

## North Carolina Historical Commission

### Meeting Minutes

September 19, 2023

The North Carolina Historical Commission (NCHC, Commission) met in person on Tuesday, September 19, 2023. The following commissioners were in attendance: David Ruffin, Chair; Dr. David Dennard; Barbara Groome; Dr. Valerie A. Johnson; Dr. Susanna Lee; W. Noah Reynolds; and Barbara B. Snowden. Absent were commissioners Mayor Newell Clark, Shana Bushyhead Condit, Susan Phillips, 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); Maria Vann, Deputy Director, Division of State History Museums (DSHM); Jessica Pratt, head of the K-12 Education Outreach Branch of the North Carolina Museum of History (MOH); Phil Feagan, General Counsel, DNCR; 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 10:00 AM. Chairman Ruffin welcomed those in attendance and called roll to establish the presence of a quorum. The chairman then 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. Having had a chance to examine the meeting agenda in advance, none of the commissioners voiced such a concern so the meeting proceeded.

Mr. Ruffin used the chair's prerogative to move his announcements from the end of the agenda to the front. He reminded commissioners that they must adhere to the requirements set forth by the North Carolina State Ethics Commission to both submit their Statements of Economic Interest and complete their annual ethics training regimen. Mr. Ruffin also reported that Commissioner Emerita Dr. Mary Lynn Bryan had suffered a recent fall with serious injuries, but that she is at home recuperating. Her family has asked people to refrain from contacting her to assist with the healing process.

#### **Approval of Minutes**

Commissioner Snowden moved approval of the minutes from the June 21, 2023, NCHC meeting, with a correction required on page one — the terms served by commissioners is six years, not five. Dr. Dennard also pointed out that the name of the new director of the Tryon Palace, Chrystal Regan, was misspelled. The standing motion was seconded by Commissioner Johnson, pending these corrections. With no further discussion, the minutes were approved by a unanimous vote.

## Accessions and Deaccessions of Items in State Collections

Dr. Waters was given the floor to guide the commissioners through the recommendations from the Office of Archives and History Collections Committee (OAHCC) for items to be accessioned into and out of the collections of several of the institutions within the Division of State History Museums — the Museum of History in Raleigh, the Museum of the Albemarle, and the Maritime Museums — as well as the Division of State Historic Sites and Properties. He directed the commissioners to the annotated list of those items provided to them in advance of this meeting, and offered to answer any questions anyone might have about anything listed therein. No questions were forthcoming, so at the chairman's invitation Dr. Dennard moved acceptance of the items proposed for accessioning as presented. This motion was seconded by Commissioner Snowden and passed unanimously. Dr. Waters then addressed items recommended for deaccessioning from the Museum of History in Raleigh, the Mountain Gateway Museum, and the Division of State Historic Sites and Properties, offering them all up as a single slate for the purposes of voting. With no discussion forthcoming about any of the items, Commissioner Groome moved acceptance of the recommendations, and Dr. Johnson seconded the motion. The motion was passed unanimously.

## Petition from the North Carolina Department of Administration Re Relocation of Object of Remembrance

The Commission considered a petition from the N.C. Department of Administration (NCDOA) to permanently relocate an object of remembrance known as the Purple Heart Memorial from the grounds of the North Carolina State Administration Building in downtown Raleigh, to the headquarters of the North Carolina Department of Military and Veterans Affairs (NCDMVA), also in downtown Raleigh, which is located two blocks directly north from its current location, on the same street. This request comes because there is a plan to demolish the current State Administration Building as part of a larger downtown government complex redesign and replacement initiative. In addition to the petition the commissioners were provided at the meeting with a depiction of the memorial.

