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Live Members Week Episode

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 00:00

[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, and today we have a very special episode of Historians and Their Histories for the Historical Society's member week programming. We are interviewing four people at the same time and in front of a live audience at the MHS headquarters on Boylston Street in Boston. Regular listeners know that we generally ask each of our interviewees six general questions. For today's program, however, we are going to abbreviate those questions, ask only three general questions with follow ups as necessary, and then allow our audience members to ask questions of our research fellows as well. Our four guests also have the ability to ask follow up questions of their fellow interviewees. This program was recorded in early June of 2025. Let us now introduce our interviewees for this episode. Betsy Klima is professor of English at the University of Massachusetts-Boston, and a recipient of the MHS NEH Long Term Fellowship sponsored by the MHS and the National Endowment for the Humanities. She also previously received a short-term fellowship from the MHS, and she is the author of At Home in the City: Urban Domesticity in American Literature and Culture, 1850-1930 and Urban Rehearsals and Novel Plots in the Early American City. Arthur Kamya is a PhD candidate at Boston University and a former recipient of support from the New England Regional Fellowship Consortium, which the MHS founded and administers. Arthur holds a BA from the University of Pennsylvania, an MA from Clark University and a JD from Harvard Law School. Camden Elliott is a newly minted PhD from Harvard University. He will also be taking up a position as Assistant Professor of History at Auburn University. He has held both a short-term fellowship from the MHS and received support from the aforementioned New England Regional Fellowship Consortium. Madeline DeDe-Panken is a recipient of the Mary B. Wright Environmental History Short Term Fellowship from the MHS and a PhD candidate at the Graduate Center at the City University of New York. She holds both a bachelor's and master's degree from Clark University.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 02:27

So, we're going to get started with the first question, and the first one with general one we always start these with, and the first one we'll go we'll start with Betsy and go down the line here. But why did you become a student of the past? Did you have particular books, authors, teachers, or other sources or individuals that helped you cultivate this interest in history? Betsy.

Betsy Klima 02:52

Thank you. Thank you all for being here today. This is very exciting and a little scary. I grew up in Hingham, Massachusetts, on the south shore, and so I suppose that I was surrounded by history just by growing up there. I was there for the Bicentennial parade in 1976. I'm now revealing that I'm a proud member of Gen X. I grew up at a time when the teachers at Hingham High were changing the curriculum to emphasize more interdisciplinary learning. So that started in ninth grade with course on humanities, and then in 10th grade we had American studies, where I remember walking around to look at old houses in Hingham. None of this made much of an impression on me, and it wasn't until my senior year, when I took AP European History with a phenomenal teacher, Jim Kirkcaldy, who this was a class where the most exciting part to me was that we did these everyone who took AP history will remember these DBQs, document based questions, where we looked at primary sources, read them carefully and use them to make arguments. For me, this was I was like, oh, this is for me. This is it. So maybe it's a little surprising that I ended up becoming an English professor. I teach at UMass Boston, but I have been so fortunate along the way to have worked with some phenomenal historians who taught me approaches that make me a little bit of an oddball in my own discipline but have made me very happy to be here at MHS.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 04:35

Camden?

Camden Elliott 04:37

Great. Yes. Thank you so much everyone for being here and thank you for the invitation. I feel like my path for, like, so many things in history, kind of just serendipity. I mean, I was born and raised in West Virginia, kind of grew up, kind of outdoorsy type, and I went to Georgetown University, the aforementioned place I got my bachelor's degree from, to the School of Foreign Service, actually, to

study government and to basically try to see the world, go abroad, do things, and no disrespect to government international relations, all that. But I found it as a discipline, unable to kind of answer the questions that I found most compelling about why people do things, about the way conflicts begin, the way people live their lives. And so, I had to take, you know, a kind of generic methods class that they just gave to the most junior member of the department, who was a guy named Dagomar Degroot, and he taught it as a survey of something called environmental history, right? This kind of, to me, at least newfangled idea that nature is kind of co-constituted by people's ideas about it. And he assigned, in week four or five, a book called Mosquito Empires: Ecology and War in the Greater Caribbean, 1620-1914 by John McNeill and this book takes about 300 years of kind of geopolitical history and looks at it through the lens of the kind of humble mosquito and the pathogens that it could carry. And I showed up to class, and basically, as an eager undergrad, often is I wouldn't shut up about it, and I think to get me to stop talking about it, he said, you know, he teaches here, right? John happened to be at Georgetown, and so became my undergraduate advisor, mentor, and I mean, more than anyone, kind of shaped the way that I kind of think about doing history. So, all of that just because I happened to be in the right place.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 06:32
Perfect.

