

North Carolina Historical Commission
Conference Call Minutes

June 21, 2023

The North Carolina Historical Commission (NCHC, Commission) met virtually, via Zoom, on Wednesday, June 21, 2023. The following commissioners were in attendance: David Ruffin, Chair; Shana Bushyhead Condill; Barbara Groome; Dr. Valerie A. Johnson; Dr. Susanna Lee; Susan Phillips; W. Noah Reynolds; and Barbara B. Snowden. Absent were commissioners Mayor Newell Clark; Dr. David Dennard, and Samuel B. Dixon.

Others in attendance were: Dr. Darin Waters, Deputy Secretary for Archives and History, North Carolina Department of Natural and Cultural Resources (DNCR); Ramona Bartos, Director, Division of Historical Resources (DHR); Sarah Koonts, Director, Division of Archives & Records (DAR); Michelle Lanier, Director, Division of State Historic Sites & Properties (DSHSP); Phil Feagan, General Counsel, DNCR; Chuck LeCount, Deputy Director, DSHSP; John Campbell, curator, North Carolina Museum of History (MOH); Parker Backstrom, Office of Archives and History (OAH) administrative assistant and Recording Secretary for the NCHC; and Matt Zeher, information technology facilitator.

The meeting was livestreamed on the DNCR website. Copies of all cited written materials can be found in the file for this meeting.

Call to Order and Conflict of Interest Statement

The meeting was called to order at 10:01 AM. Chairman Ruffin welcomed those in attendance. He welcomed the newest member of the Commission, Dr. Susanna Lee, who offered some self-biographical information and introductory comments. Since she'd been duly sworn in prior to the meeting she jumped right in as a full member with voting privileges. Mr. Ruffin also noted for the record the reappointments of commissioners Reynolds, Snowden, and himself to additional five-year terms. He also thanked and commended Dr. Mary Lynn Bryan for decades of service on the NCHC and noted that Governor Cooper had bestowed upon her the title of Commissioner Emerita.

Following a roll call to establish the presence of a quorum, the chairman asked the commissioners whether any had a known or perceived conflict of interest with respect to any of the items of business slated for discussion, their having had a chance to examine the meeting agenda in advance. No such concerns were voiced, and the meeting proceeded.

Approval of Minutes

Commissioner Snowden moved approval of the minutes from the March 22, 2023, NCHC meeting, as written. The motion was seconded by Commissioner Groome. With no discussion, the minutes were approved by a unanimous roll call vote.

Accessions and Deaccessions of Items in State Collections

Speaking on behalf of the Office of Archives and History Collections Committee (OAHCC), which he chairs, and citing a written annotated list made available to the commissioners in advance of this meeting, Dr. Waters offered a brief overview of the items recommended for accessioning into the collections of the North Carolina Museum of History in Raleigh, the North Carolina Maritime Museums, and the Division of State Historic Sites and Properties. As has become standard practice, the accession items were all presented for voting purposes as a single slate. None of the commissioners had any questions about any of the items, so Dr. Johnson moved that the recommendations by the OAHCC be approved as presented. The motion was seconded by Ms. Phillips and was carried by unanimous roll call vote.

As with accessions, the items recommended for deaccessioning from the collections of the MOH, the North Carolina Mountain Gateway Museum, and the DSHSP were presented by Dr. Waters as a single slate. Commissioner Phillips moved approval and Commissioner Snowden seconded the motion. With no discussion, the motion was carried unanimously following a roll call.

Deaccessions from the State Archives

By statute, items requested for deaccessioning by the Division of State Archives must be considered separately and apart from items from physical collections in the divisions of state museums and historic sites. Prior to the meeting Ms. Koonts prepared and made available to each commissioner an annotated list of nine collections of archival materials she wishes to deaccession from the archives, including a description of the recommended disposition of those materials, ranging from destruction to returning to the physical custody of the creating agency. Following a motion by Ms. Phillips to approve the recommendations and a second of that motion by Mr. Reynolds, a roll call vote was taken. The motion was carried unanimously.

