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### **Working Group Case Statement**

Most of my experiences relating to the public history of labor center around the theme of racial and social justice. One of my goals as a public historian is to highlight the stories of people that have been erased from the narrative, forgotten, misrepresented, and to borrow a term from Dr. Michelle Caswell, symbolically annihilated. My passion for public history and my decision to become a scholar in this field derived from a craving to learn about my own history and culture—since it was a missing aspect from my k-12 education.

As a child who immigrant from Mexico City during the mid-1990s, there was little opportunity to see my cultural heritage represented in the curriculum or in public spaces. It also emerged from noticing a lack of recognition of Latinx and immigrant labor, which created an undernourished sense of social justice and desire for community empowerment. As a public historian in training, all of my research and work centers on the Latinx experience and histories in hopes of filling this educational gap for others who might feel ignored. In this way, my sense of identity, place, and purpose coalesced in my decision to become a scholar in the field and an educator dedicated to promoting racial justice literacy and critical multicultural education in the university and public sites.

In collaboration with my colleagues at UC Riverside, independent of our coursework, we created a Riverside Latino Public History Project where we brought forth the hidden stories, places, and histories of Latinx laborers in Riverside County. Our latest project centered around braceros in Southern California. We researched and presented

our initial findings on the contributions that braceros and their families had on the economy of the area, the concept of citizenship for migrant workers, and the unexplored concept of braceros and leisure. During the summer of 2016, I was a graduate intern at the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of American History, under the program of Latino History and Culture. During my residency at NMAH, I worked on creating a podcast on the understudied concept of braceros and leisure. My goal with this project was two-fold. I wanted to highlight the history of braceros in the context of American labor, but also to challenge the historical myth that braceros were only workers, and to reshape the concept of what a bracero is and does by showcasing this underrepresented story of recreation and leisure within labor history.

During the 2016-2017 academic year, I was part of a collaboration between UC Riverside and the California Citrus State Park to uncover the forgotten stories of Latinx and Asian citrus laborers during the 1950s and 1960s. The goal of this project was to re-interpret the history of the Park to include the missing stories of laborers and their families. I specifically focused on "*ratas*," (Spanish for, rats) the nickname for child laborers, since they helped their parents harvest the low-hanging fruit and the fruit on the ground. I conducted a series of oral histories of former *ratas* and I am currently creating an audio tour for the Citrus Park with this body of work. I am also building online content in the form of digital essays, podcasts, and social media campaigns that will launch with the opening of the Park's exhibit. The laborers' stories, the contribution of their families, but specifically that of child workers, are largely missing from the history of the citrus boom in Southern California. The timing of the project is critical, for in addition to re-interpreting the history of the Park by including forgotten narratives, the project inserted itself into a

discussion of current political debates. By discussing the labor history of the park, we were able to better understand the long history of the current issues and struggles surrounding immigrant labor.

My experiences working with the histories of labor of people of color in Southern California highlights two main voids, lack of knowledge and lack of human sensitivity. The labor of these men and women has been crucial for the development of the area, and the country as a whole, yet their stories remain obscured, erased, or misrepresented in the larger narratives. Even within these revisionist or inclusive stories, the human factor continues to be ignored. An example is the concept of leisure within the bracero history or the childhood memories of *ratas*, and how working in the groves impacted their lives. Not only is the history of their labor largely missing, but also absent is their perspective, which humanizes their stories. Bringing their history back into the narrative and understanding their experience can only strengthen our understanding of labor history and its impacts in the larger historical context.

These projects demonstrate the fact that there remains a lot of work to be done. One step is by diversifying the people in charge of what stories get told and how they are presented. It is important to bring in more Latinx and people of color into the field and into these positions, particularly when Latinx labor stories are told. Latinx professionals, whether first-generation or not, bring in a unique perspective into accurately telling their communities' stories.

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### Working Group Case Statement

My case study examines the efforts of low wage African American workers to build a local labor movement by harnessing memories of Charleston, South Carolina's tradition of civil rights unionism.

Local 1199B, representing Charleston healthcare workers in Charleston, South Carolina, disintegrated within two years of its formation during a long and much publicized strike in the spring and summer of 1969. The union's New York-based international had hoped that success in Charleston would pave the way for expansion across the South and other parts of the country where women and non-white workers made up a significant portion of the growing healthcare sector. While Charleston was a failure for the union, it experienced strong growth in the Northeast and Midwest. The union appealed to new workers on the strength of its efforts in Charleston, which they projected as a successful melding of "labor power" and "soul power." They produced a powerful short documentary about the strike that served as an effective piece of propaganda for the union.

