

## BRIGHT LIGHTS, BIG IDEAS

MEGHAN HILLMAN / MEGHILLM@IUPUI.EDU

Las Vegas is one of those American cities that burns brightly in the popular imagination and inhabits a larger-than-life cultural presence. Everybody has an opinion about whether Vegas is “for them.” Some of us love the promise of glitz and glam and imagine energetic casino floors and beautiful desert views; others worry about the prospect of sensory overload or a deluge of tourists. But as NCPH prepares to head to Las Vegas next April for our 2018 annual meeting, we’re here to tell you this: if you do public history work, Las Vegas is for you.

Vegas isn’t just a tourist destination. It’s a town where two million people live or work, in a region that’s been occupied by humans for over ten thousand years, with a history inexorably tied to the history of the American West. Important historic preservation and historic archaeological work is happening here, and the area is of particular interest for those studying indigenous and Latinx communities, environmentalism and sustainability, and labor history (Vegas is, after all, a union town). Las Vegas is not a playground, but a real place with authentic stories to tell.

Together, Program Committee co-chairs Priya Chhaya (National Trust for Historic Preservation) and Benjamin Filene (University of North Carolina at Greensboro) and Local Arrangements Committee co-chairs Alicia

Barber (Stories in Place LLC) and Andy Kirk (University of Nevada, Las Vegas) are building a conference program and slate of activities that will be fun, challenging, and carefully shaped by the landscape of Vegas. The 2018 theme, “Power Lines,” asks attendees to consider the webs of power that govern our personal and professional lives. As we gather under the bright lights of Las Vegas—a stone’s throw away from Hoover Dam and Lake Mead, which provide energy and water for much of the American southwest—we’ll encourage you to think about how your own work sparks meaningful connections.

Along with a truly excellent slate of sessions (this year’s proposal acceptance rate was just under 50%, making it one of our most difficult and competitive selection processes to date), we’re hoping to introduce attendees to a more complete and complex vision of Las Vegas and southern Nevada. We urge attendees to plan to arrive Tuesday evening to make the most of Wednesday’s conference



Photo courtesy of Las Vegas News Bureau.

activities. In addition to our usual slate of Wednesday workshops, we’re also planning day trips to Lake Mead/Hoover Dam and the Nevada Nuclear Test Site. If you’d rather stick closer to home, we’ll introduce you to Vegas’s neighborhoods and some of its best public history institutions—and help you see the Strip in a whole new light. If you want to avoid the casino atmosphere altogether, you’ll be able to do so easily; our conference hotel, the Renaissance Las Vegas, is a non-gambling, non-smoking hotel located off the Strip (although easily accessible by monorail).

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## PRESIDENT’S COMMENTS



ALEXANDRA LORD  
LORDA@SI.EDU

The visitor leans in and asks the question which provokes both anxiety and excitement. “But what,” she asks, “is your favorite object?”

The question makes me anxious because it’s impossible to answer. How can I pick a favorite child? But it’s also a question I love because it gives me a chance to wander over some of my favorites—everything from the bifurcated needle that eradicated smallpox in the 1960s

and 1970s, to the condom dispenser from the 1940s, to the early 19<sup>th</sup> century medicine chest with its perfectly aligned bottles of powders.

Walking into the storage rooms for the Medicine and Science Division here at the National Museum of American History is always a heady experience for me. First, there is the smell, an acrid odor of decaying medicines. But then there are the rows of gleaming cabinets which hold both treasures I know and treasures I am still discovering after almost three years here. For a medical historian, nothing is more exciting than unlocking a cabinet and pulling open a drawer that holds

Jonas Salk’s syringe neatly embedded in its box or a patent medicine which promises to fatten up a child.



Left: Opening a drawer of vaccines is always a thrill. Right: Condoms during the 1940s and 1950s were sold under the guise of public health. Both images courtesy of the Smithsonian National Museum of American History.