Mr. Feagan walked the commissioners through North Carolina General Statute **100-2.1 Protection of monuments, memorials, and works of art**, which lays out the responsibility placed upon the Commission to authorize the relocation of memorials and under what conditions. He cited subsection **(b) Limitations of Removal**, under which the NCDOA's request would fall, noting that the request does pertain to "a memorial ... of a permanent character that commemorates an event, a person, or military service that is part of North Carolina's history." Under this statute, he continued, a memorial can be moved "when necessary for construction, renovation, or reconfiguration of buildings." Since the relocation would be to a "site of similar prominence, honor, visibility, availability, and access that are within the boundaries of the jurisdiction from which it was located," if so adjudged by the commissioners, Mr. Feagan views this request as a straightforward one that falls under the NCHC's purview. In response to a question from the Chair, Mr. Feagan said he is not aware of any objection from any person or entity to such an action, and that this petition is based upon a similar request submitted by the NCDOA to the NCHC to relocate another marker under similar circumstances several years ago, a request that was approved by the Commission.

Dr. Johnson moved approval of the NCDOA petition, stating her belief that such a request is reasonable and appropriate given the circumstances. Commissioner Reynolds asked Mr. Feagan if he

knew of any reason why the Purple Heart Memorial wouldn't simply be removed temporarily during the construction process and replaced back in its original location. Mr. Feagan stated that he was not privy to the details of the request so he cannot address that question by offering any substantive information. Addressing a follow-up question by Mr. Reynolds, Dr. Waters confirmed that the NCDMVA is willing to accept the Purple Heart Memorial on the proposed site in perpetuity. Chairman Ruffin concurred with Commissioner Johnson's sentiments about appropriateness and called for a second of the standing motion. That second was proffered by Mr. Reynolds and carried by unanimous vote.

### **America250 Committee Request for Approval of Template for Wayside Rest Markers**

The commissioners heard from State Archivist Sarah Koonts who is the chair of the North Carolina contingent (A250 NC) of the National America250 Committee, formed several years ago to oversee planning by each state for the 2026 commemoration of the 250<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of the United States of America. She provided some background information about the initiative, explaining that the A250 NC is in the process of designing a unified template for physical markers pertaining to A250-related topics and events that will be installed along North Carolina waysides.

Ms. Koonts directed the commissioners' attention to a color rendering of the template design, which includes graphics, the size of the markers, and construction materials. She explained that the A250 NC has in place funding to install 14 such markers on state property — state historic sites, specifically — with the hope that private and local groups will take an interest in the project and participate. So, at this point, she said, she is seeking approval of the concept. Pending that approval, she would come back to the Commission at some point with specifics about proposed locations. Mr. Feagan stated that because the design is more of an exhibit than a monument, a return before the NCHC for approval of each individual sign will likely not be required, should the NCHC approve the proposed design at this meeting.

Ms. Koonts offered to answer any questions or entertain thoughts about the proposed design of the template or the project itself. Mr. Ruffin asked for the procedural differences between the approval and placement of state highway historical markers and the proposed A250 wayside rest signs. Ms. Bartos and Mr. Feagan explained that the design and placement of highway markers is a collaboration between the OAH and the North Carolina Department of Transportation and that parameters pertaining to the design and language used on the signs are set both statutorily and in administrative code. Therefore, the two projects are largely dissimilar. Ms. Snowden added that getting approval from a panel of state historians to erect a highway marker is quite rigorous, and expressed her appreciation that the A250 wayside markers will be less so. Ms. Koonts also noted that the A250 NC committee will be partnering with historians affiliated with the Civil War Trails program to ensure the accuracy and educational value of information presented on the wayside markers. Said Commissioner Snowden, the A250 program will give the state the chance to tell lesser-known stories about the Revolutionary War period that might be especially important to local citizens. Dr. Dennard expressed some slight hesitancy about the ease with which the A250 marker topics might be chosen, given the less rigorous approval process for proposed topics, hoping that only the most deserved topics would be selected for presentation. Said Mr. Feagan, one distinct difference is that the highway marker program is an open application process so requires a strict vetting process, whereas the topics chosen for the A250 project would be chosen by departmental historians who would apply their scholarly knowledge about the events of the Revolution to choose subject matter.