In February 2007, union president Henry Nicholas returned to Charleston for a program honoring the strikers. Nicholas, who had been an organizer for the union in 1969, acknowledged that the union had abandoned Charleston following the strike. He committed to providing support for an effort to revive Local 1199B and hired key worker and community leaders, including Mary Moultrie who had served as the local union president. Initially, the re-established

1199B failed to make inroads among healthcare workers, but attracted several dozen City sanitation workers, who met weekly for the better part of two years as part of an organizing drive. Moultrie served as facilitator of the meetings and she was often joined by Naomi White and Rosetta Simmons—nurses who had also been among the leaders of the 1969 strike. Longtime labor and human rights activists Bill Saunders, Leonard Riley, Jr., and James Campbell were frequently in attendance as well. Collectively, the group served as living links to the city’s black working class protest tradition. They drew from their rich organizing histories as they offered guidance and support to the younger City workers.

During its brief renaissance, the union provided representation for employees facing discipline, advocated for safety reforms, and demanded better wages from the City. A citywide door-to-door petition drive netted thousands of signatures in support of union recognition for 1199B. In July 2009, however, the Charleston City Council denied the union’s demand for union recognition, citing state prohibitions on collective bargaining rights for public employees. Support among the workers for 1199B dwindled after that Council meeting. Facing questions from his members regarding the stalled Charleston work, Henry Nicholas withdrew funding from the project in September 2010.

In the meantime, prompted by a Hospital Workers Appreciation Day event organized by Moultrie in February 2008, employees of the Medical University of South Carolina began meeting regularly to collectively address their grievances related to their working conditions and wages. That group eventually established itself as Healthcare Workers United—a non-majority union that includes current employees, former employees, patients, and community supporters. HWU rightfully considers itself to be the heir Local 1199B. It was initiated by Moultrie, who passed away in 2015, shares the same democratic and antiracist commitments as its predecessor

union, and has its base among employees of the same hospital that was at the center of the 1969 strike. Often joined by Charleston-area members of the Fight for \$15—the Service Employees International Union-led campaign to organize fast food and other low wage workers—HWU has used a range of public programs, storytelling, oral histories, speeches, printed materials, and photographs, to connect its work to the 1969 strike and Charleston’s long tradition of black labor protest.

My project will explore how this historical work shapes the local labor movement’s identity—how this largely cultural project of remembering and commemoration is transformed into worker power.

Eleanor Mahoney  
Public History of Labor Working Group

### Case Statement

Fifteen years ago, my mom and I drove to Welch, West Virginia to visit the town where my grandfather had been born and raised. I was writing a senior thesis and had chosen to explore the topics of gender and race in Appalachian coal mining communities during the early decades of the twentieth century, with a focus on southern West Virginia. I do not come from a mining family, my great-grandparents were civil servants in McDowell County (where Welch is located), so prior to beginning my research I had only passing knowledge of the history of labor organizing in the coalfields. Needless to say, what I learned shocked me – still does in fact. The murder of Sid Hatfield, the Battle of Blair Mountain, the Matewan Massacre, these and other events, part of the West Virginia mine wars, were all a revelation. I wondered not only that I had not been taught these stories, but that the sites were not protected, marked, or interpreted to the same extent as other places with important histories (in recent years, grassroots organizers have added much more of this). To put it bluntly, I was pissed off.

My experience in McDowell County, which followed a summer spent working for the SEIU, fostered an interest in labor history, especially as it related to public memory. I went on to do research for AFSCME, study labor history as part of a public history masters, and work on labor history projects for an National Park Service partnership program. In each case, I kept being surprised (to put it less bluntly) by how the history of work, especially work by people of color, immigrants, women, and low-income people and other non-elites,

was systematically and intentionally sanitized and / or erased entirely. It is a political act to tell stories of resistance, exploitation, struggle, and organizing. Grassroots community organizations along with labor unions, locals and some internationals, and their partners in academia do share these powerful histories, but they have not entered into mainstream discourse. I firmly believe that these types of narratives, especially ones that emphasize collective rather than individual action, have to become part of the mainstream conversation if we who want social justice hope to build a broad based movement that makes concrete political gains in regards to the workplace. And the stories must acknowledge how racism, xenophobia, sexism, ableism, and anti-LGBT discrimination have been a part, sadly often central, to past labor organizing.

Public historians have a key role to play in this movement. We need to uncover stories and landscapes that have been intentionally neglected or ignored and highlight them using creative methods developed in partnership with diverse communities. We need to work with existing institutions that have these stories as part of their collections / missions and ensure that various publics have access to these materials. We need to push big partners, like SHPOs, the NPS, large museums, universities, International unions, and others both to fund labor history and make sure the stories that are told at their sites reflect the best scholarship on these questions. Sanitization can be just as damaging as a complete absence. We also need to prioritize reciprocity in working with our partners. Reading the other case statements, I have been inspired by much of the work that is already taking place across the country in this regard.

Challenging and changing the dominant narratives of work in the United States is a difficult task. As historians, we know that individualism, closely tied to capitalism, is central



to a particular American mythos. If we want to “reshape popular conceptualizations of this past,” (to quote the call for discussants), we have to tell compelling stories of collective action past, present, and future. Dedicating labor history sites has to be a priority. K-12 has to be a priority. Imagine if May was a national labor history month, as it already is in some states and cities. I have a young son, I would love to see him have to do labor history projects every May – interviewing his dad, for example, and grandparents on both sides who are or have been union members the same way many kids now interview relatives who are military veterans.

