you know, non-historians to the table and say like stuff doesn't have to be complicated. It doesn't have to be scholar speak. We can, you know, talk about what it's like to go into these places and to use these materials and kind of pull out what the significance of these stories are in an informal way. And I think that that just makes it way more approachable for people and really distilled down I think that's the goal of public history, right is just making things more interesting and approachable for the general public.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 05:23

I really appreciate also that this is demystifying the process of being an historian and something you just said also about the imposter syndrome of being in graduate school that is I think prevalent, but no one really talks about it. So, to the extent that you are helping to I don't know peel back the layers of what it takes what the process is like to become a young scholar, to learn the craft of history. I think that's very useful, especially for people, perhaps, who want to go into this field, but aren't sure about themselves.

Alaina Scapicchio 06:02

I agree wholeheartedly and I thank you I appreciate you saying that and I really have to attribute that again Dr. Levy has been really influential to me. Obviously, he's my advisor. But, you know, my parents didn't go to college, and so this entire world of academia and research was completely foreign to me. And so, you know, because these are institutions that were born in this country of wealth, right? So, there's a lot of people who have not had access to this for a long time. And you know, my advisor was from a class background where he was, you know, able to do this. His family has been able to do this, but he always gave me advice. He he put it in terms that I would understand. He made it feel approachable. He made it feel like these things were not closed off to me, just because, you know, I go to a state school in Florida, and I think, I think that is really important for people who don't have any kind of familiarity with this. It's like, yeah, okay, there may be some class pretenses, but you can break in and and yeah and do these things and make a make an impact, I guess.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 07:05

So, Alaina tell us about when you became interested in history. Where did you grow up? At what point did you become interested in studying the past?

Alaina Scapicchio 07:16

Sure, yeah. So, I kind of think of this as a three phase, you know, answer. So, in the beginning, I think, as many historians might say, I became interested in history because of my family. So, my mom and my grandma have always been interested in history and when I was younger, think in about fifth grade, my grandma took my grandma, my uncle took my brother and I on a trip, kind of up the East Coast, through colonial Williamsburg, through Atlanta and up into New Jersey to visit our family. My parents are from both my parents are from New Jersey originally.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 07:51

And you grew up in Florida?

Alaina Scapicchio 07:52

I did grow up in Florida. Yes, I'm from Orlando, and yeah, just kind of seeing like colonial Williamsburg and then going up to New Jersey and seeing all these different settings that are not Disneyfied all the time was like amazing to me. And then when I was about to go into 10th grade in high school, my mom again, we took a trip up to Virginia, and we went to colonial Williamsburg again, and to Monticello and several other locations. And just seeing the docents there just be amazing and have all these amazing answers and tell these amazing stories. I was just blown away by that and I was sucked in every time. And I just like, how can I do that? You know, I want to be that person. And so, I started thinking more about that and as I was getting ready to go off to college, I had thought about history many times because math and science were never my strong suit. There's always History or English. I was I've always been a decent writer and but when I first was applying to university, you know, I think again, having parents who didn't go to college, rightfully so, they're like, oh, what are you going to do with history, right? And I didn't want to become a teacher. That was never part of my plan. So originally, I signed up for political science, thinking like, okay, I could go do politics or something. And before I actually started school there was an event just to come, you know, get to know the campus, things like that. But they did have other major booths out and so I met the advisor of the history program for undergraduates. And, you know, the first thing that he did was hand me a sheet of paper that said, you know, here all the jobs that history majors at USF [University of South Florida]

