Doing Hard History

By Jamie Eves • June 4, 2019

One of the highlights of the year for public historians in Connecticut is the annual conference of the Connecticut League of History Organizations, held this year on June 3 at Central Connecticut State University in New Britain. The conference provides a chance to network with other public historians, and to learn innovative new ways to present history to the general public. It attracts dozens of museum professionals and volunteers, members of local historical societies, and even a smattering of academic historians, from across Connecticut. There were 21 different workshops this year, running concurrently in four, hour-long "breakout sessions," so it wasn't possible to take in everything. (A colleague absolutely despises concurrent breakout sessions, but pretty much all conferences these days have them, and I confess that I have gotten used to them.) There was also a keynote talk during lunch.

Four of us from the Windham Textile and History Museum (the Mill Museum) went this year: me, Bev York the Museum's Educational Director, Kira Holmes the Vice President of our Board (and a worker at Mystic Seaport), and my wife Kit, a longtime volunteer at the Mill Museum. Kira and Kit co-taught a workshop on fundraising. Among the four of us, we were able to attend a majority of the workshops. Keeping in mind the State of Connecticut's new social studies curriculum guidelines that expand the teaching of African American and Latinx history in public schools, I particularly looked for workshops dealing with how museums could help schools teach those themes.

I was excited to learn in one workshop about the Witness Stones project, begun in Guilford, CT, but now also duplicated in West Hartford. The goal of the project, according to Guilford's Dennis Culliton and West Hartford's Elizabeth Devine and Tracey Wilson, is to incorporate the history of enslaved people into Connecticut's cloud of historic monuments and sites. The names and histories of Connecticans who were not enslaved already blanket our landscape, in the form of street names, other place names, and plaques on historic houses. But enslaved people as individuals too often have been ignored and forgotten — even though they, too, played vital roles in creating colonial and early 19th-century Connecticut. Enslaved people lived in almost every colonial Connecticut town – indeed, Connecticut had more slaves than all of the other New England colonies combined. The center for the New England slave trade was Newport, RI, but prosperous Connecticut farmers and shippers traveled to the Newport slave market regularly, looking for slave labor. So Culliton, Devine, Wilson, and others began looking for the histories enslaved persons in their towns' histories and records, identifying each person when possible, and placing small paving stones near the locations where they lived. The stones bear inscriptions like "[Name of Enslaved Person] was enslaved on this site in [year]," or "[Name of person] was emancipated here in [year]." Other information about them is recorded, too. In both towns, schools played important roles in the projects. More information about the West Hartford project can be found at https://sites.google.com/view/westhartfordct/witnessstones/home.

The history of Connecticut's enslaved people is an example of what is known as "hard history." It's "hard" because the research is difficult. Even the names of enslaved people often were not recorded – as a team of researchers at Hartford's Ancient Burial Ground led by CCSU History Professor Kathy Hermes found out when they discovered dozens of brief burial records for persons called simply "a negro." But it is also "hard history" because slavery and race are difficult and emotional subjects. As with most difficult subjects, we have a tendency to avoid talking about them. But they also are important subjects, and avoiding them leaves us with incomplete histories. That was the point made by Melissa Houston, the Educator at the Keeler Tavern Museum and History Center in Ridgefield, and Cheyney McKnight, a consultant who worked with her. "As a white woman, I had to get past taking the subjects of slavery and racism as attacks on me personally," Houston said.

Enslaved people – along with African Americans who were legally free, but did unpaid work – lived at Keeler Tavern in the 18th and early 19th centuries. Houston and McKnight talked about how they learned to incorporate them and their stories into the Museum's popular school tours. Similarly, West Hartford's Devine and Wilson – both retired social studies teachers – talked about how their project helped make African American history more relevant in their town's public schools. They made their research – including documents – available to teachers, and then worked with the teachers to develop relevant class projects, such as writing stories and creating art about the enslaved people. The consensus was clear: the history of African Americans (and Native Americans) in Connecticut must forthrightly deal with the fact of 17th, 18th, and early 19th-century slavery, but at the same time acknowledge that enslaved people (the term "slave" implies that being a slave was the person's only identity, while the term "enslaved person" both acknowledges that that they were people, and that their enslavement was something that was imposed on them and not the whole of their identity) were living, breathing human beings with hopes and dreams and wants and loves and longings, people who contributed greatly to the creation of Connecticut.

All of us – public historians and teachers alike – need to do more hard history. The Mill Museum does some, but there is need for more. On Monday, I got some good ideas about how to go about it.