

# National History Day and the Power of Place: Researching the History of Your State or Community

While serving as a judge at the 2011 Maryland History Day competition in the junior individual exhibits category, I encountered a strangely familiar but unconventionally shaped exhibit. As I approached the table on which the project sat, I quickly recognized that the exhibit was in the form of an obelisk mile marker from the National Road, the first major highway in the United States. Unlike the stationary tri-fold exhibit boards, the obelisk rotated in a full circle, with each of its four sides revealing an element of the exhibit and advancing part of the student's thesis. During the judges' interview, I learned that Isabella Pannone, the Washington Middle School eighth-grader who developed the project—"The Debate over the National Road: The First Road that America Built and the Road that Built America"—chose this topic because she lived along the National Road in Allegany County in western Maryland and was curious about the road's origins.

Isabella explained that the markers that her exhibit modeled dotted the landscape in one-mile intervals along the road that she traveled daily, yet most people in her town gave little thought to the road's historical significance (Figure 1). Her curiosity led her to research the origins of the National Road and its impact on the politics and economy of the young American republic. She visited multiple historic sites and museums to access relevant sources, and she photographed the physical remnants of the road's early history in Allegany County. This student's efforts in diligently researching an institution critical to the economic development of her community and her state earned a special prize for a project on Maryland



**Figure 1.** Originally constructed in the early nineteenth century as part of the National Road, from Cumberland, Maryland to Wheeling, Virginia, this milestone marks the distance to both ends of the nation's first highway, as well as to nearby Frostburg, Maryland. Working as a National History Day judge, the author was impressed by a student's project on a western Maryland milestone, which illustrated the value of studying U.S. history through a local or regional lens, as well as the benefits of visiting local archives and museums to enhance research possibilities. (Courtesy of Christopher Busta-Peck; Photograph by Christopher Busta-Peck)

role in supporting National History Day and working with teachers and students who choose to explore topics of state and local history using resources at MdHS. In this article, by sharing my experiences

history at the state competition. Upon returning to Allegany County with prize in hand, she received an additional honor from the staff at the Queen City Transportation Museum, who asked to exhibit her project in the museum's gallery (1).

Each year, hundreds of thousands of secondary students (grades six through twelve) from across the United States participate in National History Day (NHD), a competition in which students, working individually or in small groups develop a research project on a topic of their choice that relates to a designated overarching theme. Students can choose from several interpretive media to present their research and thesis statements: papers, exhibits, documentaries, websites, and living history performances. Any topic from the dawn of human history to the twenty-first century is fair game, assuming the participant can frame it within the annual theme. When choosing a research topic, some participants, like the Allegany middle schooler I encountered at Maryland History Day, look to familiar landscapes, historic sites, and cultural institutions for inspiration, and explore the history of their state or community.

As an educator and archivist at the Maryland Historical Society (MdHS), I interpret Maryland's rich history and work to connect the public to the objects, documents, and historic sites that represent the state's past. One of my principal constituencies is secondary students and social studies teachers. I especially enjoy my

connecting NHD participants to local and regional resources at MdHS, I hope to encourage teachers and public historians to engage students in the study of state and local history and to investigate national or global events through a regional or local lens. This approach can provide students with valuable research experiences that they otherwise may not have if their topic limits them to published or Web-based sources. Students investigating elements of their state or community's history often have the opportunity to work with physical archival collections at research institutions, engage in fieldwork or exploration at historic sites, and conduct oral history interviews with community members. These experiences complement and enhance research in digital archives and conventional libraries while exposing students to a greater diversity of sources and perspectives as well as fostering relationships with community members.

### The Power of the Archive

My primary responsibility at MdHS is managing the Student Research Center for History, a manuscript reading room designated specifically for secondary students. The center provides them with the rare opportunity to engage in the historian's craft by working with original primary sources from the society's archival collections. Program offerings include group and individual research sessions and primary source workshops that simultaneously develop students' content knowledge, strengthen their analytical and critical readings skills, and introduce them to historical research methods. I serve as a bridge between the K–12 community and the state's treasured documentary heritage, and therefore am uniquely positioned to support teachers seeking to transcend online research and students searching for primary sources relevant to their NHD projects.