have gotten in the outside world. And I was like, oh, like, there's way more than just teacher on here, you know. So, I was like, oh, that's really exciting. And then he was explaining about, you know, how there's an archeology program that the USF history department does. And I was like, that sounds great. So, I switched my major before I even went in. I was like, I'm going for it, you know, if I never make any money, I don't care. And, yeah, and it was amazing. So then once I, you know, was taking my first classes, I'll kind of, you know, shout out to Dr. Brian Connolly in my department and Dr. John Belohlavek, again, just sitting there, those first days and hearing them lecture with no notes in front of them, and just like spouting off all this information. And, yeah, it was enamored. I'm like, I want to be able to do that. And so, I, you know, stuck with it from there. And I think this is where, kind of, like the books, you know, come in as I was moving forward in my program. I read Walter Johnson's *Soul by Soul: [Life Inside the Antebellum Slave Market]* which is, you know about enslaved people in within the slave trade. And then I read James Young's *The Stages of Memory: [Reflections on Memorial Art, Loss, and the Spaces Between]* which is, he is typically a scholar of Holocaust memory. But this book kind of takes several different case studies, the first one being the the building of the 9/11 memorial in New York. And he really takes he was a part of the the approval committee for that, and so he really takes you on a deep dive into the process of building that memorial. And that was my first awakening into my interest in monuments and memorials, and seeing, like, oh my gosh like, how, how much effort this took, when this was a national tragedy that so many people had, of course, different feelings about, but the kind of the sorrow that came with it was seemed universal, you know, and all the constituencies that clashed in the making of that memorial, it just really was mind blowing to me. And so those two books were hugely influential and then I met Dr. Levy, and he is the one who runs the archeology field school that the department does. And so that is at Ferry Farm, which is George Washington's boyhood home. They've been running a field school there for for several, several years. And so I went up in the summer of 2018 and did some archeology there and that was amazing and it wasn't until last night, when I was really thinking about this and putting this all together, that I kind of had the realization that, you know, my experience in archeology, which I've tried to continue on the side, which is like a fun thing to say at parties, I do archeology on the side, material culture is just so important. And when you take something out of the ground, and even if it's just a broken shard of glass, it's so it feels so important in your hands. And I think thinking about monuments and memorials as this kind of above ground archeology, above ground material culture that you know, the more you dig in to the story of these things, there's so much to uncover. All of that just kind of pushed me forward. So, as I, you know, got to know Dr. Levy, he was the first one to say, like, have you thought about grad school? And I have not again, because I was new, you know, to this whole thing. And so, he was the one who really said, I think, I think you're capable of doing it and and, you

know, if you get the funding, you should go for it. So, I just decided to keep going. I went. I thought my master's would be a terminal degree. And then here I am so.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 12:52
And it seems like you've been you've listed colonial Williamsburg, Monticello. These are all places and sites related to the Revolutionary era and your own research, of course, is on a period that's a little earlier than that. Is that the time period that you're most interested in that this time period in North American history?

Alaina Scapicchio 13:13
Before I started any of this, I was actually way more interested in the Civil War.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 13:15
Really?

Alaina Scapicchio 13:17
Yeah, I just thought that area is probably too crowded already, but it was really as we were doing the archival research for the park service that I got into the witchcraft topic because we were doing work in Westmoreland County, which is where the birthplace George Washington's birthplace is and we were at the county courthouse there, where they have, you know, again, all these archival records, and you know, looking at 17th, 18th century documents, and we came across a record from the order book there right that the court uses ordering Lawrence Washington, who is George's grandfather, to build a ducking stool on his property.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 14:00
What is that?

Alaina Scapicchio 14:03
Yes, and I didn't know either. And my my professor was the one who called it out and a ducking stool was this device. It typically was either used for punishing women or it could be used for discovering witches, right? So, they would either the ducking stool itself would be like you would be strapped to kind of like this chair that's attached to a like a wooden post and they would literally like dunk you in the water several times. Other with witchcraft, particularly other times they would just kind of hog tie them and throw them into the