Arthur Kamya 06:34
Thank you very much. So, my root, I guess here, was sort of somewhat circuitous. I did not, I was not a history major. I hardly took any history classes at university. I was in the business school, and then I thought I was going to business and law. I went to law school, but as a job being lawyer, I fell into [unintelligible] which I think, you know, academic historian sort of malign and poo poo, you know, but I devoured sort of [David] McCullough and [David] Halberstam and [Ron] Chernow and, you know, this is sort of, you know, I think academics, we should be thankful for these people for actually making history popular and accessible. You know, that is how I sort of got into history, you know, I was just through reading, you know, popular historians. When I applied to grad school, the only school I could get into was Clark University, and which is not bad it's wonderful school, and actually I went there to study English, but I fell in with wonderful old school historian, if I may call him that Drew McCoy, who, you know, instead of taking sort of English classes, I ended up taking all three classes with with

Drew McCoy, and he introduced me to the wonders of, you know, this is a debate about Republicanism and Democracy. And, you know, we get sort of reading [Stanley] Elkins The Age of Federalism: The Early American Republic, 1788 - 1800 and you know, the two things that McCoy gave me, ultimately, was [Sean] Wilentz The Rise of American Democracy: Jefferson to Lincoln and [Daniel] Walker Howe What Hath God Wrought: The Transformation of America, 1815–1848 sort of introduced me to, you know, I guess a political culture, you know, sort of two, two views of political culture. And I think that's to me, sort of, those are my foundations. You know, when I come to BU [Brendan] McConville gives me John Murren, and I try to do political culture in 17th century. So, kind of, I think that's sort of my story. It's, I guess, serendipity. And really, I think it was Drew McCoy and, you know, going to Clark to do an MA English, which ended up being history, I guess so, History and English and kind of related, I guess. So, yeah, that's my story. Thank you.

Madeline DeDe-Panken 08:46

I'm also a fellow former Clarkie Clark University student, and I also took courses with Drew McCoy, who's a wonderful professor, and I think, a through thread of something that everyone has said today already about what has inspired them to do history has been excellent teachers and great mentors and people who believed in them from the beginning and shaped you know, how they approached history, and that's very forefront of my mind right now. My undergraduate and master's advisor, Amy Richter, who is a Clark University historian, just passed away yesterday. And not to bring the mood down, but she was an absolutely incredible role model and teacher, and certainly why I am where I am today because she was somebody who really encouraged everybody in her classroom to dig in, to dig into the sources, to dig into the stories. How I got the history was certainly through the stories. I was an American Girl [Doll] raised child, maybe dating myself to being a millennial, but kind of experiencing those early fictionalized stories of girlhood specifically, really impacted how I saw history as some place where I could be imagining myself into and I think that's still kind of where I always return to when I'm in the archives is I really like the minutia and the stories of it and that kind of little bit of nosiness too of really digging into kind of what it meant to really be a person in the past, and so I guess I'm here because of teachers, and I'm here for the stories.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 11:11

Did you have a sense of what an historian does day to day before you became a student of the past?

Betsy Klima 11:19

I would say no, but if I had known, I would never have gone the English route, because, because what I get to do every day now that Peter Drummey has said that I am a historian, what I get to do every day is so fun and so exciting. And it does go back to those, as I say to those DBQs, and I should have said that I went on to have an interdisciplinary major at Wesleyan University where I went for my undergrad studies that was literature, history and philosophy. And there the historian who impacted me was named Ann-Louise Shapiro and we worked, I had a class with her that was a history seminar on 19th century French criminality, and we were looking at all these criminal records from France, looking at female criminals. So, these materials that we were looking at are so they're so interesting, and they're so there's room for a lot of interpretation, I think. And maybe, maybe maybe this is other than historians can disagree with me here, but I feel like the job of the historian is to look at these materials from the past with a sort of, like an imaginative way of, kind of getting back into that mindset. There's some, there's some materials that speak to you, I think, more strongly than others, certainly, but I feel like that's what a historian does all day, looks at looks at materials from the past, reads them, thinks about them, and tries to interpret them, so that other people, as you say, Arthur so, so that other people can read them and and understand them. For me, those the books that I've written have been aimed at an academic audience, and so the other thing that I'm doing here is to try to change my writing style to appeal to a broader audience. And I think that's something that historians have done much, much better than people in my discipline by and large. So, I feel like my best exemplars, the people who I want to write like are historians.

Arthur Kamya 13:23

The historians I, you know, Drew McCoy like English historians like sort of David Cannadine they're good, great communicators, you know. They tell wonderful stories, right? And I guess sort of the downside is, you know, you don't see all the hard work that goes into it, you know. So, in a sense, I've been sort of disappointed. But when I find out what really history is about, it's about sort of, you know, it's gumshoe work, you know, going from one outcome to another, sort of, you know, planning when you go to eat and, you know, so there's all these sort of workaday stuff that goes in that that maybe, but that's not what attracted me what attracted me. What attracted me was a wonderful story that I hear sort of the dead, you know, David Cannadine or, you know, Drew McCoy or, you know, so these are the

great communicators. But I guess they're very good at narrating what they do, and they're able to sort of, maybe, you know, they don't tell you how the sausage is made, maybe, which was a good thing. Maybe, I don't know.