Addressing a question by Commissioner Lee, Ms. Koonts said she could not address Dr. Lee's question about accessibility of the information by the sight-impaired without conferring with the Civil War Trails program staff to see how they handled that issue. Ms. Koonts did confirm that the signs will be physically accessible to members of the public but will be placed only on sites that will ensure the safety of those folks. She also reported that the Civil War Trails group recommends that QR codes — would provide access to more detailed information online, broadening the interpretive value of the signs — not be added to the signs. The concern is that weathering over time might render the details in the QR code unreadable by QR code readers found on most mobile phones, negating their usefulness. Citing the use of these codes around the world, including in World Heritage Sites, Dr. Johnson expressed doubts about the veracity of these concerns and urged Ms. Koonts to reconsider their implementation.

The Commission expressed its appreciation for the planning of the A250 NC wayside marker program, but **no actions were taken in response to the presentation.**

**Continuing Discussion about December 2022 NCHC Resolutions Pertaining to Advocacy for Teaching History in North Carolina Schools and for Increased Efforts to Retain and Properly Compensate DNCR Employees**

Mr. Ruffin restated his belief that not enough is being done to emphasize the importance of the teaching of history in North Carolina, especially within the state's institutions of learning. He added that he believes the NCHC must not only lend its voice to amplify these oversights, but it must also offer ideas for ways to rectify them. And while the Commission is not a policy-making body, part of its role, Mr. Ruffin believes, is to help promote history and the importance of history. Therefore, the chair expressed his desire for the Commission to develop a prioritized set of practical, "tactical" recommendations for implementing some of the ideas for doing so that were developed by OAH staff. Those ideas were presented to the Commission at its September 2022 meeting and a robust discussion was initiated by the commissioners at its December 2022 meeting. It is Mr. Ruffin's hope that by the time the NCHC next meets in December 2023 it will be positioned to pass a more definitive resolution summarizing both its concerns about what it sees as the devaluation of history and its recommendations for ways to address this. At the chair's request Dr. Waters passed out copies of the original staff recommendations, to which commissioners can refer today. He also re-emphasized the excellent work that is ongoing in the department, work that the public knows about and lots that they don't know about, and he re-emphasized the real need for resources to support that work, and the importance of advocating for those resources.

Citing the staff recommendations, Dr. Johnson expressed concern about how the implementation of the staff recommendations is likely to simply increase the staff's workload while the resources upon which staff draw remains unchanged. She would like to see the Commission talk about ways to elevate its advocacy for staff without putting an undue additional burden upon them. Perhaps this includes helping get additional positions funded or empowering volunteers to advocate on the department's behalf. Dr. Johnson suggests this requires a layered approach, first, to help the public better understand history and its importance in our world view, and secondly, to find ways to "make space" for all the stories that still need to be told, since history is being created every minute of every day. She believes this will require a productive and direct working relationship with the Department of Public Instruction (DPI). The divisions have developed some excellent initiatives, but they are narrowly focused on the OAH. They are not emanating through the greater system. Said Dr.

Johnson, the OAH cannot shoulder the burden of being the only one promoting history on behalf of the state, providing all the content, and doing all the work. There are certainly resources that K-12 teachers have that can be brought to bear to raise up the profile of history and the humanities. To the latter point, she asked how the National Humanities Center, operating in the Triangle, can connect with the DNCR in a productive way. She thinks that would be an area of advocacy worth exploring. Both Dr. Waters and Ms. Koonts testified that working with the DPI is not an easy thing to do and that efforts toward maintaining a productive relationship with it has proven difficult.

Mr. Ruffin stated his appreciation for the broadening out of thought by Dr. Johnson because the issue, he said, isn't that the divisions of the OAH aren't doing enough, it's that the fine work they are doing is too insular, not being exposed to or put in front of enough people. Making it more accessible would help increase the awareness of the public. Increasing this visibility should be part of the implementation of any promotion or plan.

Commissioner Lee asked whether there is an online "one stop shop" that summarizes all the events, programming, and exhibits that are open and available to the public. Ms. Koonts confirmed that while this type of information is available at the division level, the department has not built the kind of "one stop shop" that Dr. Lee may be thinking about. The functionality of a single calendar for A250 events has been developed and could possibly be expanded to incorporate exhibit openings or other programming. Dr. Lee acknowledged that doing so would require additional funding but thinks something like that might be very useful. Dr. Waters reported that in the final year of this department's administration prior to the 2024 election for governor, DNCR Secretary Reid Wilson is promoting the educational materials that the department produces. Perhaps the type of resource that Dr. Lee would like to see, he said, could come out of that focus.