Educational theorists have long touted the importance of culturally relevant pedagogy and the need to ensure that academic content, skills, and processes are socially applicable and meaningful to students' lives beyond the classroom (2). History ceases to be merely a collection of abstract facts when students can associate historical trends or epochal events with physical structures, institutions, streetscapes and landscapes, place names, and individuals within their communities—hence the power of place. With the help of archivists and other public historians, students and teachers can utilize the local and regional resources in identifying NHD topics and can enrich their research experience by visiting museums and archives within their communities.

Over the course of the last decade, the Library of Congress, the National Archives, the Smithsonian, and hundreds of smaller institutions have digitized tens of millions of individual items. They have created extensive online archives of the documents and objects that convey our national heritage to even the most remote audiences. Digital surrogates have forever transformed history education by allowing students and teachers to easily access primary sources that support national and local educational standards and give voice to diverse historical actors. These institutions have fully embraced their K–12 educational mission and offer resources, guides, video tutorials, and digitized primary source sets geared specifically to students seeking research support for their National History Day projects. With a computer and Internet access, NHD researchers can read scanned pages from rare slave narratives, view video footage of civil rights protests, and zoom in for a thread-level analysis of the original flag that inspired the “Star Spangled Banner.”

While digital archives have greatly enhanced history education and democratized historical research, teachers may also choose to explore the potential of local history topics and consider the powerful experience of engaging students in archival research and fieldwork with the support of state and community institutions. Visiting a special

collections reading room is experiential learning that cannot be replicated in the virtual world, regardless of the sophistication or depth of digital archives. In most cases, an institution's digital collections are a mere fraction of the physical sources in its archival holdings. For instance, a student researching the civil rights movement in Maryland in the MdHS's digital archives will find several dramatic images of activists picketing outside of Baltimore's Ford's Theater. However, the researcher can supplement these images by accessing dozens of other photographs of the event and oral history interviews with participants, available in physical form at the MdHS's library and archives.

When students engage in archival research, they acquire skills and knowledge that are applicable in both higher education and the workplace: navigating a library's online catalog and collections databases; articulating their project's purposes, needs, and research questions to archivists and librarians; exhibiting proper reading room etiquette; and sifting through often imposing manuscript collections in search of relevant information. Knowing where to locate sources and how to access them greatly expands the research potential of a project and allows the researcher to consider other questions, explore new angles, and include a greater diversity of perspectives, thus strengthening the final product (3).

Furthermore, the tactile experience of handling archival material excites and motivates students and imbues them with a sense that their research is authentic, original, and meaningful. From my experience working with NHD researchers, students are energized by the sense of discovery in scouring a document case of personal papers and elated upon encountering a source that speaks directly to their research question. Leah Renzi, a Baltimore County Public Schools social studies teacher who brought her eighth-grade students to MdHS to research their NHD projects, reflects, “I think students feel like they are being treated as serious students when they are invited to research at archives and historic sites. . . . The impression I get is that they think going to these places adds credibility to their studies. And it does” (4). Since most NHD participants across the nation cannot easily visit the Library of Congress, the Smithsonian Institution, or the National Archives and Record Administration's repositories, their best chance to have an archival research experience, as Leah Renzi's students enjoyed, is to embrace a local or state history topic or to consider the local dimensions of a global or national theme.

Informed and enthusiastic public historians—librarians, archivists, curators, site managers, and educators—are the stewards of local history and thus a critical bridge between students and sources. Students who conduct archival research and seek assistance from librarians and archivists will discover new directions for their research and survey a greater diversity of sources than if they relied solely upon digital archives, thus leading to a deeper, more nuanced and authoritative understanding of their topic. Norah Worthington, a theater production teacher in Baltimore who has collaborated with MdHS educators and archivists on several local history projects, stresses that public historians are facilitators in connecting students to sources in meaningful ways. When asked why she chooses to include archival research sessions in these projects rather than relying upon digitized collections or published sources, she explained, “[A]t MdHS, we are working with knowledgeable guides who can put documents, pictures, and objects in context. They can point us toward the detail that unlocks an object's significance” (5).