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NCPH inspires public engagement with the past and serves the needs of practitioners in putting history to work in the world by building community among historians, expanding professional skills and tools, fostering critical reflection on historical practice, and publicly advocating for history and historians. *Public History News* is published in March, June, September, and December. NCPH reserves the right to reject material that is not consistent with the goals and purposes of the organization. Individual membership orders, changes of address, and business and editorial correspondence should be addressed to NCPH, 127 Cavanaugh Hall – IUPUI, 425 University Blvd., Indianapolis, IN 46202-5140. E-mail: [ncph@iupui.edu](mailto:ncph@iupui.edu). Tel: 317-274-2716. Join online or renew at [www.ncph.org](http://www.ncph.org). Headquartered on the campus of Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis, NCPH is grateful for the generous support of the IU School of Liberal Arts and the Department of History.

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Printed on 50% recycled paper (25% post-consumer waste)

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## WELCOME, STASIA TANZER!



Anastasia (Stasia) Tanzer.

the GAR Hall in Aurora, IL and in the North Central College Library Archives, in addition to working at the Schoenherr Art Gallery in Naperville.

Anastasia (Stasia) Tanzer is serving as the Graduate Assistant for the 2017-2018 academic year. She graduated from North Central College (Naperville, IL) in 2017 with a BA in History and Psychology, and is currently in her first year in IUPUI's Public History Master's program. Before NCPH, Stasia interned with



The NCPH Board hard at work in Indianapolis, IN, April 2017.

## NOTICE OF FALL BOARD MEETING

On October 27-28, the NCPH Board of Directors will be meeting in Washington, DC. The board welcomes comments, questions, and suggestions from NCPH members throughout the year, and especially for the fall agenda. Please contact the executive director ([rowes@iupui.edu](mailto:rowes@iupui.edu)) or individual board members listed at <http://bit.ly/ncphcommittees>.

**Welcome New Members!**

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**NCPH would like to extend a special thanks to our new Partner member:**

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## PRESIDENT'S COMMENTS // CONT'D. FROM PAGE 1

Even as I pull open drawers and relish their contents, I experience a slight feeling of disconnect. As a graduate student, I focused very much, as did most of my peers, on textual evidence. In retrospect, this is odd. Medical history is very much focused on the body as well as the instruments, potions, powders, pills, and other objects which we use to prod, poke, measure, and even alter it. Yet somehow I managed to get a PhD without fully exploring the rich material culture which surrounds this history.

Leaving academia and becoming a public historian opened a new world for me. I spent my first few years at the Office of the Public Health Service Historian, thinking and learning about the history of the United States Public Health Service through objects associated with this federal agency. Examining a puzzle used at Ellis Island to test immigrants' mental abilities and then studying a photo of an immigrant completing this puzzle under the watchful eye of a Public Health Service officer gave me an insight into the experiences of both the early 20<sup>th</sup> century immigrant and the medical officer that no text could.

As I explore this kind of material today, I can—and do—fault myself for my failure to study the material culture associated with the history of medicine while I was in graduate school. Why did I not question how I was being taught in graduate school? Why did I not seek out and learn more on my own initiative about the relationship between changing medical theories and the objects and instruments that shaped and reflected these changing perceptions of the body? I think about these questions frequently and they are at the heart of my passionate interest in how historians are trained.

In many ways, my graduate education was excellent and it has had a lasting impact on how I approach and understand not only history but also literature, current events, and even my own encounters with physicians. It is fundamental to who I am today. But in other ways, my graduate education fell short.

If I had any illusions about whether it was simply my experience which was problematic, the almost bi-weekly meetings I have with graduate students and unemployed PhDs who seek me out for informational interviews would quickly put paid to this idea. Reviewing CVs and résumés of these historians and thinking about how these scholars can market themselves, I know how limited our approach to graduate education is.

How, then, are we to think about graduate education in history?

Traditional PhD programs have a great deal to learn from public history programs. Students who study both American and international histories would benefit from engaging in and thinking about material culture; they would also benefit from learning and thinking about preservation and the ways in which public space and architecture have shaped and reflected past cultures.

Like many people who attended a traditional history program and then later discovered public history, I am puzzled as to why graduate students in history are not routinely taught to think about multiple types of sources. This became especially clear to me during my time at the National Park Service where I worked closely with an archeologist who loved to tease me by pointing out contradictions between a historical text and the discoveries she and her colleagues had made.