In closing, I live in Seattle now, site of one of the most significant labor actions of the early twentieth century, the Seattle General Strike. We have a fabulous labor history community here, including the amazing Harry Bridges Center for Labor Studies at the UW. In writing this case statement though, I did a poll of 20 non-historian friends from a variety of backgrounds, asking how many had heard of the general strike. Perhaps not surprisingly, only a few had, and some of them thought I was talking about the WTO protests in 1999. Of those who did know about the strike, only one knew any details (when, why, how many workers etc.) Does this matter? Why or why not? Is it particular to labor history? Do we need to share stories like the general strike in order to build a contemporary movement for social change? How best might we do that? I do not have the answers, but I look forward to hearing your thoughts in Las Vegas.

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### **Public History of Labor Working Group Case Statement**

As a historian in the early stages of my career, I've spent the vast majority of my academic life working on projects that involve some combination of labor, immigration, and a public engagement of that work. It is only perhaps recently though that I feel like I've really done true "labor" history. Thanks in part to this panel's predecessor at NALHC, I've begun to work with the United Steelworkers on a new museum and digital engagement project. But what I want to focus on for this panel is my other public history works, the ones focused on migrant communities and the challenges of attempting to both share the narrative with the community and connect it to something larger in the historical sense. Particularly my research has focused on the Maltese community in both Detroit and Toronto, though more in-depth work with those in Detroit.

The community is - at this point - an older immigrant community, settling in the Corktown neighborhoods of Detroit in the 1920s and through the 1970s. By and large these individuals worked, like many other immigrants in the city at that time, in auto factories and the numerous tool-and-die shops. Many of these men came with some technical training thanks to a long British colonization of the islands which meant lots of jobs of Maltese in the Royal Dockyards working on projects as welders, electricians, and pipefitters. Further on as Malta gained its independence, the nation focused on educating its younger men in trade skills so when they inevitably migrated to the United States, Canada, or Australia, they would at least arrive with a trade and some knowledge of the benefits of a union as well. Historically then, these individuals are certainly the "typical" labor history story. Today the estimate is that 40,000

Maltese or Maltese descendants live in the Detroit area, and that number is shrinking rapidly. There is no appetite in Malta for emigration anymore. Malta enjoys high standards of living, very low unemployment and their inclusion in the EU makes it so that any Maltese individual looking for work abroad tends to stay within Europe and the UK. Not only is the community in Detroit shrinking, but the community in Toronto is also rapidly declining due to deaths of older members and return migration of younger Maltese who can easily find employment back home and are enticed by the proximity of relatives.

My major project, an online archive and database for the Maltese community in Detroit was created back in 2013 and has slowly evolved. Initially there was a considerable amount of interest in sharing pictures and events that would help flesh out the digital archive and for this particular community, it was a huge step to even begin this process of archiving their past. Unfortunately, the Maltese community in Detroit has taken nearly no effort to preserve its history or heritage in the region. Little to no documents have made it to local, regional, or national archives for preservation. No oral histories, prior to this project, were ever collected. The faint few traces of a Maltese community in Detroit, buildings or parks, were being sold off and replaced with little in the way of preservation. That is what spurred my desire to both write a dissertation on the community and start this project knowing that a digital site would accomplish two specific goals for this community. First, it would be relatively cheap compared to opening a space that could properly archive and store information, pictures, documents, etc. Second, its digital nature could reach folks across the world including those who may have lived in Detroit but moved to other parts of the nation or back to Malta in many cases. Instead of having to collect stories in a physical location, they could be compiled digitally and add to the scope of the project.

The project - I believe - is on its deathbed. The new website ([www.detroitmaltese.com](http://www.detroitmaltese.com)) stalled last year, approximately a year after its launch. Prior to the new website, we ran an Omeka.net site that was difficult for people in the community to navigate and many refused to use it. In response, we transferred the data and concept to a site that was easier to navigate and find on the internet. That launch two years ago was very successful. However, there exists many challenges in working with this community today. Even though I grew up in the community, I was not part of that immigrant experience as my grandparents were. That generation is slowly dying off and there is now a rush to capture that history before it is gone. Despite the recognition of the importance of this work, few are eager to actually share their stories. Furthermore, I no longer live in Detroit, making communication and work on the project difficult. This is where we get to some of the meat and bones of what I want to discuss. Three fundamental questions are repeatedly asked by both the community and myself. Outside of just my academic research, what is the point of capturing the histories of this community? Second, how do we work with a community that is both dying and seeking to preserve their heritage but lacks any skills, ability, or desire to do so? Finally, how do we overcome historical amnesia in a community so small that very few voices exist to complicate the narrative from within?