Consider the example of Natalie Williams, a seventh-grade student at Centreville Middle School, who scheduled a research visit to MdHS's Student Research Center for History in the hopes of locating additional primary sources for her NHD project on Quaker abolitionism. When she arrived, she had a sense of Quakers' theological perspective and moral rationale for opposing slavery, and a general idea of where and

when Quaker abolitionists were most active. She was unaware, however, that Quaker abolitionists had an active presence in the slave state of Maryland. During her research visit, she examined rare books and pamphlets published by abolitionists and read a hand-written antislavery essay by John Needles, a Baltimore Quaker. Needles's pamphlet described in graphic detail the importation and auction of slaves upon arrival in the West Indies and praised "The large and ever increasing number of those who, from motives of humanity, have agreed to reject the products of West Indian Slavery" (6).

In addition to his abolitionist activities, Needles was a prominent cabinetmaker, well known for his artisanship and patronized by Baltimore's well-to-do (Figure 2). At the time of the student's visit, MdHS was displaying examples of Needles's furniture. The student was able to photograph the furniture exhibit and include the images as visual evidence in her project. By choosing to pursue a local angle on her subject and engaging in archival research, she greatly enhanced her project with sources, both artifacts and written documents, unique to MdHS. She also discovered a way to focus and personalize her research by exploring the perspectives and actions of a specific Quaker abolitionist. She ultimately qualified for the state competition, where she received a special prize for researching a historical topic that addressed an ethical issue.



**Figure 2.** This mahogany (with poplar and maple) work table was built c. 1825 by Quaker John Needles, a prominent Baltimore cabinetmaker. A photograph of the table formed part of the National History Day exhibit of a Baltimore-area seventh-grader, who visited the Maryland Historical Society (MdHS) archives, in search of information on Quaker abolitionism. She was pleasantly surprised to find a local connection to the topic through Needles, who was also an abolitionist, and took advantage of an exhibit of his furniture to add a visual dimension to her project. Her experience points to the value of local and regional brick-and-mortar archives to student NHD projects. (Courtesy of Maryland Historical Society)

### Community Connections

The value of working with local archives goes beyond the benefits for an individual student. Students and teachers also establish community connections when they collaborate with archivists, preservationists, and museum educators to research NHD projects. When working with public historians to utilize archival or museum collections or to investigate historic sites, students are exposed to the challenges of preserving the documents, objects, and physical spaces that represent our cultural heritage. Protecting this heritage is a civic responsibility, and stewardship of cultural assets is contingent upon community awareness and involvement. Students who learn the cultural importance of caring for historic places and collections through NHD research may be more likely to be advocates for and stewards of community and state history.

When I first judged at the NHD competition in College Park, Maryland, my team of judges encountered a group of high school students who had created an exhibit about a threatened historic site in their community. Not only did their diligent research result in qualifying for the national competition, but they managed to raise community awareness about the historical significance of the threatened structure. They used their NHD research to become forceful advocates for the site and ultimately worked with local preservationists and elected officials to ensure its preservation. For these students, NHD was an opportunity to develop both research skills and a greater knowledge of the civic processes of preservation. Thanks to the generous support of preservation organizations, some states, including Maryland, offer special prizes at the state competition for projects that address a topic in historic preservation, an additional incentive for exploring the preservation needs of one's state or community (7).

### Oral History

Conducting oral history interviews is another avenue for fostering community connections when researching local topics or localizing a national or global theme. Many state and local history museums and archives have extensive oral history collections that cover a wide range of topics in twentieth and twenty-first century history. Oral histories are excellent primary sources for NHD projects because they are often accessible and compelling for students. Such sources present the voices and perspectives of ordinary people from a diversity of backgrounds. Oral history collections provide perspectives and document experiences from populations that may be underrepresented in manuscript collections and therefore can be a critical resource for many research projects. The Maryland Historical Society's McKeldin-Jackson Project (1969–1977) is comprised of ninety-two oral histories about the civil rights movement. It centers on the lives of Baltimore mayor and Maryland governor Theodore McKeldin, a white moderate Republican considered sympathetic to the civil rights movement, and Lillie May Jackson, an African American Baltimore resident who served a thirty-five-year tenure as president of the city's NAACP branch. The collection offers a particularly rich and diverse spectrum of perspectives and includes interviews with high-profile political figures and local grassroots activists. These oral histories attract scholars from around the world and are particularly popular among secondary students and teachers engaged in research projects on civil rights activism and African American life in Baltimore (8).