Madeline DeDe-Panken 14:23
I think one thing that clicked for me was kind of the pattern recognition was kind of switching from like, okay, like, I have all these interesting facts that are going on and floating around, but what really congeals it into doing history is recognizing the arc of it and the pattern of it, and how we can see change over time, how we can see all these disparate facts and lives kind of come together into something that is deeply meaningful and kind of affecting of society at large.

Camden Elliott 15:16
Yeah I mean, I think, like my colleagues here, yeah, I did not really realize what being a historian would entail, but I the first time I went into an archive, it was Library of Congress Manuscript Collection. Sorry, I was in DC otherwise I would have been here. You know, there is an allure, right? There is something that does capture you about seeing people's stories, about being exposed to that. And then the challenge is, of course, how to narrate that in a way, and sometimes it is just letting those those documents speak. But I mean, yeah, the process is interesting. And the thing that places like Mass Historical do make possible.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 15:54
Well, so you mentioned the Library of Congress, the National Archives, it's down there. I would say that the Massachusetts Historical Society is second only to those institutions when it comes to our collections. But what's the point of having these collections if we don't have people here to make use of them? So, let's learn about the projects that these wonderful scholars are working on at the MHS. And I thought we would go chronologically by your time period that you study. So, we'll start with Cam we'll go to Arthur, and then to Betsy, and then to Madeline.

Camden Elliott 16:24
Okay, well, thank you. Very happy to be the earliest. I'm often I find myself the earliest in a room of at least American historians, because, yeah, I work on the the 17th and 18th centuries. My dissertation

project was an environmental history of the Anglo-Wabanaki wars. So, these are a series of conflicts from the 1670s think kind of Northern theater of King Philip's War through the 1760s think French Indian War, Seven Years War. And what I do in kind of each chapter of the project is I take a different part of the non-human world. I take trees, I take non-human animals, I take agriculture, I take pathogens, and I try to narrate the same kind of more or less 100 years of conflict to arrive at kind of insights for how ideas about the natural world shape conflict, how conflict shapes those ideas. This kind of dialectic relationship, yeah. So that was what I was at MHS for. It should eventually be a book. So, if anybody knows a publisher, let me know, I'm shopping.

Arthur Kamya 17:34

Thank you very much. I guess my own project is about, essentially, trying to make the 17th century sort of more relevant, I guess, you know. I my own impression, sort of, at least all the history classes I took was, you know, people are very good at studying the 18th century, and then they project back a little bit to the 17th century, but they really don't take the 17th century seriously, right? So, essentially, one thing that's, for example, sticks to my mind is there's sort of a lot of resonances between the Adams family, you know, and the Winthrop family, right? You know, the Adams family has been sort of well-studied in this institution, right? You know, the inner lives, you know, sort of the reading habits, you know, the of the Adams, right? The Winthrop's, you know, also have the same thing. But, you know, maybe we haven't paid as much attention to it as much, right? So one of the two documents that I actually looked at when I was working here were sort of legal manuals that were sort of held in the holdings of the of the of the Winthrop's by William Lombard, who is, I guess, you know, he, he was a justice of the peace in the county of Kent in England, right? And he writes about, sort of, you know, justice sessions, and, you know, the duties of constables and and a couple of them are actually annotated by, I think, maybe Winthrop's father, I think, right. So, essentially, to me, you know, that's, maybe it's something that, that that attracted me. I was sort of trying to understand, you know, when, when Winthrop is, is trying, is making law about, sort of, you know, first appointing the first constables in Massachusetts, right? Is he referring to this? But, you know, to this, you know, you know, this manual by William Lombard. So that's sort of, you know, that's one way in which I'm, I'm trying to make, you know, trying to think of the Winthrop's in the same way that maybe, you know, people are thinking about the Adam's and and and Massachusetts Historic Society is, of course, perfect for both of them.