"Why do you guys always think the historical text is the be-all and end-all? We archeologists like both the texts and the stuff we find," she

often said. I could never really provide a satisfactory answer to her question and after a while I just gave up trying, opting instead for what I hoped was a mysterious shrug which hinted at some sort of deep knowledge which we historians kept hidden from archeologists.



Who wouldn't be drawn to these beautiful apothecary jars? Courtesy of the Smithsonian National Museum of American History.

But even as public history educators may lead the way in helping us to re-think how historians, in and outside the academy, should be trained, we also need to think critically about public history, its graduate programs, and how these may wind up defining who can do public history (along with where and how it is done).

On occasion, I have heard colleagues who teach public history claim that traditionally-trained historians should not do public history—and that they must attend a public history program if they are to practice public history. Narrowly defining who can, and who cannot, do public history is detrimental to our profession, and it runs counter to NCPH's goals to diversify our profession.

We need to be careful not to insist that public history programs become gate-keepers on who can do history. The overwhelming majority of public history educators do not do this but I've heard it often enough to find it a trend, especially as the number of public history programs grows.

Having been a practitioner now for seventeen years, I am always impressed by the diversity of backgrounds my colleagues possess. I've worked with people who possess PhDs and people who possess "just" BAs (along with many MAs). I've worked with people whose degrees, whether undergraduate or graduate, are from traditional history programs and people whose degrees are from public history programs, as well as people whose degrees are from public policy, preservation, and museum studies programs. A surprising number of my fellow public historians have degrees in non-American history (although they, like me, now do American history). And, of course, as a medical historian, I often work with historians with MDs.

As the product of a traditional PhD program, I began my public history career assuming that PhDs knew best. Over the last seventeen years, I've been humbled as historians with a wide range of different backgrounds and training showed me new ways of thinking and exposed me to content knowledge I never acquired in graduate school.

During informational interviews with students, I am cognizant of my tendency to fall into the pattern of believing that the journey I took to becoming a public historian is the best one (this includes my somewhat crazy belief that studying non-American history for several years is the best foundation for doing American history!). I need to check myself constantly—to remind myself that not only should aspiring historians understand that there are many paths to a public history career, but also that our profession will produce richer and deeper work if we come at it from varied backgrounds.

*Alexandra Lord is Chair and Curator of the Medicine and Science Division at the National Museum of American History and is President of NCPH.*

# FINAL 2017 NEH GRANTS ANNOUNCED



The National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) announced in August that it will award \$39.3 million in grants for 245 humanities projects. "The recently announced NEH grants are yet more proof of the Endowment's crucial role in supporting access to the humanities for all Americans. With grants supporting cutting-edge research, the preservation of our cultural heritage, professional development for K-12 teachers, and exhibitions and community programs in all parts of the country, the NEH's reach is wider than ever," said Stephen Kidd, Executive Director of the National Humanities Alliance, a coalition of organizations (including NCPH) dedicated to advancing humanities education, research, preservation, and public programs. "The NEH announced these grants as the House advanced legislation that would fund the NEH, with just a small decrease, in the coming year. We are pleased to see that Congressional leaders value the NEH even as the administration has sought to eliminate its funding."

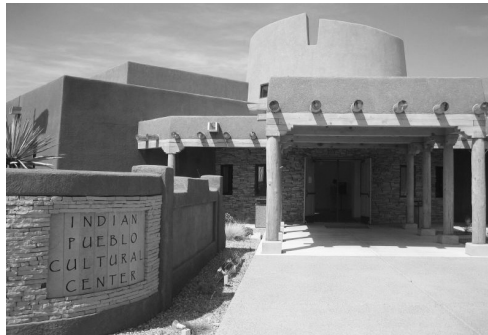
This round of funding, NEH's third and last for fiscal year 2017, will support vital research, education, and public programs in the humanities. These peer-reviewed grants were awarded in addition to \$46.1 million in annual operating support provided to the national network of state and local humanities councils during fiscal year 2017.

"NEH grants ensure that Americans around the country have the opportunity to engage with our shared cultural heritage," said NEH Acting Chairman Jon Parrish Peede. "From traveling exhibitions and teacher workshops to efforts to preserve local history, these projects demonstrate the power of the humanities to build connections, stimulate discovery, and contribute to vibrant communities."