water. And if the person were to float, that means that you are floating contrary to custom that you're putting off the waters of baptism and that you are in line with the devil, right? But if you sink, you're not, and they'll pull you up quickly, or maybe you drown and but you're not a witch, so it's fine. And I was like a ducking stool like in Virginia. Why would that be? And that just opened up this whole other world of discovering that witchcraft trials and accusations was not just happening in New England. It was not just happening in Salem. It was throughout the colonies, and as far down even today, right as Virginia Beach, there is a full body bronze commemoration of Grace Sherwood who was accused in in what is now Virginia Beach, and we know that she ended up living because there's a probate record from her the end of her life. But her trial does get sent to Williamsburg because we don't have, you know, the documents from their fires. All you know many things have happened there over the years. We don't know exactly what her case ended up being, right, but we know she survives. So, it just got me interested in looking at where else this was happening. Why why is Salem the only one that we talk about and remember and and then combining that with my interest in memory and commemoration, monuments, memorials, I was like, well, let's start looking for these things, like, how many are there? Let's get a list together because I think especially, too at the time that I was really, you know, getting into my master's program and things like that, that was right, as you know, Black Lives Matter was happening, and where people really started to investigate, you know, particularly Confederate statues and monuments and I felt that that was giving all monuments and memorials a bad name. And so, I wanted to with this project encourage people to just look closely at all of these things, right? Not just choose particular ones, but let's learn about all of them. Let's learn about why they were put up, what the message behind them were, and then, you know, as communities, we can decide if they're right for us or not without making kind of flash judgments. And so that's that's what prompted this, and then finding out simply that there were more of these things than I had ever known about is what has kind of driven the project.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 17:01

Tell us more about the scope of this. So how many are there? What do you envision with this project? What are you covering?

Alaina Scapicchio 17:07

Yeah, so there are I should have looked at an exact count before I came on here, approximately, I would say in including some of the smaller ones. I would say in the teens and 20s of what I've discovered now, of course, in and around Salem are going to be the, you know, the majority of them. Between Salem and

Danvers, there are three kind of larger and more official commemorations. And then during the 300th anniversary of the witch trials in many of the surrounding towns that had victims come from there as well, they would erect smaller stones to just the victims from their own town. So, there's several in that area. I found several in Connecticut as well. There is a house marker to Susanna Martin, also from Salem, as far up as Maine and and then, yeah, down into Virginia Beach. Scope was hard in the beginning, you know, because, of course, I think there are also, you know, places like New Orleans that have a lot of kind of interesting history that will start to where witchcraft, or, you know, maybe voodoo and things start to blend. I decided for this project to not veer into that, because I do think that even though maybe public conception might be the same. You're getting into different religious practices and things there. But then, originally, when I when I had envisioned the project, I was really interested in looking at a comparison between the United States and the United Kingdom because the colonists are bringing with them this belief in witchcraft from, you know, the motherland. And so, I thought that that would be interesting. And there are several commemorations in the UK as well, and some groups that are still active in the UK in trying to get these up as well in the United States. But obviously, with the limited funding of a dissertation program, I decided to just keep it in the United States so I would be able to get this all done. So yeah, it's really looking at mainly New England and then Virginia as well. And monuments, memorials are the focus, but also other sites of commemoration, like, there are a few places that do dramatic reenactments of trials, right? So, there's one in Salem. There is one in colonial Williamsburg as well. So, going to those shows, right? Thinking about how they're they're talking about this and, you know, other sites, because I'm also, I'm interested, too, in anniversary commemorations, right? So, what was happening at the bicentennial? What was happening at the tercentenary and within the first hundred years of Salem in particular, right, there's no physical commemorations at all. And so, to kind of look at, you know, were people still thinking about this? What was going on. I have looked at some written types of memory, right? So, things in periodicals or lectures, and that's really the only way that I'm seeing it, kind of in popular memory, at least in the post immediate post-Revolutionary period. It's narrowing in scope as I go right with the dissertation. But really just thinking about the events themselves and how commemoration over time has used memory to kind of to put memory into physical form, I suppose, and what that means to each of these groups that have chosen to do that.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 20:18

Is there a time period when most of these monuments went up?