I personally believe that I can't be alone in these struggles in dealing with communities and public history. Some of these difficulties are age-related problems, how to communicate the importance of digital advertising, archival practices, and preservation to an executive board that has minimal education, a budget with no room for extra expenses, and an inability to even use the internet. Other problems are memory problems. With such a small community, how do we verify the history and reconcile false truths with reality. My hope is that some of these problems

I have run into over the course of the project can be discussed and maybe help spur some further thoughts on our purpose as historians in these communities.

My work studying American Indian labor history in the twentieth century in Federal Government cultural institutions has illuminated the absences in how we define workers, places of work, and labor. In my dissertation, I am researching the history of a Navajo Mobile Unit of the Civilian Conservation Corps Indian Division in Chaco Canyon, Canyon de Chelly, and Mesa Verde National Parks during the Indian New Deal. I also look at the Civilian Conservation Corps Indian Division by the Blackfeet Indian in Glacier National Park and the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians in Great Smoky Mountain National Park. Today, the National Park Service is working to bring American Indians into National Parks both as employees and also as visitors through the creation of partnership parks such as the Badlands National Park that allow tribes to take more ownership over these lands and sites. They are also working to create a new generation of young American Indian Park Rangers by investing resources into seminar programs for young American Indian youth. These efforts could include recognition of the historical precedent for the relationship between Native labor and National Parks in the twentieth century. National Parks need to be seen as historical sites of American Indian labor and that these parks are in many ways cultural products of this labor.

It is important in considering labor history in National Parks to interpret the places as products of historical labor. The labor conducted by tribes riddled these places with meanings and ownership that needs to be interpreted by the National Park Service. As William Bauer explains in *We Were All Migrant Workers Here*, the Round Valley Indians helped to “create California’s distinctive landscape and invested their own meanings in the land.”<sup>1</sup> Just as the Round Valley Indians shaped the landscape of the spaces off the reservation where they worked,

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<sup>1</sup> William Bauer, *We Were All Migrant Workers Here: Work, Community, and Memory on California’s Round Valley Reservation, 1850-1941* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012): 25.

the Navajos shaped the landscapes in National Parks. In these spaces off the reservation, Navajos forged group cohesion, new identities and cultural practices. To generate a more culturally inclusive understanding of labor history we must understand the power of the places and the labor in sustaining the laborers and their home communities. For example, in my research in looking at ancient Pueblo dwellings reconstructed by Navajos in the 1930s, I research how Navajos created new connections and meanings to the landscapes of the Mesa Verde and Chaco Canyon. By day they worked alongside archaeologists and by night performed dances for visitors in front of the structures they built. They lived in camps outside of the canyons where their wives learned to can food and their children joined the boys and girl scouts. These spaces where the National Park Service works today to tell the history of Pueblo peoples, became important spaces of labor for Navajos in the twentieth century.

It is important that the National Park Service research and interpret this history of Navajos working in parks to challenge myths about Native people and to understand the significance of these places to all American Indian Nations. For example, in Mesa Verde to only interpret these sites as the sites of Ancestral Pueblos completely erases the history of the Navajos who worked to reconstruct these historical structures. The Ancestral Pueblo historic structures such as Cliff Palace need to be interpreted as cultural resources that were built with the hands of Navajos. In approaching my dissertation, I have consulted National Park interpretive sources such as the Historical American Building Survey that tell the history of labor on these cultural resources. To tell a complete history of Mesa Verde would be to understand both the ancestral and modern history of American Indian peoples. To help visitors to understand that American Indians are not anachronistic but are modern flourishing peoples. Bringing American Indian labor history into National Parks is essential in challenging the myths that are damaging to

American Indians sovereignty. The National Park Service can fight the ideologies and expectations of twenty-first century park visitors that American Indians are static and unchanging. Instead, visitors can see the National Parks as important centers of Native American life where American Indians lived and worked and adapted to changing social, cultural, and economic circumstances.

In considering how American Indians left meaning in the places I have reconsidered the definition of labor to incorporate labor conducted by women and children in the community in and around these National Parks. I also consider unpaid labor such as the conversations between American Indian laborers and visitors held on the construction sites. To include all of the labor done by the entire American Indian community brought to these National Parks, I examine the motivations of National Park Service superintendents in bringing tribal members to work in their parks. For example, in the case of Glacier National Park, Park managers hired the Blackfeet CCC-ID to work on the Blackfeet Highway to create what they believed was a more historically accurate landscape of Indians with teepees and headdresses. However, the Blackfeet who worked in the National Park used these opportunities to talk with visitors about the history of their tribal nation. Through this labor, traditional Blackfeet crafts were re-invigorated and sold in tribally owned stands on the highway. The money earned from these stands went back into the Blackfeet economy contributing to new women's clubs and clubs for children. To create a more culturally inclusive understanding of labor history and to understand the role of federal cultural institutions in this history a more holistic approach must be undertaken that considers all types of labor conducted in these places. The labor of community survival and adaptation is just as important as the labor done alongside of it.