Commissioner Reynolds asked to revisit the language used by the NCHC when it drafted its resolutions in December 2022. He paraphrased it by saying the Commission expressed its desire to promote awareness of history in secondary schools and colleges, and thus the general population, through public education. As he reads it then, the focus is on the classroom. Reviewing the recommendations of OAH staff, he specifically cited a recommendation from the Division of Historical Resources to foster greater cooperation between the DNCR and DPI. Further, per the minutes from the June 2023 NCHC meeting, the Commission focused on questions such as "How is history being taught?" and "What is being taught in context?" Also discussed was the importance of making primary sources available to anyone promoting history, an emphasis in engaging with communities, the importance of oral history programs, the value of building relationships, and the desire to solicit feedback from teachers on ways to broaden how history is taught, and what the DNCR can do to further support that participatory approach. Mr. Reynolds then went online to review the DPI's 'Standards for American History' which talks about investigating turning points in history, understanding multiple causations, determining patterns of change, being able to compare multiple perspectives, synthesizing and evaluation evidence, and so on. He noted the absence in these 'Standards' of discussion about access to primary sources, museums, and historic sites. Perhaps that's a "sweet spot" where the DNCR and DPI could come together, letting the DPI know that there are primary sources out there — museums and historic sites, state archives, and the like — that are available for it to access.

Commissioner Groome extolled the "incredible" people and resources in the OAH and the opportunity that people have available to them to tap into what already exists. But, she noted, despite being a public-school teacher in North Carolina for over two decades, she was unaware of



those resources until she became a member of the NCHC. This highlights the kind of disconnect that hamper achieving the partnership that is being sought. Said Dr. Johnson, everyone in the state should know how to access those resources. But she re-emphasized that the OAH staff should not be the ones burdened with the responsibilities of outreach. As she referred to earlier, perhaps the staff and Commission can “deputize” others to spread this message, taking the opportunity to center this message upon the current A250 project. Such a topic would be an obvious drawing card, said Mr. Ruffin, citing the interest in American history raised around the time of the bicentennial. Being a topic of “pure history,” this should also serve to circumvent the conflation created around the nexus of history and politics. Ms. Snowden echoed what she suggested at the June meeting, that commissioners talk with other like-minded organizations of which the commissioners may be a member about “signing onto” whatever resolutions are passed by the Commission. In turn, those organizations need to be asked to get the message down to their members for further dissemination. Or perhaps the commissioners themselves need to participate in teacher workshops that are being sponsored by other entities to help spread the message about things that can be done to promote and amplify the importance of history. It will be up to the Commission to get copies of whatever resolution is passed out to groups and include with it a list of some of the resources — those available in the OAH — that can be accessed upon request. She stressed the need for commissioners to themselves spread the message because she fears a written resolution being handed to a school superintendent, for example, might just sit on a desk without any actual action being taken. Chairman Ruffin offered up an alternative avenue for someone like himself, who comes at it from a non-teaching perspective, and that it is to speak about these issues before civic organizations such as Rotary clubs, which he stated he would be happy to do. And Ms. Groome stated her intention to put together a list of resources that she can share with the superintendent of Buncombe County schools or Asheville city schools. She also offered to investigate speaking to classes of school children herself.

Chairman Ruffin urged each commissioner to examine where their areas of expertise and passion are and imagine ways to integrate the messaging about the importance of history into those endeavors. If nothing else is accomplished during the conversation at today’s meeting, it is agreed upon that simply coming up with a static resolution or two with no action behind them — laying the responsibility of implementation on others — is not nearly sufficient.