Betsy Klima 19:44

Great. I came here first as a short-term fellow, and that gave me four weeks to work on a project that was on a novel by Catharine Maria Sedgwick called Hope Leslie, or, Early Times in the Massachusetts which is set actually in King's Phillips war. So, it's the Catharine Maria Sedgwick's archives are here. And that was it was pretty easy to write a proposal that said, I really need to come here for a period of time to work on this project. For me so, so I've been at UMass Boston since the year 2000. So, I've been there a long time. I have a busy life and my big teaching load, and so it can be hard to carve out the time to really spend on my research and writing. And the short-term fellowship came at a time when I could it allowed me this time to focus in a way that I hadn't had in a long time, because I wasn't at home, because I was here, because all the documents were here, because there's an amazing staff who finds everything for you. It's like concierge service. It's phenomenal. But as a result, I went a lot faster than I thought I would. I mean, I thought I would need more time to look at the material than I did. And so, as I was finishing my work for that article, I started working on a project that became the project that my long term fellowship is for. I started thinking about I was, I was really interested in thinking about people who women writers who had shaped Massachusetts and had were Boston writers that really people don't think about very much anymore today. One of those writers is Susanna Haswell Rowson and who lived in Massachusetts for two significant periods of her life. Her father was a Royal Navy officer. She was born in England in 1762, and her father was a Royal Navy officer stationed here in Boston in the 1760s which was, I don't need to tell you a very it was a very conflictual time to be a customs officer. That's where he worked was in the Customs Service. William Haswell, he came back. So, Susanna's mother died in childbirth. William Haswell married a Massachusetts woman, and he went back to England to get his daughter, and she lived in Hull in Nantasket village for her childhood, until her father was a loyalist. The family was taken prisoner in 1775, and she was kept under house arrest. Guess where? In Hingham, where I grew up? I was like, I totally get this, what it feels like to be a prisoner in a house in Hingham. So that became the basis of the project that I'm working on now. And so, there are wonderful documents here that shed light on what it was like to live in Boston during that the 1760s through 1775 and some of these things, you know, it is, it's, you read, I don't know, letters from a loyalist woman writing to her brother. And you might spend, you know, you spend quite a bit of time looking at this stuff. Maybe that'll be a sentence or two. Maybe it'll be something that'll lend some some color, verisimilitude to what you're doing. It can be very like that the hours that you spend research sometimes don't result in very much writing, but this so, so there's that period that has been,

there's been a wealth of material, but I would say one of the really fun moments, and this just talks about the breadth of the collections here. When I got here for my long-term fellowship, I learned a lot about Susanna Haswell Rowson's brother Robert Haswell, who is a favorite among the MHS staff. There's a portrait of Bob. You can go visit it and see what he looked like. He was a first a sailor and then eventually a ship captain, and he kept the log for the first American circumnavigation of the globe, for that trip on the Columbia Rediviva. I don't even know if that's how you pronounce it, but reading that log, pulling it out and looking at his handwriting, understanding that there's more than one writer in the family, the log is actually quite lyrical in a lot of passages. So that was interesting to see, but it gave me a much better sense for for the family and the people surrounding the the author that I was working on, and at the very beginning of this fellowship, really shifted my direction into doing some much more biographical work, because that's what the materials gave me.

Madeline DeDe-Panken 24:33

I'm working on my dissertation, which is on the history of foraging, and I'm a little bit later than, I think, a lot of researchers who come to MHS, and so I'm particularly grateful for the opportunity to kind of play around in the archives and dig around, and for all the hard work that the librarians are doing, kind of finding me materials that maybe might not typically be pulled. So my work focuses on this late 19th, early 20th century moment, which is around the rising popularity of mushrooms, yeah, I pause for reaction, as an object of scientific and culinary and leisure opportunity, and so my work particularly focuses on women's roles in foraging cultures during this period, and also on kind of the legitimization of knowledge, whose knowledge is legitimized as scientific, safe knowledge, whose knowledge is delegitimized as potentially deadly knowledge, and how that kind of impact how people view one another and their relationship with the earth, and their relationship with what science can do for society. And so, while I've been here, I've been kind of digging in many realms, because that's what the project has called for. So, I've been looking at some cookery materials, some cookbooks. I've been looking at records of the Boston Society of Natural History, and I've been really digging into the papers of one woman, Cora Clarke, who's who was very active in the botanical community during her time period. She was 1851 to 1932 and her father was a Unitarian minister and a theologian. And MHS has a wealth of papers of the entire family, which has been so wonderful to look at not just this one individual, but also kind of the networks that she is creating and sustaining writing to her aunt in Georgia, who is looking at Oak tree specimens and thinking about sending them back to her. Writing, you know, to other

folks in the family, and really engaging in the botanical and scientific community of her day. And I've been particularly excited to get to look at some of her actual botanical materials that the librarians were nice enough to to pull for me and work with me on to see some of like the original mosses and lichens and botanical specimens that she collected.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 27:55
I'll just point out that we love projects that deal with the 20th and 21st centuries. We are still collecting. The Historical Society's first in the nation. We are still collecting. We grow by about 150 linear feet every year. There's a lot of material in the 20th and 21st century, and we encourage folks to dig into them as well. We'd like to be known for those wonderful collections as well. Are there any follow ups among the panelists before we move on to the next question?

Betsy Klima 28:21
Have you done mushroom foraging much? I ask because I did a year as a Fulbright on a Fulbright in the Czech Republic, where mushroom hunting is a national pastime. And I'm just curious if you've had that opportunity?