Alaina Scapicchio 20:22

The first one that I know of that my thesis research was on is the Rebecca Nurse monument, which was dedicated in 1885. So, it's close to the bicentennial, but not, not exactly. And after that is when a few of the these house markers start popping up in New England. But then really it is at the tercentenary in 1992 when it's this explosion, right, because the city of Salem is using 1992 as a yearlong kind of event where they have different programs that they're putting on throughout the year, and their main goal was to have all of this culminate in the city official monument for the Salem witchcraft victims. So, they they have Arthur Miller come and announce the design winner. They have Elie Wiesel come and make a speech, right? So, they're really trying to get a lot of popular attention around this and, yeah, so that's when, you know, this official memorial pops up and when several around the city, the city of Salem and the surrounding towns pop up, and then from there, it's kind of a weird trickle. You know, there are a few in the early 2000s. Once Proctor's Ledge was determined as the execution site for Salem, they build another one there. I believe that was in like 2016, 2017 and the latest one that I found is 2019 in Black Rock, Connecticut. They have in a community garden, they have a plaque and a large stone for Goodwife Knapp, who was also accused and executed in Connecticut. It's a kind of a strange time frame, more recent, I would say. And like I said, there are still people, particularly in Connecticut, a woman named Beth Caruso she's really led the charge in getting more of these things dedicated and things like that, having some small like commemorative bricks at a local fountain. And they've named in Windsor, Connecticut, they've named room in the courtroom for two women who were accused, I think the first two women accused in Connecticut. And so there are still people who are very passionate about recognizing, you know, what they see as an injustice towards these people, of course, primarily women who are accused. And want, you know, local communities to recognize that. So, it's it continues today.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 22:50

So, let's switch gears from public memory and recent memory to more traditional building blocks of history. What collections have been you have you been using at the MHS?

Alaina Scapicchio 23:02

Yes, so when I was planning on on this trip, as I mentioned, my thesis work was on the Rebecca Nurse monument. And so when I'd originally started doing my thesis, and my interest in, you know, anniversaries, that was originally going to be the outline of that project, right, was looking at the 100, the 200, the 300 year, but then with the Nurse monument being dedicated at the 200 everything just got sucked into that, because

there was so much more material there than I than I had imagined. And that was because I argued that the Rebecca Nurse monument was done by her descendants. So, they created the Nurse Monument Association, and they were the ones to solicit funds for this project. And then one at the dedication, you know, they were the ones primarily running it, but they had ministers from the First Church of Salem, First Church of Danvers. And in in 1885 in the moment that they were dedicating this monument I think that there is a huge Congregationalist component to the dedication. And I really found that while they were trying to make up for, you know, the loss of their ancestor, right, they're calling her a martyr. They're saying that, you know, she was this blameless woman falsely accused and went to the grave for refusing to, you know, lie and say that she she had been practicing witchcraft. But at this time, kind of broadly in American history, there's this shift from looking at the United States first kind of colonizers, I guess, as Puritans to Pilgrims, right? And so in the sermons that these ministers are giving at the dedication and in the speeches, there's also this tension between Puritanism and, you know, not explicitly Pilgrim memory, but just saying that, hey, Puritans weren't that bad, you know, like they may have had, you know, these worldviews that are kind of backwards to us now, but you know, overall, they were an upstanding, you know, group of people. And you know, this is kind of an anomaly, right? And so, I found it really interesting, like that they're trying that her descendants were trying to rehabilitate Puritan memory at the same time as they are trying to commemorate their martyred, you know, ancestor. And so, when I was planning for this trip, I wanted to be able to look deeper into that research, because obviously I'll be kind of expanding and reworking that for the dissertation. And I wanted to know, you know, what are other monument societies in Massachusetts and in New England talking about at this time, right? When they're when they're thinking about revolutionary memory, what are the kinds of things that they're saying, right? How, how religious are they being? How patriotic are they being? And so, for the first week I was here, I spent the entire week looking at the records of the Bunker Hill Monument Association, which was, there's so much there, and was very exciting. And my advisor kept texting me and being like, don't get sidetracked, because it's like, there's, there's definitely something there. But yeah, like looking at those records. This week, I've been looking at the records from the 300th anniversary of the Massachusetts Bay Colony in like, the 1930s and I've been looking at the 300th anniversary of the landing of the Pilgrims, right? So, kind of seeing what the discourses are in those records. But then also looking at the MHS, obviously has lots of records dedicated to just witchcraft and the witch trials themselves as well. So, looking at many of the lectures or sermons that were published in the 18th century, sometimes the 19th century, mid-19th century, reflecting back on Salem. Again, just to kind of see how these shifts in memory are happening, right? Like, how are they what terms are they using to describe what happened in Salem, right? Is it hysteria? Is it delusion? Is it panic? So yeah, those are kind of the

collections I've been working with so far. I'm as I continue, I'm going to keep looking at anniversary and documents and other monument building associations, and then for the very last before I leave the MHS houses, the petition of the friends of Rebecca Nurse that tried to attest to her innocence. And so, I as a little treat before I go, that's going to be the last thing I look at and hold in my hands, since I've sat with this for so long in my mind. So, I'm, like, very excited. I'm looking forward to that.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 27:36

So, since Rebecca Nurse is such a key character in your work, we might want to remind our listeners or introduce our listeners who don't know who she is to well, who is Rebecca Nurse?