Dr. Dennard expressed concerns about the “growing pains” or “identity crisis” the NCHC might face as it navigates this issue, stating that the Commission rightfully wants something done but isn’t quite sure how to accomplish it. It appears to him that the Commission might be “running away from who it is” and what it should be doing and straying into pedagogy by telling teachers how to teach. The NCHC, he stated, needs to emphasize the importance of history and the ways that it can be promoted, then invite others to join in the process of determining how this is best accomplished. In addition to formulating a message about the importance of history, it can compile and share a list of resources that can be used to promote the “product.” But it should leave the implementation to those in a more practical position to succeed. Put another way, he said, the NCHC is the “guardian” of history, the advocates for the sacred importance of history, whereas the promulgation of this message should be turned over to those more qualified and better positioned to do so.

Mr. Ruffin sees the NCHC’s role, as a non-policy-making entity, as advocating for the importance of history and letting others know what is already being done on the OAH level to facilitate a connection that can be used to promote the importance of history and its teaching. In response to Dr. Dennard’s stated concern, Mr. Reynolds said he doesn’t think the Commission would be telling

people what to teach or how to teach but rather would be letting people know that there are resources available that they may not know about, a state historic site or a museum, for example, as a destination for a field trip, or a location where primary sources can be found and utilized. In response to additional concerns Dr. Dennard expressed about staff at state historic sites perhaps not being as up to date on information pertinent to those sites as they could be, Dr. Waters shared information about an initiative under Secretary Wilson called the PUSH Project, which centers on updating the history of the state. This project, which is being done in partnership with Carolina Public Humanities, has given the department an opportunity to deepen its relationship with the university system. It could also be a conduit between the department and support groups such as the North Carolina Literary and Historical Association (NCLHA) to integrate what those groups can contribute into a greater message about the history of the state.

Mr. Ruffin commended the commissioners for helping narrow down the practical, implementable steps that the NCHC could take without overstepping its boundaries, which has gotten some non-regulatory bodies in other states into trouble.

Dr. Johnson stated her belief that the perception of history is that it is not active, not vibrant, not “live,” but rather “a thing on a shelf.” To the contrary, she said, history can be an economic driver. In addition, the NCHC can be a voice reminding or educating people that history is not something archaic but rather something that is relevant every day to everybody, and it can have economic value. Ms. Groome challenged herself before the Commission to do some research on what other states are doing to address their citizens’ lack of interest in history, opining that North Carolina can’t be the only state that is struggling with this issue. She stated that she will share the results of her research. At Ms. Groome’s request for which states she might begin contacting, Ms. Koonts cited other southern states such as Alabama, Mississippi, and South Carolina as having the same general models of governance, with stand-alone departments of archives and history like North Carolina has, adding that as state archivist she tends to use them as benchmarks for work she is doing in her division. Ms. Vann stated that the Minnesota Historical Society is one of the best at getting its messaging into classrooms, noting that the students from Minnesota that participate in National History Day do amazing work that can be credited to their classwork curricula.

The chair walked through a list of ideas or concepts he jotted down during today’s discussion. He feels that these ideas need to continue to gel, but he thinks it will be possible to build a resolution around them, to be discussed and hopefully firmed up at the December 6 meeting of the Commission. He said he’d circulate these points in the upcoming weeks for review and expansion. The bullet points he recited were:

- Better promotion by members of the NCHC of the work being done in the Office of Archives and History.
- Investigate the feasibility of partnering with the PUSH Project to expand and amplify messaging about the importance of history.
- Investigate the feasibility of partnering with the NCLHA and other support groups to expand messaging about the importance of history.

He also signaled his plan to use his regular speaking engagements at gatherings of bankers as a megaphone to bring the issues under discussion to a wider audience, on behalf of his role as chairman of the NCHC. These attendees are typically active in their communities and he would like

them to be aware of what he sees as the legitimate danger posed to our society — including their children and grandchildren — by the continuing erosion of the knowledge of history and even basic civic awareness.