Ten NCPH members were among the grant winners, and their total grants amount to over \$1.6 million. We congratulate them all on the hard work that led to these awards, and thank the NEH for enabling great public history work.

## INDIVIDUAL MEMBERS

**Sheila Brennan, George Mason University** (member since 2011)  
Fairfax, VA  
Transcribing and Linking Early American Records with Scripto and Omeka S  
\$230,000



**Rose Diaz, Indian Pueblo Cultural Center** (member since 1980)  
Albuquerque, NM  
Journeys and Pathways: Oral Histories of Contemporary Pueblo Women in Service, Leadership, and the Arts  
\$90,000

**Julie Golia, Brooklyn Historical Society** (member since 2009)  
Brooklyn, NY  
Seven Diseases That Changed Brooklyn  
\$250,000



**S. Chandler Lighty, Indiana State Library** (member since 2017)  
Indianapolis, IN  
Indiana Digital Newspaper Project, Phase Four  
\$213,000

**Tiya Miles, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor** (member since 2003)  
Ann Arbor, MI  
The Story of "Ashley's Sack": A Family Heirloom in the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture  
\$42,000

**Constance Schulz, University of South Carolina, Columbia** (member since 1989)  
Columbia, SC  
The Revolutionary Era Pinckney Statesmen of South Carolina, A Digital Documentary Edition: Phase 3  
\$340,000

**J. Mark Souther, Cleveland State University** (member since 2006)  
Cleveland, OH  
Curating East Africa: A Platform and Process for Location-Based Storytelling in the Developing World  
\$74,939

**David Trowbridge, Marshall University** (member since 2014)  
Huntington, WV  
West Virginia Digital Heritage Trails  
\$60,000

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**Chicago Historical Society** (member since 2006)  
Chicago, IL  
Assessing the Preservation Quality of Collections Storage, Display, and Work Spaces at the Chicago History Museum  
\$50,000

**Kentucky Historical Society** (member since 2008)  
Frankfort, KY  
Civil War Governors of Kentucky Digital Documentary Edition  
\$300,000

Photos courtesy of Wikimedia Commons.

## WHERE IS THE PUBLIC HISTORY CONVERSATION HEADED?

CATHY STANTON / CATHY@CATHYSTANTON.NET

That's the question that has engaged me since I first became an editor of the H-Public listserv back in 2005. As NCPH wraps up its editorial involvement in the list, this seems like a good moment to reflect on H-Public's role in evolving discussions around the field, how the list has fit in the suite of digital platforms that NCPH has developed since 2005, and where the conversation might be headed next.

When I say "where it's headed," I'm thinking not only about where the current issues and ideas are, but also literally (or virtually) about where the discussions are actually taking place.

Over the past two decades, the venues where we encounter our peers and colleagues—not to mention our publics—have included the digital, to the point that it's become hard to separate virtual and actual spaces as neatly as we once did. It's the interplay of those two things that I've found most intriguing as NCPH has been building and refining platforms and spaces where public historians can gather and interact.

In the beginning, when dot matrix printers still roamed the earth, there were listservs,

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# WHERE IS THE PUBLIC HISTORY CONVERSATION HEADED? // CONT'D. FROM PAGE 5

simple electronic mailing lists built on another then-cutting-edge technology: email. NCPH got involved with the H-Public listserv—then known as PUBLHIST—in 1995, three years after it was founded. Three years later, PUBLHIST joined the H-Net network of listservs. Under its new name of H-Public, it became one of 90 lists devoted to humanities and social science topics.

I became an editor in 2005 after I raised a question to NCPH leadership about how the list was being moderated and was rewarded by being invited to take over the job myself (kids, don't try this at home). Debbie Ann Doyle joined me as an editor shortly afterward, and she has continued in that role ever since.

For several years, H-Public was the main online venue for active long-distance discussion about public history topics. It didn't reach absolutely everyone involved in the field, but when you posted a message, you could be reasonably certain you were talking to a broad cross-section of the community. People raised questions, offered advice, discussed methods and ethics, and occasionally took a run at the perennial question of what public history was.