Alaina Scapicchio 27:48

Who is Rebecca Nurse? Great, yes. So, Rebecca Nurse was an elderly woman, I think, in her mid-70s when she was executed during the Salem witch trials. And she's an interesting figure because she was one of the first, first members of the community to be accused that was not the typical kind of case or person that would be typically accused of witchcraft, right? So, you know, the first three women were, you know, one of them was enslaved, right? The other two were kind of marginalized within the community, seen as kind of aggressive or off putting, or, you know, sometimes poverty right would would make people, you know, an outlier, an outcast. But Rebecca Nurse was a full church member at a time when that was difficult right to do, and she had many children. She had grandchildren. She was well respected within the community. And so, when she was accused, I think people were shocked. And this was, I really think, a turning point within the trials where it seemed like open season, right? Anyone at that point then could be accused. And one of the things that was most striking to me as I was learning about her story is that Rebecca Nurse, again, this old woman and a four year old girl and Rebecca Nurse were arrested on the same day. And I remember the first time I realized that it it actually brought me to tears just thinking about like this elderly woman who is a grandma, you know, being in a jail cell near or with a four-year-old child. It's, it's, it's horrifying, you know. And I think that was the first time for me that it became more than just a topic of research, right? It became really real. And then, yeah, as as Rebecca's trial goes on, you know, you have several of these community members, I believe it's about 40 people who come to her aid and sign this petition and say, hey, we we've known this woman for a long time. We know that she's not practicing witchcraft. The court originally finds her, you know, not, not guilty. But then you know to keep it short and sweet, right, because she's old and she's been, you know, standing up on trial all day, she kind of makes this comment that the court misinterprets, right? They bring a few people into the courtroom. And, you know, she says something you

know about, you know, oh, how could they come among, amongst us again now? And people take that to mean, oh, that she was a witch, right? She was practicing witchcraft with these people. And when they ask her to explain her comment, she doesn't hear the question, and so she doesn't answer. And this whole scenario gets her sentence reversed, right? So, they see her again as guilty, and they end up executing her, and it's like it's just because she's old and she didn't hear the question, and it's just it's so sad. And I think because of because of her being this kind of blameless old woman, right, she becomes a very unproblematic first person to commemorate, right, because for yeah, for almost 200 years, Salem and Danvers, they're like, we don't want to talk about this. Like there are still people living in this community, descendants of accused and accuser, and we don't want to rehash, you know, these, these old wounds. And so when the dedication happens in 1885 you really do see this kind of community reconciliation where, you know, you have descendants of the accusers of Nurse giving funds or giving land to, you know, the Nurse Monument Association. So, it's really kind of a the first community, you know, reckoning, I suppose with with these events and and so yeah, I think that she becomes a really interesting figure in all of this. And for the longest time, she's you know the only Salem victim commemorated, right until we get to the 300 year because in between, in between, those two times, all you get is you know house markers, which are kind of different, just saying, you know, this person lived here. So, it takes a while for the rest of the people executed to even be recognized. And so it's I find that interesting you know why why did someone have to be completely blameless, right for them to be commemorated when we know now you know and even in you know in 19th century, they knew right that this was this whole trial was kind of unjust and that there were several things wrong with it. Even 200 years later, they're still touchy about commemorating every person involved so.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 32:34

You say that you're keeping this petition as a last treat before you complete your fellowship here and you deal with monuments all the time and you've talked about the importance of material culture. What is it about holding something in one's hand or being able to touch something that connects you with the past that you think is so important?