Mr. Ruffin asked Dr. Waters what resources his team needs to perform their roles and accomplish the goals with which they have been tasked. A huge issue continues to be hiring and retention. Many divisions simply don't have the number of staff they need to do the work required of them in the best, most impactful way, which underserves the people of North Carolina. Informing members of civic and professional organizations and groups like chambers of commerce about the economic benefits that are not being realized because of the budgetary limitations placed upon state governmental agencies perhaps might spur some advocacy on the OAH's behalf. It's important for constituencies to understand what the OAH does and how those things can benefit them. Dr. Waters offered to construct a list of talking points for use by commissioners when speaking to civic groups and others, if the commissioners are interested in him doing that.

The chairman wrapped up the discussion by thanking the commissioners for their efforts on this challenging issue, and he reiterated that he would like to have a resolution in place by the time the Commission meets on December 6, 2023.

### **Lunch Break**

The meeting was recessed for 30 minutes for lunch.

### **Resumption of Meeting**

The meeting was called to order again to conduct further business.

### **Reports from Division Directors**

Chairman Ruffin asked Dr. Waters to introduce the OAH division directors who'd been asked to offer verbal reports summarized from more detailed written reports shared with the commissioners in advance of the meeting. He noted that the director of the **Division of Historic Sites and Properties**, Michelle Lanier, could not attend today's meeting, so he referred attendees to her written report. He also noted that after 16 years as director of the Division of State History Museums, Ken Howard has announced his retirement and is not in attendance either. But Dr. Waters introduced deputy director Maria Vann, who will be presenting the division report.

**Division of Archives and Records** – Ms. Koonts presented a report highlighting the goings on in her division since the last meeting of the NCHC. The full, written report — which was made available to the commissioners in advance of this meeting — can be found in the file for this meeting of the NCHC, located in the administrative office of the Office of Archives and History.

**Division of State History Museums** – Ms. Vann presented a report highlighting the goings on in her division since the last meeting of the NCHC. The full, written report — which was made available to the commissioners in advance of this meeting — can be found in the file for this meeting of the NCHC, located in the administrative office of the Office of Archives and History.



Following her report Ms. Vann introduced Ms. Pratt, who has been serving as the interim section chief for the Education Section of the MOH, since her predecessor, Chrystal Regan, was hired as director of the Tryon Palace. Ms. Pratt provided an overview of the Education Section, discussing briefly the three constituent branches within the section — the Public Programming Branch, the Volunteers and Group Tours Branch, and the K-12 Education Outreach Branch — and how each one serves the community. With the resources it has, not including its channel, last fiscal year the Education Section reached more than 322,000 students and teachers in 94 of North Carolina’s 100 counties. The Education Section also organizes and oversees the Tar Heel Junior Historian Association at the MOH and produces the Tar Heel Junior Historian magazine. Before concluding Ms. Pratt addressed a few questions that Dr. Johnson had about the availability of grants for schools to make visiting the museum easier and how the programming caters to special needs students, as well as a question from Dr. Dennard about how the programming is marketed.

**Division of Historical Resources** – Ms. Bartos presented a report highlighting the goings on in her division since the last meeting of the NCHC. The full, written report — which was made available to the commissioners in advance of this meeting — can be found in the file for this meeting of the NCHC, located in the administrative office of the Office of Archives and History. There was a brief discussion with Dr. Dennard about the OAH’s plans for adding additional National Register of Historic Places properties and new state historic sites, and how Secretary Wilson is prioritizing these types of things.

**Division of State Historic Sites and Properties** – A copy of this report can be found in the file for this meeting of the NCHC, located in the administrative office of the Office of Archives and History.

### **Concluding Thoughts and Announcements**

Mr. Ruffin reminded the commissioners that the next meeting of the NCHC will take place on December 6, 2023, and will be held virtually.

Dr. Johnson announced that on September 29 there will be a webinar offered by the Maritime History Council about North Carolina and the Civil War. She said she would send out an email with relevant information about participating in that webinar for anyone who is interested.

In response to a question from Dr. Dennard, everyone is still waiting for a proposed state budget to come from the North Carolina General Assembly and go to Governor Cooper for his signature.

### **Adjournment**

The chair adjourned the meeting at 1:45 PM.

Respectfully submitted,

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

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Darin J. Waters