Madeline DeDe-Panken 28:38
Absolutely. I fell backwards into this project from what else but an archival find. And I grew up in upstate New York, kind of very outdoorsy, but kind of really only knowing what not to eat. And through this project, I have kind of become an avid forager myself. It's it's kind of mushroomed into life a little bit, if you'll excuse the pun. And I have really just found it so fascinating and gratifying to literally be able to walk in the footsteps of my historical actors, looking for some of the same organisms in some of the same places, literally, and thinking about, you know, how, how history continues to rhyme through that. And so, yeah, and it's just a wonderful, fun and really gratifying hobby that has kind of taken over my life.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 29:51
Alright, we're going to do our last general question, and then we'll go to questions from the audience. You can ask a question specifically of any of the panelist or a question for all of them, so please specify that that's there on your note cards there. Alright, so let's go to this one. What have been some

unexpected finds for you in the archives, and both Cam and Arthur also had support from the New England Regional Fellowship Consortium, which is a travel fellowship that goes to 30 you can go up to 30 institutions in New England. You can bring in material from other institutions that are part of the consortium as well. But and I'll let anyone start who wants to start unexpected fines.

Madeline DeDe-Panken 30:32
Well, I had no I will, kind of, you know, jump off the last answer that I had. I had no idea that that MHS had actual botanical specimens kind of hiding among the leaves among the pages of their collection. And so that was just such a, such a great find, and so fun to be able to really, you know, really engage with.

Arthur Kamya 31:02
I mean, I don't know whether I have an unexpected find, I guess following up on women, to me, one of the most fascinating persons I've come across that and you know, some of her letters are here is Elizabeth Fones Winthrop Feake Hallett gives her full name, right? She's a cousin you know her. She's a cousin of the Winthrop children. She marries Adam. She's before she's widowed. You know, three days after the land here, I think it's 1630 Adam unfortunately drowns. She gets married to an English to an English sort of merchant called Feake. And she sort of separates herself from him. She takes up with his, you know, manager account called Hallett. And she moves to Connecticut. She moves to Greenwich, you know, she starts intriguing in sort of the, you know, the border wars, and all the while she's actually corresponding with both her father-in-law, you know, uncle, sort of old Governor Winthrop, and the son too, right? And she's, you know, I guess, you know, there are lots of fascinating stories, but, you know, she's one of those almost too good to be true. And one of what, one of the interesting things about, is what sort of the broad approach of the, you know, of the persistence of marriage and divorce. You know, essentially, you know, they continue corresponding with her. I mean, she's their kin anyway. And you know, even after, sort of people write to them and tell her that, you know, she's basically an adulteress and, you know, but, but anyway, I'd like to see more of her letters. I know, I've seen them online, you know, but I, you know, I'd like to see her to like to see her writing sort of letters in real life. I think that's something that I'd like to follow up on.

Camden Elliott 32:51

Yeah, I mean, so basically, every time I go into any archive, a thing that I'm looking for are traces or words are the lives of Wabanaki people, right? So indigenous folks that live in kind of what is now Maine, Canadian Maritimes, Vermont, New Hampshire. And it might be surprising to some folks, and it is even surprising to some historians, that these are all over archives, at MHS, at Rhode Island Historical, at Maine Historical, which are some of the places I got to go on my NERFC. And one story that really stands out to me is there's a moment where one of the Dunbars, fairly important family, is sitting around a fire and talking to probably Penobscot man, who he says was a great captain in their wars, right? So has fought against the English and some of these, these conflicts that are ongoing. And he just lays out to Dunbar, kind of, his philosophy of land and what it means to and how it can't be owned by people. And Dunbar writes it down, it seems, in a way, based on everything we know it's fairly faithful, because he is so kind of struck dumb by this that he's just like and then he said, this isn't this. And all of this has been here and has been in archives forever. And when people are willing to look and take that seriously, it can, I think, kind of up in some of these traditional histories. So MHS is replete with those.

Betsy Klima 34:20

I talked a little bit about Robert Haswell. I believe there may be a ship model of his Columbia Rediviva in these collections. For me, recently, I've been looking at a lot of newspapers, and these are newspapers some of them are newspapers in the MHS collections, and some of them are newspapers that are on microfilm. What's been really neat in looking at these newspapers has been so mostly this I told you about Susanna Haswell Rowson's early life, when she lived in Nantasket then she became an actress. She lived in England for a while. She came back here as an actress, and then was was on the stage in Boston for a year and then ended up touring Rhode Island before she retired to start a school. So I was, I'm looking through these newspapers for theatrical notices, for reviews, for mentions, and not just of her personally, but just to get a sense for what the broader scene is like and so one kind of a kind of poignant moment for me was just stumbling across a newspaper in which my my original project, which was to look at these three different women, Judith Sargent Murray, Sarah Wentworth Apthorp Morton and Susanna Haswell Rowson like flash before my eyes, because in one issue of this newspaper, you have Judith Sargent Murray advertising to her subscribers to The Gleaner, which was the compendium of all of her work. And she's asking for people to invest some money so that she can afford to get the

printing presses started and people will buy this like tome. There's a review of Sarah Wentworth, one of Sarah Wentworth Apthorp Morton's books. There's a glowing review. It goes on and on and on. She was very popular among the literati in Boston at the time. And in that same issue, there's an ad for for Mrs. Rowson's Academy for Young Ladies because Susanna is giving up the her acting career. She will keep writing, but that's on hold for now, and she is starting a school because she has to make a living. And so there you sort of see the highs and lows, I guess, in one issue of these three people together. So that was quite a quite a moment.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 36:42
All right, thank you all. We are now happy to take questions from our audience. Would you like the microphone or would you like to give me your sheet of paper? We're to you first? Alright.