Alaina Scapicchio 33:00

That's a great question. It's funny that you asked that because I was also thinking about this too. There's been a few books here particularly some of the texts on witchcraft, right? Things that maybe, you know, Cotton Mather wrote or you know, there's several things from man named Charles Upham who wrote

about this, you know, pretty prolifically and some of those books have been digitized on the HathiTrust. And so, right, rather than sitting there and photographing a 400-page book, I sit there with the original, right, I take a few pictures if there's things that are different but then I've downloaded, you know, the ones that are on HathiTrust. But even when things are digitized and I think I learned this early on doing archival research in Virginia because you know many genealogists and people doing that kind of hard work have transcribed a lot of those early handwritten, you know, 17th century documents. And so, yeah, you can sit and look at a transcription book and it's helpful very useful. But yeah, holding, holding a document in your hand. It really just makes it all so real. You can see, you know, the splotches of ink where you know they might have messed up or you can see the lines the things crossed out. You can, you know, see all these little details that you know, even in a perfect photo on the internet that it just it doesn't, it doesn't translate. And I think you know when you're someone who has an interest in the past and then you know, if you take that interest and start working on a project, right that, you know, I've now been sitting with this project for like four years to have these people in your mind all the time and to try to you know visualize and create a narrative in your mind that helps you understand it, you know, so that you can begin to help other people understand it. You just spend so much time with them in your mind. And so, I think, to hold something that you know is significant to that part of the story, it just makes it so much more real. Yeah, it's, it's, it's like, you see that it's not just people from a textbook or anything. It's like, these are real people with handwriting that varies from person to person. Sometimes they're easy to read, sometimes they're not. And, yeah, I think just like that material culture aspect going to museums when there's museums where you could touch things and sit on things, it's like it just makes it, it eliminates that barrier that kind of pretense that tells you you can only interact so much with this. You know, you can only think about this right where when you could touch something, when you can really examine it. It's hard to explain I guess. You just get a sense of closeness I think that you're not able to get any way else.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 35:49

A lot of people say or don't think that history matters or has a connection to them. Is this something that is that might be an antidote to that to a certain extent?

Alaina Scapicchio 36:00

I think so I do because even you know, when people are discovering the history of their their families and things, you know, it's like when you find a birth certificate or when you find a photograph from, you know, the 1920s it's like, oh my gosh. It makes it so much more real. Even, you know, I will say even myself, as a

historian, my my uncle lately has been doing 'Throwback Thursdays' but he's sending all these old photographs of our family, right, that he's had. And, you know, seeing photographs of my family from, yeah, from the 1920s from the turn of the century. You know, seeing, you know, my great, great grandpa on horseback as a New York City policeman. It's like, oh my gosh, you know, like, and I'm a historian, but I've never, you know, it's not until you really see these things that it's like, no, these are real people, just like us. I think it's, it's like, history doesn't have to be pretentious. It doesn't have to be, you know, this mysterious thing. You just have to find what it is that interests you and then go do something where you can actually interact with that, right? Whether it is at a you know public heritage site you know just walking on the battleground or you know, whether it is going to an archive, right, and discovering your family history, or, you know, looking at documents that pertain to a time that you're you're interested in. The line between, you know, someone who is interested in history in a Jeopardy type sense, and an actual historian is is not that it's not that far. It doesn't take that much so.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 37:30

Something you said there also about how you realize that these people from the past are just like us, and you can then sort of visualize also how people who are absolutely terrified of the unknown might behave in a way that would later on people would look back and say, that is reprehensible. How could they do that, right? Is there a lesson there also about putting yourself in the shoes of people who are acting in a way that later on, you would say, why on earth would they do that? And you hope that you would have that you would be one of the few people who have the strength to say, this is wrong. But it's not that easy is it in our own lives compared to the past. Emotion, the pull, the fear of being in the moment is real.