With the advent of Web 2.0 platforms in the early 2000s, H-Public and other listservs began to get quieter, becoming more like handy bulletin boards than lively discussions around the water cooler. NCPH formed a Digital Media Group (DMG) as a kind of working advisory committee in 2008, and the organization became a fairly early adopter of social media in the professional history world. (Our conference is still one of the most Twitter-friendly in the field.)

From the outset, staff and members of the DMG wrestled with issues we're still discussing: What was happening to the formerly more cohesive public history conversation as people self-selected into different media spaces? What was our role as a professional organization within the newer constellation of platforms? Was there some kind of ideal balance between the dignified pace and absolute control of an academic journal and a free-wheeling and increasingly contentious milieu like Twitter? Did it really matter what we thought, when those discourses (and algorithms) were defining themselves in practice and evolving from one year to the next?

Many of these issues mirror larger questions about public historical projects in general, and talking them over within NCPH has always been challenging and usually fun. For several

years now we've been asking ourselves on a regular basis whether it still made sense for the organization to be involved in H-Public, and this year we finally reached a consensus that it doesn't.

H-Net was creating its new H-Net Commons platform at precisely the same time as NCPH was developing a more integrated web presence. By the time the H-Net Commons rolled out in 2014, our own new Wordpress-based digital home was already up and running. For some time all we've been doing is pushing out our biweekly news listing on H-Public, which also sees an occasional query but very minimal discussion. The work of recruiting and training new editors as well as putting together a required, separate Advisory Board for the list felt out of proportion to that level of activity.

So on June 30 we stepped down from our editorial role, which H-Net hopes to fill with new recruits. (Anyone who's interested should contact the VP for Networks.) We'll be continuing to build on our successes with the *History@Work* blog, the various projects of the Public History Commons discussion area, and our Facebook, Twitter (@ncph), and perhaps other social media presences as well.

And we continue to ask "Where is the public history conversation headed?" and to look for ways to convene, participate, or sometimes just listen in on it. One of the things we've noticed recently is that Facebook groups are starting to function a lot like the listservs of yore.

They're lively spaces used by self-selecting groups of like-minded people for a range of reasons from the most



A lively Twitter conversation is a feature of NCPH conferences.

personal to the highly professional. We've created a new group on our Facebook page—look for the NCPH Members Forum. We hope this space will allow members to connect where they already are—without having to share their personal profiles or remember a separate login. Spirited conversations are already happening, and we invite you to join us. For now this space will be a member benefit, something we're always looking to create so that there are more incentives to support the organization by joining.

We know that won't reach or engage everyone, and we're open to suggestions about other ways that we can continue to tweak our online spaces and projects. Email Membership Manager Christine Crosby (crosbyc@iupui.edu) with ideas about social media or Executive Director Stephanie Rowe (rowes@iupui.edu) with more general feedback.

*Cathy Stanton is a Senior Lecturer in the Department of Anthropology at Tufts University. She is in the process of stepping down as NCPH's Digital Media Editor, but looks forward to continuing to be part of the conversation.*

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# BE SEEN IN LAS VEGAS



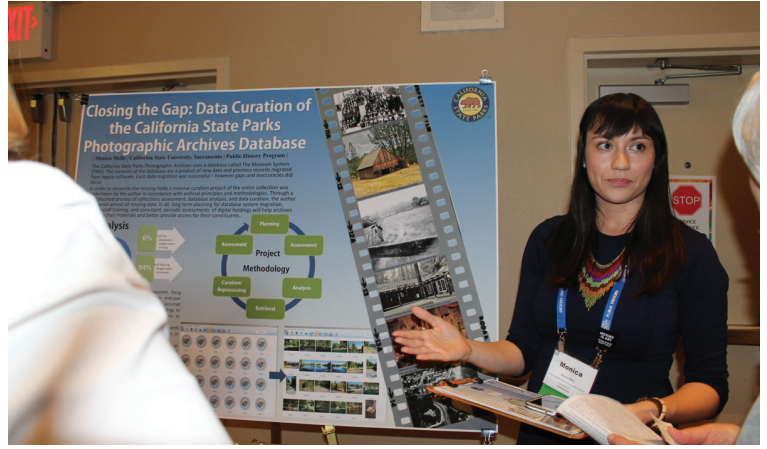
Museums and Civic Discourse working group at the 2016 NCPH Annual Meeting.