Audience member 36:58
You know, I, I, I am so inspired by the joy you know that we all share and love history and we see it repeated and just curious because when do you know when you got so excited about a project when do you know you've hit the high points and you're ready, the research is done and you're ready to propagate it somehow, or document it, or share it and to perpetuate that joy. How do you know it's done? Or is it going to lead you into you know when do you when do you stop researching if you do?

Madeline DeDe-Panken 37:34
My advisor would love this question.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 37:39
Anyone can start.

Camden Elliott 37:40
No. I mean, I mean, I think, I think we're all laughing up here, because in some ways it's an almost unanswerable question, right? Like for almost no topic will you have fully exhausted everything that there ever is to see. But there does come a time where you start to notice patterns, things that rhyme, and for a variety of reasons, be it, you know, kind of the base concerns of jobs and job markets, of tenure and promotion, or just to be like, you know, the kind of curve every gain has reached such a kind of

marginal thing that it is just time to to write. But I will say that I think that part of the import is at the kind of outset, at the stage of choosing and running down leads is to find something that one will continue to be inspired by and want to keep, you know, researching and thinking about. But yeah, I don't think that, at least, even for what I do, I don't think that I have exhausted all of that, but I think that, you know, at a certain point it is time to share it with the world. So that's what motivates me.

Arthur Kamya 38:44
The only thing I can add for me is when, when the research sort of starts talking back to me, in a sense, right, you know? So when I'm, you know, that's, that's, that's what I know, you know, because I came with this idea, and then suddenly it tell, you know, it reflects something totally different, but something sort of interesting and and then I know I have something, you know, that's, that's how I tell.

Betsy Klima 39:06
I think it was maybe Don Murray who said that writing is never done. It's only due. I don't I feel like it, it's so hard to feel like something is really finished. And I feel like, for for those of us who you know things are due, you know, we have to write dissertation, and that's going to be due, we have to get a job, and if we have a job, we better finish that dissertation, and maybe it's going to be finished faster than we thought it was going to be. And then we're going to, if we're lucky, we're going to go up for tenure. And if we're going up for tenure, we're on a clock, and we have to put that project out. I remember early in my career talking to my advisor, who has been a true champion for me for a long, long time now. And I had won an NEH fellowship I had a little, a young child, I did not know how I was going to teach a three, three load and write a book and get tenure, and I didn't know, and I I got a full year NEH Fellowship, which was a huge gift to me. This was after my second year at UMass Boston, and I remember talking to my advisor, and she said, now you can write the book you want to write. And I just, I keep thinking about that, because I feel like now, now I'm writing the book I want to write, but I don't think we have the freedom to do that for a little while in the in the academic business, sad say. So, I don't think it's ever really done. So maybe I don't know, what do you think Madeline?

Madeline DeDe-Panken 40:41
Yeah, I think it's hard to kind of put it away and say this is enough and like, this is ready. You know, it's very hard to to figure out when it's ready. For me I think it's when, yeah, maybe the research becomes a

little recursive and it starts morphing into something else. And I have to start listening to, oh, maybe there's something else going on that I'm going to want to look at next. And so, this thing has to be ready to be shared. And I think part of it, hopefully, is also like, okay, excited to share this, right? Like I found something, and people should know. And so certainly when it, when it comes to, you know, conferences and presentations and things like that, and feeling ready to share in that way, it's been very natural of like, I found a thing, and I, I want, I want you to know it.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 41:49
There's a phenomenon that happens here, which is that on the last week, maybe the last two days of your fellowship time at the MHS, you're going to find several collections that you did not even know existed. That's that's happened to me, and by the nods, it's happened to other people too. This just happens, and that happened to me. I had a short-term fellowship at MHS as well as a regional fellowship. And I also haven't even looked at what the BPL [Boston Public Library] has in their special collections. I mean, there's just so much there, and you want to be exhaustive, but my dissertation advisor two words he said, dissertations end. See it, it's all he said. There's something to be said about the time period you study too the sources. There are fewer sources, the farther back you go, Renaissance period versus the 20th century, with this, with this much more of that.

Audience member 42:44
I'm always looking for new reading material. So, I'm wondering if you can give us a book that was inspirational when you started a historian, or a recent book that you just loved and would like everyone else to experience.