Follow-up Discussion about NCHC Resolutions Pertaining to its Advocacy for Teaching History in North Carolina Schools and for Increased Efforts to Retain and Properly Compensate DNCR Employees

Reintroducing an item of business tabled at the March 2023 NCHC meeting, Mr. Ruffin reminded the commissioners that two resolutions were passed at the December 2022 NCHC meeting that spoke to the concern of the Commission about how history is being generally profiled and taught in our schools, and concerns about the reduced role that societal leadership, including those in state government, is playing in promoting the importance of understanding history. Summarily, he said, the Commission feels the time is right for it to use its voice to emphasize the vital importance that both teaching and understanding history play in our society. The chair stated that it's his prerogative to not take any action at today's meeting, but rather use this meeting to begin a substantive dialogue that will set up action by the NCHC at its September 2023 meeting.

He stated that he has been struck by the amount of action that has already been taken, primarily in the form of recommendations by OAH staff—which were re-shared with commissioners in advance of this meeting—for ways that each division could promote the teaching of history from their unique perspectives. The Commission, he said, now needs to find a way to put its “weight” behind the implementation of these ideas. Mr. Ruffin then opened the floor to discussion.

Commissioner Snowden began by praising the specificity of the staff recommendations, cited especially the inclusion of initiatives surrounding the opportunity that America250 presents. She also echoed the stated concerns about reduced staffing levels and non-competitive pay playing into the difficulty each division has in recruiting and retaining talent, as well as in carrying out their respective missions. Ms. Snowden suggested that each commissioner put together a list of groups and organizations each is familiar with which the NCHC might “bring on board” the proclamation that it intends to draft. She feels that doing so would give such a proclamation a broader, more inclusive profile and lend it greater weight in the eyes of both the public and state officials. Ms. Phillips suggested condensing the staff recommendations into a prioritized “agenda” that may be more likely to gain traction “straight out of the gate,” perhaps a “phase I” initiative with a more detailed “phase II” initiative to come.

Dr. Lee echoed the concerns of staff, and voiced by Ms. Snowden, about staffing and resource issues, which she experiences daily in her role at North Carolina State University. She feels that staff need to be properly compensated for the expertise and experience they bring to their mission to serve the public.

Dr. Johnson cautioned the commissioners to be mindful that the NCHC represents the entire Department of Natural and Cultural Resources, not just the history side. For example, she said, the Commission should look for ways that the arts and humanities and natural history arms of the DNCR could partner with the cultural history arm. Perhaps, she said, holding something like “Coffee with the Commissioners” events—social gatherings wherein constituents could engage one-on-one with commissioners in their respective regions.

Commissioner Phillips expressed her belief as “a non-historian and non-educator” is that the relevance of history has become obscured in the hearts and minds of the general public. Perhaps the Commission should look for ways to demonstrate what the relevance and utility of history is to the lives of individuals. In some people’s view the recitation of history has even been cloaked in the promotion of cultural propaganda. People must be shown that history is important by asking such questions as, how has historical knowledge been used to shape or affect the present and the future? She feels that people generally don’t see a “need” for knowledge of history the way they do more practical applications and utilitarian concepts applied to everyday life. If people don’t believe that history is important then its teaching and promotion are not likely to get funded or even advocated for. Toward this end how can the NCHC and OAH staff help recontextualize history in such a way as to establish a connection between people and history? Chairman Ruffin concurred with these thoughts, reframing it by saying that imparting knowledge about history is not merely a recitation of facts but also the implementation of concepts and ideas, and it must be approached in this way.

Speaking as an educator, Ms. Groome stated that it’s in the classrooms where teachers can get children excited about history, where she feels it needs to begin. This is especially true if history is personalized, for example, by incorporating family stories. Mr. Reynolds opined that it’s equally important to reach out beyond those who already have some knowledge of and appreciation for history, who might be more inclined to seek a deeper understanding of it, to those individuals who might have little or no knowledge of or interest in history. So, how can the Commission direct its messaging to the latter demographic across the state about the importance of history? He also stressed the concept of “simpler is better,” in essence, that the less complicated the message the greater reach it is likely to have. One method for this type of messaging might be offering “lunch

and learn” or “virtual tour” opportunities in schools. Another might be having bibliographical materials at state historic sites to give visitors the opportunity to do research during visits.