Over 800 public historians are expected to attend the 2018 NCPH Annual Meeting in Las Vegas, Nevada. We invite you to raise your institution's profile by reserving exhibit space, advertising in the Conference *Program*, or sponsoring an event. Reach potential customers, partners, or students; promote the latest scholarship, forthcoming titles, and journals from your press; and celebrate the accomplishments of your organization.

For more information, visit the 2018 conference page on the NCPH website: <http://ncph.org/conference/2018-annual-meeting>

## THERE'S ROOM FOR YOU ON THE PROGRAM

Now that the Program Committee has worked through the session, workshop, and working group proposals for the 2018 conference in Las Vegas, we have opened the call for poster submissions and will open the call for working group discussants this month.



NCPH Poster Presenter.

## CALL FOR POSTERS

The poster session is a format for presenters eager to share their work through one-on-one discussion. It can be especially useful for works-in-progress, and may be particularly appropriate where visual or material evidence represents a central component of the project. The Call for Posters is available now at [bit.ly/ncph2018callforposters](http://bit.ly/ncph2018callforposters). **Proposals are due October 25.**

## CALL FOR WORKING GROUP DISCUSSANTS

Each working group has facilitators who have already proposed the topic. They will be looking for 8-12 individuals to join them in pre-conference online discussion, to exchange brief case statements, and to meet in session during the conference. Look for the call in late September; it closes **October 15.**

Information about NCPH Working Groups can be found at <http://ncph.org/conference/2018-annual-meeting/>

## BRIGHT LIGHTS, BIG IDEAS // CONT'D. FROM PAGE 1



Photo courtesy of Las Vegas News Bureau.

Las Vegas is what you imagine it to be—there's no denying the kitsch or the energy, and we wouldn't want to—but it's also much more. We invite you to explore the city with NCPH and over 800 of your colleagues and friends next

April; we hope you'll find that what happens in Vegas doesn't stay in Vegas after all, but instead leaves a lasting impression on your professional life all year long.



Photo courtesy of Las Vegas News Bureau.

# PUBLIC HISTORY NEWS

## National Council on Public History

127 Cavanaugh Hall-IUPUI  
425 University Blvd.  
Indianapolis, IN 46202-5148

ISSN 08912610

**Editor:** Stephanie Rowe

**Editorial Assistance:** Christine Crosby,  
Meghan Hillman, and Stasia Tanzer

**Design:** Brooke Hamilton  
openbookstudio.com

## REWARD EXCELLENCE—NOMINATE THE BEST IN PUBLIC HISTORY



We need your help in finding the best public history! Nominate yourself or a colleague for one of our annual awards, presented at the spring 2018 meeting in Las Vegas, NV:

### DEADLINE: NOVEMBER 1

**NCPH Book Award**—A \$1,000 award for the best book about or “growing out of” public history published within the previous two calendar years (2016 and 2017).

**Robert Kelley Memorial Award**—A \$500 award honoring distinguished achievements by individuals, institutions, or nonprofit or corporate entities for making history relevant to individual lives of ordinary people outside of academia.

### DEADLINE: DECEMBER 1

**Excellence in Consulting Award**—Up to two \$500 awards recognizing outstanding work and contributions by consultants or contractors.

**Graduate Student Travel Award**—Five travel grants of up to \$300 each for graduate students presenting (session, poster session, or working group) at the 2018 Annual Meeting.

**Outstanding Public History Project Award**—\$1,000 recognizing a project that contributes to a broader public reflection and appreciation of the past or that serves as a model of professional public history practice.

**Student Project Award**—A \$500 travel grant to attend the 2018 Annual Meeting recognizes the contributions of student work to the field of public history.

**New Professional Award**—Two \$500 travel grants to enable new professionals, practicing public history for no more than three years, to attend the 2018 Annual Meeting.

Visit <http://ncph.org/about/awards/> for details.

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