Alaina Scapicchio 38:18

Absolutely. When I tell people that this is what I study, right, the first question, even though I'm always like, memory commemoration is always like well, were they, you know, it's either were they witches or you know, like, why? Yeah, why were people so reactive to this? And it's like, yeah, you have to think, especially being I always make this joke because I'm from Florida, right? And my mom jokes that I'm like, a city suburb girl. I'm really not a city girl. I'm definitely a suburb girl. Being in the city has taught me that, but I was raised on a street that had streetlights right everywhere. There's streetlights everywhere in Orlando, and so then, like, going to places like Virginia, where there's, like, no streetlights in places and it's pitch black at night made me realize like oh yeah, this is scary. You know, like, when you're out in the middle of nowhere at night, it's scary. And so, thinking about these people who lived in the 17th century, right? They're like they are

surviving every day. At night, it gets dark. It gets quiet. It gets scary, and they're deeply devoted and religious people. You can certainly see how very quickly this could become, yeah, a panic, right? And so, I try to yeah, I try to make people see that it wasn't just they hated women and they wanted to kill them all, or, you know, that kind of the popular imaginings that we think of today. I was thinking too, you know, thinking about challenges, right, as a historian. I think that right now, right, we're living in a time of division. We're living in a time of uncertainty. I think there's certainly been a lot of mistrust of history and of the past. You know, I know that as a young person, right and my family will certainly tell you, I'm an activist of many causes, right? But, you know, I think seeing, I think, with several young people as well, kind of this rebellious disdain for the past almost and saying that there's been so much wrong right done in the past that why should we even look back at that, right? It's all bad. It's all negative. And I think that's a really dangerous way of thinking, right? I think that it's okay to look at the past and say, yeah, these things were horrible, but you're right find that human element to say, okay, but why? Why were these things happening, right? And that doesn't mean you have to excuse it, right? But if we just say, oh, it's all so bad. It's not worth looking at. Not to make the old adage, you know, history repeats. But it's like, you know, we have to look at these things and find some kind of lesson from them, right or at least, you know, look for these aspects of humanity that are, of course, going to repeat, right, because we're emotional beings. We're reactive creatures. And so, yeah, I think it's worth, you know, trying to humanize even the people that we find did things so horrible, you know, that we would never want to be around them because we can't just write it off, you know, as all being just too bad, you know. We have to, we have to try to confront it and and that's why I think this project is interesting too, and that there's still so much modern interest, right? I think people just have a thirst for finding some kind of justice right out of these, out of these situations, and in looking for that justice, we can't ignore the ugly parts. We have to kind of work through them in order to find some kind of peace I think with the past.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 41:56
Any unexpected finds in the collections?

Alaina Scapicchio 42:00
So, in the records of the Bunker Hill Monument Association, there is a book written which I'm like, why can't they do this for every monument? George Washington Warren wrote a history of the Bunker Hill Monument Association, which is just like, awesome. Thanks for doing that. But the kind of subtitle to this book is 'Monuments Themselves Memorials Need.' I saw that, and I was like ahhh! And it's a weird,

obviously very 19th century sentence, but saying like, we need to dive into the history of these memorials, right? We need to memorialize monuments by writing down, you know, what they mean, what they meant to the people putting them up, how much they spent, you know, how long it took. I just thought that that sentence perfectly summed up everything I've been trying to do for the last several years. And so it's very random, but that was my favorite unexpected find. The other one that is exciting to me but probably more boring for other people is that I found a pamphlet from the Nurse Monument Association about a basket picnic that they had done to raise money for the Nurse monument before it was dedicated. And I had seen references to this basket picnic several times as I was writing my thesis but had not seen the original pamphlet. So, seeing that was also like, ah, that's fun, too.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 43:28

Any last comments or thoughts as we wrap up?

Alaina Scapicchio 43:30

No, I again, I'm just, you know, so grateful for for the opportunity and for this, you know, discussion about memory and public history and, yeah, I'll just, you know, say again, if you're out there and you're interested in the past, go check out your local courthouse or your local historical society because they are, they're dying to speak with you.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 43:52

[Outro music fades in] Historians and Their Histories is produced by the Research Department at the Massachusetts Historical Society. We would like to thank Alaina Scapicchio, a PhD candidate at the University of South Florida, and Sam Hurwitz, Podcast Producer at the MHS. Music in this episode is by Podington Bear. Please see our show notes for details and thank you for listening. Please also rate, review and subscribe to both the MHS produced shows wherever you listen to podcasts.