Mr. Ruffin expressed his concern about how the teaching of history has become entwined with politics, as alluded to by Ms. Phillips. So, the messaging part must be combined with efforts to decouple the concepts of history and politics by removing even the sense that the Commission is trying to push any kind of agenda. That said, he agreed with some who expressed their belief that this would be a tough task. It is his hope that the general fatigue being felt by the public toward an overall toxic, hyper-partisan political environment might create an opening to allow the Commission to convey that its mission is to push politics aside and convey that history that can bring together people who may have different political beliefs, by building it around an appreciation and reverence for what history truly gives all of us.

Commissioner Phillips stated she feels that how history is taught is important, especially by placing what is being taught in context. It’s easy to point out the most obvious points about a person, place, or time in history, but it’s imperative to include the other facets as well, the more “non-obvious” people, surroundings, and happenings incorporated into the very same event, so that a fuller picture is presented for consumption. Ms. Snowden stressed the importance of making primary sources available to anyone interpreting history so that each interpreter can apply their own deductions and formulate their own conclusions rather than seeing things through secondary or tertiary sources, or even hearsay by those who’ve already reinterpreted some aspect of history. Providing a bridge to connect schoolteachers and administrators with primary sources is one way that the DNCR and OAH can help guide such a process.

To build upon some of the points that have already been made, Dr. Lee stressed the importance in her mind of engaging various communities directly about the importance of history, some of which have been challenging to engage. Some forms of history are less well documented than others, or the documentation is record-based and in many cases scant, so to impart inclusive, relevant, historical stories will require extra effort and time and resources to accomplish. Dr. Lee stated that in her experience teachers are often very hungry for this type of information but might not get the kind of support they need from school administrations. Along these lines, she would like to see more subject matter experts brought into teaching settings to disseminate historical information and provide proper context.

Ms. Phillips commended Ms. Koonts on the oral history program in the state archives and would like to see a program developed that would have state archivists or interns go into schools and teach children how to record oral histories. Ms. Koonts explained that she would be meeting soon with the state’s oral historian and would talk with him about this suggestion. Ms. Koonts concurs that this would begin to show young people that you don’t have to be an “important” person to have an important story, but rather that their individual stories matter and are part of a tapestry that forms American history. Mr. Ruffin asked Dr. Waters and Ms. Koonts to share with the commissioners prior to the September meeting any specific ideas along these lines with which they might be familiar that might have come from other groups or organizations with whom they might have interacted.

Dr. Johnson emphasized the need to build relationships. It’s great to have ideas on things to do inside classrooms, she said, but it’s a matter of execution. Since there is already a framework built around the upcoming America250 program, she thinks it important to leverage this framework to solicit feedback from teachers on ways to broaden how history is taught and what the DNCR can do

to further support them. Not only would it produce tangible ideas, but it would also strengthen these already existing relationships. She cited as an example the efforts that the North Carolina African American Heritage Commission have made to partner with the state on building a curriculum to be rolled out to kindergarten through grade 12 teachers incorporating black history in North Carolina.

Before the Commission regathers in September, Dr. Johnson asked the commissioners and staff to think about how best to take advantage of these relationships to develop ways that schools can tell better, more comprehensive stories, as well as communicating to schools that they themselves can do some of the work that we know needs to be done around revitalizing the understanding and appreciation for history in our society. Adding to this, Commissioner Groome posed the question, what can “we” do in our own communities to develop interests in and a passion for history?