## **Working Group Case Statement: The Public History of Labor**

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My interest in the intersection of labor history and public history stems from three sources: my research on urban planning and the built environment, with particular emphasis on the erasure of working-class residents from civic life and the urban landscape; my position as coordinator of Wayne State's MA program in Public History (MAPH), which has an "urban and labor history" track; and my role as the coordinator of the 2017 North American Labor History Conference (NALHC), where this working group first met. Additionally, when I was a historic preservation consultant several years ago, I often worked on projects and sites that had some relationship to labor and working class history and this stoked my interest deindustrialization and industrial heritage.

I will focus in this case statement primarily on my experiences with our MAPH program and with NALHC, because I am especially concerned with how we can how begin to institutionalize more diverse forms of labor and working class history. We established our MAPH program quite recently, in 2015, in response to demand from current students and recent MA graduates who had built (or were building) careers in museums, cultural resources, and state and local government. Our alumni often reported that they wished they had been able to pursue coursework that would have better prepared them for these jobs, and my colleague Elizabeth Faue and I designed our public history MA program in part in response to their feedback. We were highly attuned to the fact that public history programs have been proliferating and that public history jobs are not a panacea for the jobs crisis in the humanities. With that in mind, we wanted to develop a program that built on our department and university's unique strengths. Among these are our departmental depth in the fields of urban and labor history and the presence on campus of the Walter P. Reuther Library (the

Reuther), one of the nation's premier labor archives. A unique aspect of our graduate programs is that all of our graduate students have the opportunity to earn, at the cost of an additional six credits, a certificate in archival administration. Students who do so typically work in some capacity at the Reuther, and indeed, most of our graduate students build thesis and dissertation projects that can in part be completed in the Reuther's labor archives or local history records. Departmental faculty—labor historians and otherwise—often build assignments around research at the Reuther. For example, one colleague, an Africanist, collaborated with the Reuther for a digital history course in which students digitized records on American union members' role in South Africa's anti-apartheid movement, and then built online exhibits around the digitized documents. In this way, our public history students, even those not in the urban and labor history track, will almost without exception be asked to develop some sort of project that uses the Reuther's records and asks them to think critically about labor and working class history.

Detroit is commonly associated with the UAW and a particular form of white working-class unionism, but in reality many of its workers, in the auto industry and elsewhere, were (and are certainly not today) white men. Because our metropolitan region is so diverse and because the Reuther's holdings are national in scope, students have expressed interest in developing projects on topics ranging from conducting oral histories on the experiences of Arab American auto workers to working with teachers to develop educational materials on the history of teachers' union activism (we have yet to see if these projects will come to pass!). Finally, the Detroit Historical Museum, which is located across the street from the Reuther, also works closely with both our program and with the archives, and we see endless possibilities for collaboration on a range of exhibits, oral history projects, historic preservation initiatives and the like through which our students can engage with the history of Detroit's exceptionally diverse working class.

For the 2017 NALHC conference, we settled on the theme "Labor History and Public History," in part to draw attention to our MAPH program. NALHC has been around for

almost four decades—it will hold its fortieth annual conference at Wayne State in 2018—and it was at one time the foremost (and only) labor history conference in the country. Following the creation of the Labor and Working Class History Association (LAWCHA), which holds biennial meetings, often in conjunction with the Organization of American Historians, NALHC no longer attracts the numbers that it once did. NALHC steering committee members have, for at least in the seven years in which I have been among that number, expressed concern that the conference is too narrowly focused on US industrial and trade unions. This focus makes sense both in terms of the historical focus on these kinds of unions in the historiography and in terms of the conference's location in Detroit, the home of the UAW. Recent coordinators and steering committee members have sought to include union members and activists not just as audience members, but as panelists, and to expand the scope of the conference to include a wider range of geographic areas and a broader notion of who counts as a workers and what kinds of unions and organizing drives are represented in the historical record.

One of the best features of NALHC has always been that it counts among its attendees union members from the metropolitan area and the Midwest more generally and a wide variety of local activists. For instance, General Baker, a founder of the Dodge Revolutionary Movement, was a fixture at the conference before his death. Having non-academics in the audience generally leads to more interesting conversations that we might otherwise expect about scholarly papers. Several NALHC steering committee members have also begun attending NCPH conferences, and we were inspired by the energy and enthusiasm of NCPH participants. We hoped that reaching out to public historians would help invigorate sessions at NALHC. In a stroke of luck, Melissa Bingmann of West Virginia University approached me and suggested that we make NALHC an NCPH mini-con, and she facilitated an introduction to NCPH Executive Director Stephanie Rowe. We settled on the idea of a working group that would meet at NALHC and continue its work at NCPH, and Rachel Donaldson and Richard Anderson agreed to take on the work of facilitating. We circulated the NALHC CFP through public history, historic preservation, museum, and archives networks.