Some students, however, are motivated to go beyond drawing on existing interviews and become investigators in their own right. They choose to conduct an oral history interview with community members who can provide firsthand insight on particular topics. Many teachers engage their students in oral history projects, since such undertakings require deep research, a variety of methods, and interpersonal communication skills. In conducting an interview, students become cognizant that historical events and trends influenced their communities

and, conversely, that ordinary people from their states or communities shaped history through a variety of individual and collective actions. As websites and documentaries increase in popularity as vehicles for NHD projects, audio and video excerpts of oral histories can serve as powerful interpretive devices. In addition, students who conduct oral history interviews demonstrate to NHD judges the variety of historical research methods they utilized in developing their projects.

While oral histories can provide fruitful results, this research method can also pose challenges for both students and teachers. A strong interview that complements documentary research and supports a thesis requires significant preparation. In addition to carrying out research on their topics, students must become familiar with their interviewees' personal backgrounds and life experiences. This often requires pre-interview conversations that at once apprise the interviewee of the project and the student interviewer's objectives (transparency and honesty are essential for professional ethics in the field of oral history) and elicit relevant details about the interviewee's life experience. Oral historian Donald Ritchie estimates that interviewers, on average, complete about ten hours of preparatory research for every one hour of interviewing.

Research on each individual interviewee allows students to develop stronger questions, and the success of an oral history interview is dependent upon the quality of the questions asked. Teachers may have to review and assist in refining multiple drafts of questions to ensure that the students will accomplish their objectives while being sensitive and empathetic toward the interviewee. Those who are willing to invest the time in advance preparation and who seek out willing candidates for interviews often reap the rewards of creating a unique and new primary source, deeply personal and telling, to utilize in their projects. Furthermore, many local and state historical institutions encourage students to donate recordings of oral history interviews. Thus, students become preservationists by literally creating a new primary source that documents state or local history and is available in perpetuity for future researchers (9).

### Overcoming Research Obstacles

Although researching a topic of local or state history can be exceedingly rewarding for NHD participants, such an approach presents numerous challenges. Overcoming them requires an engaged and responsive public history community that utilizes its knowledge and talents to support NHD researchers. Many teachers and students may be unaware of the research potential within their communities and the resources available to them. In choosing a research topic, many participants naturally gravitate toward themes with which they are familiar—the individuals and events that their American and world history textbooks chronicle. Early each fall, the Maryland Historical Society, among other state museums and archives, widely distributes a list of state and local history topics that relate to the annual NHD theme and that are supported by its archival and museum collections (10). Thus, teachers are aware of potential topics that they can promote to their students and the available resources for investigating these topics.

Locating sufficient sources, both primary and secondary, also can be problematic and frustrating for young researchers. Archivists should fully embrace their role as educators and be prepared to train NHD participants in searching for and identifying relevant collections, analyzing raw archival material that can often be abstract or opaque for even the most astute young scholars, and helping students consider the historical context in which sources originated (11). Many historical societies, museums, and public libraries offer workshops on historical research methods for NHD participants and host research sessions in which trained researchers assist students in locating and analyzing primary sources.



**Figure 3.** After the Civil War, the Chesapeake Bay experienced an oyster boom. In this 1912 photo, “dredgers” catch oysters with large nets or “dredges,” as opposed to “tongers,” men in smaller boats and shallow waters who used a rake-like instrument or “tong” to harvest a smaller crop of oysters. Competition between these two groups, as well as between Virginia and Maryland oystermen, led to ongoing violent conflict on the Chesapeake known as the “Oyster Wars,” an example of a regional topic that offers rich potential for student archival research. (Courtesy of Maryland Historical Society)

Throughout the 2011–12 school year, educators at MdHS assisted numerous NHD participants who chose to study a local or regional history topic from MdHS's list of suggestions. Although these topics may be fascinating to students who recognize the relevance of these events to their communities, public libraries and online databases and archives offer few sources to support the deep research required for NHD projects. For instance, eighth-grader Justin Frankle chose to study the Chesapeake Bay oyster wars (Figure 3), but struggled to locate sufficient primary sources in the conventional venues before scheduling a research visit to MdHS, where he received one-on-one assistance from an educator-archivist. He was able to examine a local lawyer's scrapbook as well as correspondence between the governors of Virginia and Maryland. By interacting with an informed archivist, Justin ultimately obtained access to rich primary sources and developed a more sophisticated and broader knowledge of his topic (12).