Chairman Ruffin stated his strong support for participatory approaches to some of the ideas developed by OAH staff following the December 2022 meeting. The goal is to get the younger generation to see history as being “cool,” maybe by using tools that younger people utilize like social media, blogs, and podcasts. Ms. Phillips suggested that such a message could come from the education branch of the DNCR. She commented that she went online to try to find the education branch but found that its online profile was so “buried” that her efforts proved fruitless. To this end she asks that connecting with the education branch be made much easier.

Dr. Waters expressed his appreciation for the robust discussion. Adding to it, he advocates getting school students out to state historic sites which, he said, is a wholly different experience than being told about history in a classroom. He would like to see greater “cross-pollination” efforts by schools to facilitate students in western North Carolina visiting museums and historic sites in the eastern part of the state, and vice versa. He realizes that resources are limited but it’s an idea he’d like the Commission and staff to think more about.

To wrap up the conversation, the chair stated that he would like to see the following come out of the September NCHC meeting: a prioritized set of practical, “tactical” recommendations for implementing some of the ideas developed previously by staff; and for Chairman Ruffin, Dr. Waters, and perhaps DNCR Secretary Reid Wilson to sit down and come up with a respectful but forceful way to request more awareness and sensitivity from the North Carolina General Assembly to the real issue of staffs being limited in what they can accomplish with the restrictions placed upon them by the challenges of recruitment and retainment of talent due to non-competitive remuneration. In this way the NCHC would effectively serve as the “squeaky wheel” on this issue, the effects of which have been acutely felt by the various divisions, as stated unanimously and repeatedly by the division directors.

In conclusion, Chairman Ruffin reiterated his desire that the NCHC become more than merely a “reactive” body, and he thinks the time is right to make a statement that the Commission wants to advocate for the work and needs of the OAH in a more proactive and effective way.

Update on Status of the Pasquotank Legal Matter

As he speculated at the Commission’s March 23 meeting, Mr. Feagan confirmed that that the plaintiffs in the suit against the NCHC pertaining to the civil war statue issue in Pasquotank County—the Sons of Confederate Veterans—have dismissed the suit.

Deputy Secretary Report

Touching on some of the highlights from his divisions of Archives and Records, Historic Sites and Properties, Historical Resources, and History Museums, Dr. Waters reported that he and Secretary Wilson traveled to Fort Fisher State Historic Site to see the improvements being made there. Ms. Lanier provided some summary information about the \$30 million project, which includes construction of a new visitor center. She also reported the addition at Fort Fisher of staff member Kaitlin O'Connor. Dr. Waters reported he has been traveling a great deal this summer and noted that he and Commissioner Dennard together visited the underwater archaeology lab in Greenville as Dr. Dennard had never seen the work going on there, despite his living in that same town.

The deputy secretary was pleased to report on the hiring of Chrystal Reagan as the new director of the Tryon Palace in New Bern. She moved there from the education section of the Museum of History in Raleigh, which she oversaw.

Two major arts projects are ongoing within the OAH, supported by the African American Heritage Commission through grants from the Z. Smith Reynolds Foundation. One is the 'Africa to Carolina' project at Brunswick Town/Fort Anderson State Historic Site, a public site for recognition of a disembarkation site for enslaved people coming from Africa to North Carolina. Dr. Johnson expressed her excitement about the two artists chosen to bring this vision to life. The other art project is being carried out at Tryon Palace.

Dr. Waters concluded by stating that the department continues to await a proposed budget from the North Carolina General Assembly. The governor's proposed state budget includes \$3.8 million for increased existing departmental salaries, as well as funding for five full-time positions at the new Thomas Day State Historic Site, and funding for positions in the Division of Historical Resources. Ms. Lanier and Ms. Bartos reiterated the challenges they're facing due to lack of funding and expressed appreciation to the DNCR's senior leadership for its advocacy on behalf of the divisions.

Chair Announcements

Mr. Ruffin reminded the commissioners that the next meeting of the NCHC will take place on September 20, 2023, and will be in person in Raleigh.

Adjournment

The chair adjourned the meeting at 11:34 AM.

Respectfully submitted,

*[A final, post-edit version will be
presented for a signature]*

Darin J. Waters