My colleague Erik Nordberg, the Director of the Reuther, arranged for a Society of American Archivists section meeting to be held in Detroit the day before NALHC. We also partnered with a regional digital humanities consortium and the Michigan Labor History Society, an organization run largely by former union members concerned with preserving labor heritage, to offer events ranging from labor history walking tours to digital humanities lightning talks to labor films for conference attendees and for local union members and their families. The conference attracted a higher-than-usual number of session and paper proposals, and we discovered that more than half of this year's participants were first-time attendees. Sessions were on the whole better-attended than in any year since I became involved with the conference, and the participation of public historians in the academy and out did, indeed, bring the energy that we hoped it would. Instead of only papers recounting the history of particular strikes, we also had sessions on designing graphic histories, on creating museums, on making documentaries, and on worker education programs. We had discussions about using history to build union membership, about public outreach, about collaboration between union and artists, and about the erasure of working people, especially working people of color, from the landscape of American history. It was particularly rewarding to partner with a workers' organization to make some of our events free and open to the public, and therefore make the conference about "public" history in practice rather than merely in theory.

I want to end by noting that my interest in labor is not purely historical; I am a shop steward and occasional volunteer organizer (though not nearly often enough, as our paid organizer will surely confirm!) for my faculty union. Aside from the institutional issues outlined in this case statement, I am personally quite interested in thinking about how developing a fuller, less white, and less male collective memory of "labor" can help inform contemporary organizing drives, especially among groups (be it faculty members or casino workers) who might not think of themselves as potential union members. A more useable past could do important political work in the present, and I would like to be part of helping to build that in some way.

## Rachel Donaldson and Leonard Riley Case Statement

With this being a co-authored project, we, Rachel Donaldson and Leonard Riley, both come to the public history of labor from very different perspectives. Rachel is a historian and historic preservationist and Leonard is a longshoreman, as well as an active member, and former board member, of the International Longshoremen's Association (ILA) Local 1422 in Charleston, South Carolina. While we approach the issues of labor history and heritage from different angles, we both strongly believe in the importance of growing the labor movement, particularly in regions recognized as traditionally hostile to labor organization—e.g. the South—as well as the importance of preserving labor history and heritage, and of generating a more inclusive understanding of labor history.

Leonard Riley, Jr., officially began working as a longshoreman in 1977, but his work in the field predated that time by several years. His father, Leonard Riley, Sr., had been a longshoreman since 1950, and Leonard first began working on the docks in 1970. From the very outset of his career, Riley joined the ILA, eventually serving fifteen years as a board member and continually acting as a contract negotiator on wage scale committees. Over the course of his career, Riley has worked in ship holds as a cargo handler and operated cranes as a winches/crane operator. During the early-1990s, he became header for his work crew—a role that entailed supervising the longshoremen of his gang.<sup>1</sup> Currently, he dedicates much of his time to activism, specifically working on contract issues for longshoremen and women, as well as supporting issues of social and economic equality on the docks and in the wider community.

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<sup>1</sup> Because the labor of longshoremen and women requires workers to haul massive amounts of cargo, the work is inherently collaborative; groups of workers are able to move what individuals cannot by working alone. The crews of longshoremen and women are referred to as “gangs,” and are known for their high level of collaboration and, often, camaraderie.

Rachel Donaldson is an Assistant Professor of public history at the College of Charleston. She is the lead historian revising the content and guidelines of the Labor History Theme Study for the National Historic Landmarks program. In her work as a historian and preservationist, she focuses on the intersection of place-based history and labor organization. Place-based history roots the study of the past in particular places, recognizing that sites—structures, spaces, and cultural landscapes—have served and can continue to serve as important facilitators for contemporary organizing, while at the same time protecting the heritage of labor by connecting past struggles to current efforts. As a preservationist, she advocates for the protection of these buildings. However, rather than working just to secure their presence in the built environment, as is the approach of adaptive reuse approaches to preservation, she seeks to ensure that the significance of the history that led to their construction and the historical functions that they served for the communities that used them are preserved as much as the structures themselves.

Together, we have started working on a project that focuses on the important role the ILA has played in shaping the labor landscape of Charleston, particularly through the different buildings that it has used as labor halls in downtown Charleston since its establishment in 1936. The ILA has been a critical force for organized labor in the city and the state, and the different sites that the union has occupied have been key venues for labor organizing, not just on the docks, but also throughout the city of Charleston. The current union hall, for instance, has been a meeting place for other labor organizations such as Healthcare Workers United (healthcare workers at the Medical University of South Carolina), and Charleston's Fight for Fifteen. It has also been the site of targeted campaigns such as the International Brother of Machinists' recent drive to organize workers at Boeing, and a local effort to gain union contracts for city sanitation workers. The hall has served as a home for organizing groups, as well as a rallying site where activists have gathered prior to demonstrations and community canvassing. In fact, the current

hall was *designed* to accommodate community groups and efforts like these. As Leonard explains, longshoremen have a long history of organization in Charleston, and their standing in a port city whose economy largely depends on their labor lends them a good deal of leveraging power—power that not many other workers in the area possess. For instance, the hall serves as the monthly meeting site of the Charleston Alliance for Fair Employment, a group that includes many active members of the ILA. The purpose of the Alliance is to both lead and assist in labor struggles among all workers, organized and unorganized. This helps to bridge the gap between workers who have union representation and those who don't, which is in keeping with the Local 1422's emphasis on opening their doors to *all* workers struggling for fair treatment.