Madeline DeDe-Panken 43:05
So my kind of number one go to never taught a class without it, giving it to everyone I know, is Laurel Thatcher Ulrich's A Midwife's Tale: The Life of Martha Ballard, Based on Her Diary, 1785-1812 which is probably a very well-known volume around here, but it is also one of the things that made me want to become a historian because what she does with kind of pulling on the threads of one woman's life to create an entire world is just an absolute master class. Somebody that I'm feeling inspired by right now is Tiya Miles, who recently came out with a book on Harriet Tubman and also has a absolutely wonderful kind of shorter volume called Wild Girls: How the Outdoors Shaped the Women Who

Challenged a Nation about women's experiences outdoors and how that fomented kind of the seeds of of activism in them from early ages.

Betsy Klima 44:05

So, two books, one, one, really foundational book that I loved and has shaped me my work is Jane Tompkins's Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction, 1790-1860. It's a book that talks about the work that novels and literature do in in the world. It's excellent. But the book I'm reading right now that I'm loving is called Jane Austen's Bookshelf: The Women Writers who Shaped a Legend. It's by Rebecca Romney. I see some people nodding. It's great. It's super lively. It's very well written. She is a rare books collector, and she and dealer, really. And she is, she is able to write in such a way that, you know, she's knowledgeable, but she's able to convey that joy and excitement of discovery really well in her writing. She is considered, she's like, constantly thinking one thing and then learning another, and she's taking great pleasure and being wrong. Finally, reading a whole bunch of books that she never read that she's never read, and so it's very fun. It's a it's it's not I got it as a as a book what do you call it? A desk copy for teaching? I thought I might teach it in a class, which I don't think I'll do, but I've really been enjoying reading it, and it's a great model for lively writing.

Camden Elliott 45:20

Well, I already mentioned the book I always go to for this Mosquito Empires: Ecology and War in the Greater Caribbean, 1620-1914 is by John McNeill. So, I'll say two other books. The one which folks, especially at the MHS, are probably familiar with, is Our Beloved Kin: A New History of King Philip's War which is Lisa Brooks's new history of King Philip's war. I think it's published 2018 it's it's brilliant, it's powerful, it's poignant. And I, when I encountered it, I was beginning to write basically the story from the moment that she ends. So that is a very important book for me. And then the other one, a little bit newer, is Robert Michael Morrissey, has a book called People of the Ecotone Environment and Indigenous Power at the Center of Early America. It's about the Illinois and within, like historical post contact time the Illinois move into kind of prairie grasslands and become buffalo hunters, although they are not a horse people, and it is one of those kind of, like begins deep time, long histories that really show kind of, I think, the power of environmental history and what we can do with kind of nontraditional sources in dialog with scientists and so on. So that is not as light of a read. It's it's a

dense, very well footnoted, but I think that it is one of the best books on Native American history to come out in the last five years.

Audience member 46:37
When researching something, do you sometimes find a story that caused you to change direction of your research?

Madeline DeDe-Panken 46:46
I'm here because of a story that changed the direction of my research. I went into the archive many years ago expecting to find one thing, and I found these pamphlets. This was at New York Botanical Garden on a Mellon Fellowship and these scientific panels that had recipes in them. And I was like, this is not what I was expecting, and I am confused. And I had a moment where I was like, I could put this aside, or I could keep thinking about it. And I kept thinking about it, and I was like, maybe this is an article. And then I was like, maybe this is two articles. Then I was like, oh, maybe this is the next several years of my life. And I love that moment of being, you know, perplexed when I I taught I tried to bring students into archives, and kind of let them sit with that confusion, because I think it's incredibly productive.

Arthur Kamya 47:51
I suppose one has to be open to that. I mean, I mean, I got sort of the moment of clarity for my project came not actually, when I was at [unintelligible], and I was at the New England Genealogical Historical Society, I was looking at sort of Hallett's accounts, you know. So, it's not quite a story, but I was looking at, you know, and then I looked at the account headings, you know. And I saw, you know, well, these, you know, accounts for, you know, these accounts for fines, civil fines, captives, you know, and then sort of have sort of a house licensing, right? And, and, and I'm like, well, what I was actually writing about, you know, that's when I realized, I'm like, well, he's the treasurer during King Philip's War, and then he becomes the treasurer of Massachusetts, right? And his funding, you know, I'm looking sort of right, you know, he's funding the war and the comings, you know, what's coming in and what's going in is sort of categorized as sort of this, you know, what's owing to the government, as opposed to, you know, sort of licenses, as opposed to selling captives, you know, and, you know. And then I'm looking at, sort of, you know, who owes money to civil fines. And then I look at, oh, it's

widow, so, and so was that ale housekeeper, you know? And then I realized, I'm like, wow, this, there's something going on here about sort of "sin taxes" and sort of, you know, that's funding the government, you know. And essentially, that, that framed almost, I came in, I wouldn't looking at sort of property conveyance, is what I was going to look at, right? And then I was, you know, I looked at sort of Hallett's accounts, and how the council crystallized for me, sort of the what had become my dissertation, which is the idea that sort of a lot of Massachusetts government was funded by licensed fees for ale houses, you know, by, you know, fees for, you know, drunk and disorderly conduct, by sort of, you know, finding [unintelligible] sort of three times the value of what they're worth, and then making sure that they pay, or otherwise they're sold into slavery, you know, essentially by selling captives, right? So, so that was to be, sort of, that was sort of Gestalt moment.