### Conclusion

Working with community members, whether public historians or oral history interviewees, to research the wealth of local and regional history can be a rewarding experience for NHD participants. To provide students with these opportunities, however, teachers and public historians must enter into dialogue about how to support students who choose this often challenging task. Historical societies, museums, and archives throughout the nation have become leaders in promoting NHD, developing and distributing resources, and providing educational workshops to orient students, teachers, and parents on the research process. Public historians and teachers can enrich these

partnerships by introducing students to potential topics and facilitating onsite research sessions, whether in the reading room of an archive or in the field at a historic site. Not only are these experiences memorable and potentially transformative, they tighten the bonds between various groups within the community, immerse students in experiential learning, and instill in them a greater appreciation for historic stewardship and an understanding of the policies and professions that preserve local and state historic treasures. □

### Endnotes

1. Maryland Humanities Council, "Maryland History Day Winners," <http://www.mdhc.org/files/resources/2011mhdadvancers-special-prizes.pdf>; "History marker," *Cumberland Times News*, May 9, 2011, <http://times-news.com/local/3364971055/History-marker>.
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3. Julia Hendry, "Primary Sources in K–12 Education: Opportunities for Archives," *The American Archivist* 70 (2007): 114–29. Marcus C. Robyns, "The Archivist as Educator: Integrating Critical Thinking Skills into Historical Research Methods Instruction," *The American Archivist* 64 (2001): 363–84.
4. Leah Renzi, interview by author, email correspondence, January 2012.
5. Norah Worthington, interview by author, email correspondence, December 2011.
6. John Needles, "Slavery and the Slave Trade," n.d., Vertical File, Maryland Historical Society.
7. Maryland Humanities Council, "Special Prizes," <http://www.mdhc.org/programs/maryland-history-day/contest/special-prizes/>. The Maryland Historical Trust awards a junior and senior division prize to students with "projects that successfully recognize and encourage the protection, use and appreciation of Maryland's diverse history."
8. McKeldin-Jackson Project, 1969–1977, Maryland Historical Society, <http://www.mdhs.org/library/projects-partnerships/mckeldin-jackson-project>.
9. Donald Ritchie, *Doing Oral History: A Practical Guide* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).
10. State historical societies throughout the U. S. provide a wealth of online resources for NHD participants, including lists of state-specific topics. The Maryland Humanities Council's website hosts the Maryland Historical Society's list of state and local topics, <http://www.mdhc.org/files/resources/mdhsmarylandtopics2012.pdf>. Some notable examples that I encountered in my research include the Ohio Historical Society, <http://www.ohiohistory.org/historyday/pdf/ohiotopics.pdf>; the Vermont Historical Society, <http://vermonthistory.org/images/stories/history-day/2012/vt%20theme%20sheet%202012%20web%20site.pdf>; the Tennessee Historical Society, <http://www.tennesseehistory.org/images/uploads/Tennessee%20Topics%20of%20Revolution,%20Reaction,%20Reform.pdf>; and the Wisconsin Historical Society, [http://www.wisconsinhistory.org/teachers/historyday/documents/witopics\\_2012.pdf](http://www.wisconsinhistory.org/teachers/historyday/documents/witopics_2012.pdf).
11. Society of American Archivists, *National History Day Archives Toolkit*, 2011, <http://www2.archivists.org/groups/reference-access-and-outreach-section/national-history-day-committee>. The National History Day Committee of the Society of American Archivists (SAA) developed a useful toolkit for NHD participants and supporters. The SAA established the website after research revealed a need for "enhanced understanding and cooperation between archivists, K–12 teachers, and NHD coordinators in disseminating information about NHD and teaching the use of primary sources." Their work could serve as a model for local, state, and university archives and museums seeking to increase their support of parents, teachers, and students engaged in NHD projects. See also Hendry, "Primary Sources in K–12 Education," which promotes a role for archivists in supporting K–12 history education through authentic research experiences for students that promote historical thinking, critical analysis, and research methods.
12. For a social history of the Chesapeake oyster industry, see John Wennersten, *The Oyster Wars of Chesapeake Bay* (Centreville: Tidewater Publishers, 1981). For a lesson plan and educational resources, see Chesapeake Bay Maritime Museum, "Oyster Wars!!": <http://www.cbmm.org/pdf/Oystering%20Curriculum6-10.pdf>.