The project we are working on together is new for us both, but we believe that a place-based, public history of labor project on the role that the ILA has played, and continues to play, in Charleston would benefit well from the perspectives of both a public historian and a labor activist. In combining our approaches, we hope to be able to serve as a potential model for other projects involving collaboration between historians and activists.

With this project, we are each motivated by concerns that intersect on many levels. As a historian, Rachel is interested in broadening the historical interpretations of labor to include both regions and types of work not traditionally represented in labor history and in local history. Labor historians have done a remarkable job in the past thirty years of shifting the historical focus from the industrialized cities of the North to those of the South as well. Yet, the focus still remains on those areas that are undeniably industrial: New South cities like Birmingham, company towns of the coal and textile industries, and extractive work camps operated by free and convict labor. Interpretations of labor history now need to move into areas not often recognized as sites of labor history such as plantations and antebellum cities. We are beginning to move in this direction. Increasingly, the historical interpretations of slavery and sites in which

slaves lived and worked are emphasizing the *labor* history of American chattel slavery. This latter development has done much to bring to light the history of slave labor, particularly in “Old South” cities like Charleston. While both the scholarship on Charleston and the public history programs in the city have greatly expanded interpretations of slavery to illustrate the ways in which the city developed on the back of slave labor, there is a remarkable lack of attention paid to the significance of labor history in the city after emancipation—a significant historical oversight that we hope to correct through our collaboration.

As Rachel focuses on the history of labor on the docks and in the city, Leonard is concerned with connecting the past to the present by showing how struggles of the past can inform present struggles. Tying contemporary efforts of the labor movement to 19<sup>th</sup> century notions of producerism—the idea that labor creates value and that all work, regardless of skill level, is significant—he is hopeful that this project will highlight how the labor of individual workers is directly tied to the wealth of the country. We both believe that when people value that connection, it will give workers the respect they deserve. Furthermore, projects like these can highlight the significant role that unions play in the lives of workers *and* in local communities. During a period when workers are voting to reject unionization, we hope that getting this information out into the public can help to combat antiunion rhetoric and misperceptions about organized labor.

By focusing on the important role that longshoremen, and the ILA, played in influencing and shaping the political, economic, cultural, and structural history of the city during the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, we hope to begin a longer effort to bring Charleston, and cities like it, into narratives of American labor history. At the same time, we hope to bring the history of labor more fully to the forefront of the public history of Charleston itself.



Leah Worthington  
Addlestone Library  
Case Statement, NALHC

My experiences with labor history in a public history setting are both behind a desk and in the field, meeting with the public both in the digital format and face-to-face. In the first case, in the digital realm, I am the project coordinator for the Lowcountry Digital History Initiative (LDHI), which is a digital public history project that publishes exhibitions highlighting underrepresented race, class, gender, and labor histories within the Lowcountry region and its interconnection Atlantic World sites. LDHI is the major digital project of the Lowcountry Digital Library (LCDL), which produces digital collection and projects through partnerships with the region's archivists and scholars. LCDL's mission is to advance public understanding of the history and culture of the region. Of LDHI's twenty exhibitions currently published, six of them deal directly with labor history. In addition to this experience, I was also the lead interpreter at a historic site that was once a plantation, McLeod Plantation Historic Site (MPHS). The interpretation of McLeod focuses on the enslaved and then freed people who lived on the property from 1851-1990, therefore centralizing in the interpretation enslaved labor and the worker in the pre-Civil War era. Interpreters at MPHS spend a significant portion of their time speaking with the public about enslaved people's experiences, which translates to the wayside signs, physical objects, and guided interpretive tours of the site honing in on labor history and the worker. In both positions, I worked to expand the definition of labor history and the American worker for the public, implement these ideas to those involved in the project, and considered how a less inclusive definition of labor and the worker lead to misinformation about larger national narratives.

The public often arrives to historic sites, museums, and online searches with an incomplete or factually incorrect idea of a topic that the historian, interpretive guide, or museum curator must then contend with and help redefine. At MPHS and LDHI, this is done through carefully considering the objects, images, and language used to define the site or topic. The public's internalized narrative of plantations, as I found working at MPHS for example, was a combination of white America's constructed

myth and Hollywood. In the mind of the public, the mythologized plantation of Scarlett O'Hara often replaced the historical reality of a plantation – the site of an organized and systematic race-based forced labor institution that enjoyed political, legal, and social acceptance by the American majority. Because of the known discontent between real and imagined history so many visitors arrived with, we used all opportunities of interpretation to help visitors reconstruct their idea of the site. The wayside signs placed around the 40-acre site discuss each part of the narrative from multiple perspectives. The multifarious perspectives placed alongside each other help visitors realize who was at the site and how different their experience were. For example, the meaning of cotton (labor product) to an owner (wealth/status) contrasts sharply with its meaning to enslaved people and then sharecroppers (forced labor/violence/lack of humanity). The wayside signs also discuss women's labor, including domestic work as labor, despite it often not being considered labor in the present-day United States because it is not always paid.