Audience member 49:55
This has been really great. I wanted to follow up on something that I think that the Betsy hinted at a little while ago. Can you all comment on the challenges of being an historian in our current times? Has it changed any aspect of your work and how?

Betsy Klima 50:15
Yes. So, as I, as I say, I normally teach at UMass Boston, and I applied for this fellowship, and I learned that I had won it, like, a year ago, more than a year and I couldn't believe it. It was just like amazing life moment. I was in the parking lot of CVS, and so I was really, really, super, super excited, and I had to negotiate a lot of stuff with my university, etc, and I was planning to come beginning in March, and I'll finish in June. And then January came, and my fellowship is funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities. And I had this horrible day. Classes had started. Classes were starting. I wasn't on the teaching schedule. I didn't like how was I going to pay back a semester's worth of salary and benefits if my fellowship was gone. Fortunately for me, at the end of that day, I heard from Cassie that MHS was going to take care of me and that it didn't matter. So, for me personally, luckily, thankfully thank you thank you thank you everybody. I get to finish up my fellowship time, but I feel like for me, the stakes of my project, which is really a feminist project. I'm trying to write a book about about women's power, why women matter, like the ways in which that, like the force of women is, is, like, kind of denied at every turn, is, is undermined, is said to not matter. This is something that's it's really important to me to tell a story about how that happens, why that is, why? Why it is that there's this book that I'm writing

about that is, it is by far the greatest, bestselling book of early America, by far. None of you, I mean, but maybe some of you have heard of it, but it's a it's a book that nobody thinks about as the great American novel, as the origin of literary history in this country. It's written in 1790 same as Mass Historical Society and and I feel the more I work on this, and the more I read, the more I feel like, like I really understand what it's like to try to write and work under duress. That's, that's what, what I'll say about it just makes the project matter more and makes it more important that it's a project that's not just for academics to read. So that's what I would say.

Madeline DeDe-Panken 52:58
I'll heartily second that as someone who's working on a project that feels kind of spiritually analogous about women's roles in society, women's power, and also who gets listened to. And I think that that's an incredibly important thing to pay attention to, and we should all be listening to historians right now more than ever. And so yeah, thank you to the MHS for continuing to fund our work, to continuing to support our work, and continuing to, you know, do do everything that they do to get history out there.

Arthur Kamya 53:47
It's all I can say is, it's a very dark time. I mean, in the best of times, sort of humanities have not exactly been the top of, you know, university administrators, or even, you know, career minded students priorities, but right now, when you know they're being sort of actively denigrated or or despised or demonized, you know, it's, it's, it's very hard, you know, those of us, I mean, I do some work sort of in sort of structural racism, And I teach sort of, it's on, it's, it's quite disconcerting to do it, but I don't really know what else to do, other than to hope that at some point pendulum will swing back again. But you know, it's a very dark moment that I feel very depressed so.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 54:34
So, folks, Betsy Klima is our last long-term fellow for the foreseeable future. We do not have the funds to support the long term fellowship program without the National Endowment for the Humanities, and the institution made a commitment to continue to fund the two long term fellows who were here in residence because they would have been cut off at that point when the federal government stopped sending money, and we're very proud of having done that, been able to do that, and there are other institutions that cannot. So, this is just an example of how important your membership support is to the

MHS. You allow us to fund every single one of these fellowships. You allow scholarship to get out there, and you allow us to make new insights into the past. So, thank you very much for your support. Thank you for coming, and let's give a round of applause to our wonderful panelists here and wish them well.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 55:25

[Outro music fades in] Historians and Their Histories is produced by the research department at the Massachusetts Historical Society. This has been a special production of the show recorded in front of a live audience for a member week program at the MHS. We would like to thank Betsy Klima, professor of English at the University of Massachusetts, Boston, Arthur Kamya, a PhD candidate at Boston University, Camden Elliott, Assistant Professor of History at Auburn University, Madeleine DeDe-Panken, PhD candidate at the Graduate Center at the City University of New York, Hanna van Belle, events specialist in the development department at the MHS, Chris Coveney, chief technology and media officer at the MHS, Sam Hurwitz, Podcast Producer at the MHS and a special thanks to all the members and supporters of the Massachusetts Historical Society who make our programming and podcasts possible. Music in this episode is by Podington Bear. Please see our show notes for details. Thank you for listening as always, and please rate review and subscribe to both the MHS produced shows wherever you listen to podcasts.