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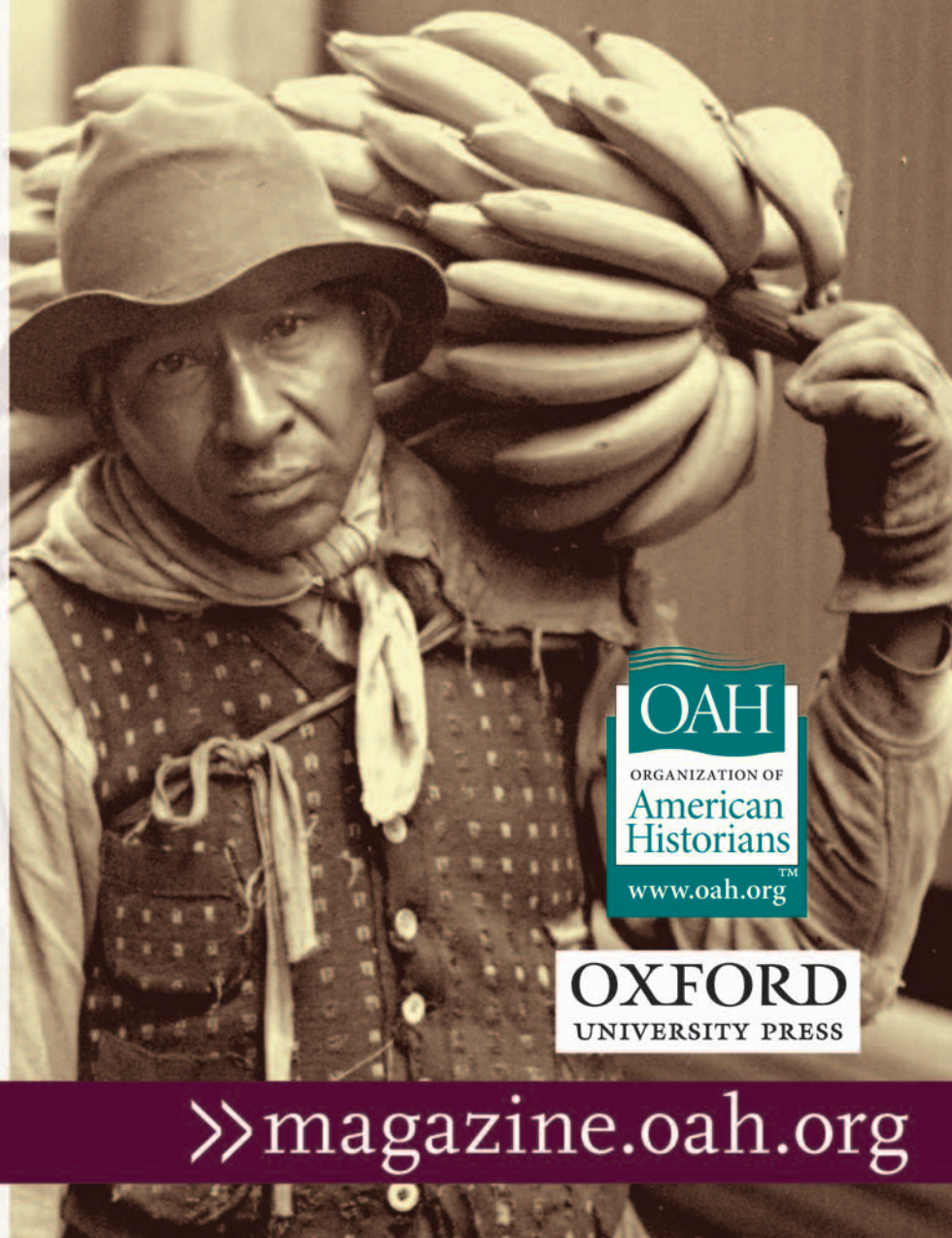
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