Objects at historic sites and museums, in addition to images in signage and exhibitions, also assist the curator and interpreter in defining the importance of the site and centralizing labor as a narrative. For example, the house of the owners at MPHS is purposefully unfurnished, but there is a discussion of who built a house owned by a man who enslaved around one-hundred people. Furthermore, inside the Welcome Center sits a cotton gin and a row boat – both objects of labor. The kitchen, dairy, cotton gin house, and barn are buildings are objects for interpretation to discuss the most common activity on the site - labor. At LDHI, with a digital format, images provide a powerful and easy way to tell the reader who is central and therefore most important to the narrative. For example, the exhibit about the hospital workers strike in Charleston, South Carolina is labor history with black women as the central historical actors. The coordinator can help guide the process of choosing images for the exhibition. With image research, often the easiest images to obtain for an exhibition are not the best images, particularly in underrepresented histories. At both MPHS and LHDI, careful consideration goes into choosing images which accurately convey the laborer. In the example of the hospital workers strike, this means centralizing images of the strikers. Accurately depicting the worker in the images reinforces the narrative by providing some visitors

with unexpected faces of “the American worker.” The images solidify for the public that the American worker was not and is not a specific gender or race. Again, assessing what the public thinks they know about labor history of the American worker is essential when attempting to educate them on a specific labor history narrative. Depending on the narrative, there might be more or less “knowledge” to deconstruct alongside the narrative being constructed.

These objects and images of labor are presented alongside text and discussion at LDHI and MPHS talk about the worker. Interpretive guides and tour guides at MPHS are trained on their word choice; through training, they learn that their word choice has the potential to challenge and redefine misinformed ideas or reinforce old, myth-based ideas. At MPHS, we also connect the worker in the narrative to the people visiting the site, connecting enslaved Africans with present-day labor struggles. Understanding the underlying commonality between past and present and defining the universal human experience in the narrative is essential for this approach. For example, paid and unpaid workers across centuries of American history organized in order to gain or maintain a level of control over the production process. Yet much of the public does not think of enslaved people as autonomous or having the ability to organize, and so connecting enslaved people’s needs and desires to the public’s needs and desires brings the worker to life. Forming these connections personalizes the past so that visitors relate to and internalize the narrative. At LDHI, the exhibit’s authors often connects the labor history to broader labor narratives the public is likely to be more familiar with, which allows for easy contextualization of new information, or the authors conclude their exhibit with present-day connections. The tool of connecting the past to the present is inconsistent in its application across the half dozen exhibits that deal with labor in LDHI, but it does need to stay that way. Coordinators are in the position to help scholars see the benefits of including these tools throughout their exhibition, particularly if the goal is to not just educate but change the way people think about a topic such as labor and the worker.

At both MPHS and LDHI, people working in public history are widening the definitions and understandings of labor history and the historical actors in those narratives. However, if the public is

expected to expand or change their understanding of a historic site or event, the people working at that site or on that exhibit must also be aware of the goal and how to speak to the public about it. At a historic site like MPHS, this takes the form of intensive and continued training of interpreters, docents, volunteers, and any other staff that the public will interact with. By empowering them with knowledge about why certain objects are included and others excluded from exhibits or sites and explaining how the material covered might be challenging or even jarring for some visitors, those employed at public history sites work through these redefinitions of labor and the worker themselves. They can then, in turn, work through these histories with the public. At MPHS, the interpreters and volunteers keep a log of questions they are asked by the public. These questions are reviewed at monthly or quarterly meetings. The intensity of the training different groups receive might vary, but the content does not. Interpreters share responses to common or difficult questions from the public so that the wheel house of answers is a shared one. It's also a space to catch each other's language to make sure it correctly defines labor history and the worker, instead of slipping into old, inaccurate definitions. The information gathered at these meetings is then collated and shared with other staff or volunteers of the site.

For exhibits with LDHI, initial conversations about the goals of the projects and then the editing process both allow opportunities for the coordinator or any member of a collaborative team to discuss issues of labor and the impact of exclusion. Leaving out a narrative on labor can lead to a false narrative not by misinformation but by omission. What does it mean to write exhibit text about a plantation site without significantly discussing the labor taking place at the site? How much does this lead to a misrepresentation of the historical reality for the majority of the population on plantation sites? Public history projects provide space to determine how past and current exclusion of the labor narrative in specific historical contexts, such as American slavery, molds the public's construction of national identity, the American worker, and national mythology (in place of historical realities). While the public may find difficult historical labor narratives difficult or uncomfortable, my experience is that it also engages their critical thinking about how this "new history" they've learned reframes, connects to, and helps make sense of the present world they live in.