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To Uplift Our Hearts: Building Bridges through Historic Preservation

George W. McDaniel, Drayton Hall

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The title of this session is *History, Preservation and Public Reckoning in Museums*. That's a tough topic but an important one because the opening of this museum and our present moment in time tell us how important the public reckoning of history and historic preservation is for museums. The good news is that this museum's construction tangibly demonstrates a positive public reckoning of such. Now the museum faces the question: How to give back? How does it find ways to make a difference to the good, not by "disremembering" or omitting the bad or tragic things in our history, but by remembering them and combining those things with the good, thereby creating experiences that enhance our lives?

In looking back over his years of writing, novelist William Faulkner, who certainly knew tragedy, said that he wrote (and I'm paraphrasing) in order to "uplift our hearts." That's a simple phrase, but spot on. And he's not referring to just my heart or your heart, but to our hearts. And we "uplift our hearts" by trying to tell the truth, warts and all, about our past. If we just look at one side of history — only at the good or the bad, or only at the elite or the oppressed — we don't uplift our hearts. We are in this life

together, and the people of the past were no different. To deny either the evil aspects of history or its good aspects is to defraud our past.

In recent years, most museums have increasingly seen that the public wants to hear this more complete story of the past. Like a good novelist, we need to find ways to tell it. And like a good marketer, find ways to promote it. We don't need to hit people over the head with their history and force it down like a health drink. We don't need to accent only the evil doings of a group and send up their defensive shields so they do not see or hear themselves in the story we are telling. Instead, we need to ask: How do we find ways so that people from all walks of life will open their eyes and ears, so that their mind in turn will be opened?

A well-told story is often the way to do this. And for the story to be heard, the person must be prompted to care – to care about the people in the story and to feel connected to them. Now that story may be told by way of artifacts, photographs, text, or video, and even places and landscapes may tell a story; and if it is well told, the public will respond and want to see that that history is preserved. They will stand up and say: “No, this place matters and should not be bulldozed.” Or, “my family's history is important and I'm going to preserve it.” And “my community's history is important, and there should be a museum to preserve and interpret it.” The sum of all this is that the public will see history and historic preservation as central to their own and to our nation's ethos. By our own endeavors and through museums like this, we can change the perception so that history is seen not as something peripheral or extraneous, but rather central to the understanding of who we are as individuals, as a community, as a nation, or as human beings. Why is that important? Because as Martin Luther King is said to have declared: “He who controls my mind controls my body. He who controls my history controls my mind.”

Although this may be my goal and yours too, if we look at trends in schools and contemporary culture, I think we'll agree: we have our work cut out for us.

To counter these pressures, how can history museums, including this one and other African American museums across the nation, reach out all the more and build bridges that both connect past, present, and future and connect people of different backgrounds and experiences? One way, now and in the future, is for history museums to be seen as places that matter, places where people will feel safe and respected — challenged perhaps, but respected. They become places where the history of people of diverse backgrounds is preserved and featured in engaging exhibits and programs, on site and on line. They are places where different components of the public — different ethnic groups, religious backgrounds, sexual orientation, immigrant status (whether native born or recent arrival) -- may feel that their history is respected, not shut down. Safe places where scholars, preservationists, citizens, community activists of differing points of views can come together, discuss issues, get to know one another, break stereotypes, and devise positive solutions.

One way of doing so is to open up our museums so that people may contribute their stories about historical places and events, and activities, which could be used for what is now being called “public curation.” Museum professionals and historians Bill Adair, Benjamin Filene, and Laura Koloski have teamed up and ably presented this process in their book of essays and interviews, entitled *Letting Go: Sharing Historical Authority in a User-Generated World*. In this “public curation” process, as Filene explains, professional curators or historians are not pushed aside, but rather develop partnerships with the public. Such partnerships call for new skills from historians and a willingness to share authority yet still maintain their professional standards. Also, public participants both desire and appreciate the expertise and structure that professionals provide. The result can be a more informed selection of what warrants preservation and why, as well as a richer, more nuanced historical narrative — one that better resonates with diverse audiences, for they can see and hear themselves more clearly. This narrative has the curatorial voice, to be sure, but also that of the people themselves, thereby enhancing the public reckoning of the history being preserved and interpreted.

Historic sites, for example, can become places for “public curation,” places where people whose ancestors were once entrapped by prejudice and locked in conflict with one another can come together and discuss how their shared, albeit different, histories have shaped their lives and how they hope to build on the past to create a brighter future. For this symposium, I have invited descendants from Drayton Hall, descendants of the enslaved and of slave-owners, to attend: Rebecca Campbell, her sister Catherine Braxton, their cousin Esther Chandler, Anne Drayton Nelson, and Alison Rea. According to their Bowens’ family oral history, the ancestors of Rebecca, Catherine, and Esther came over, enslaved, from Barbados with the Drayton ancestors of Anne and Alison in the 1670s. Thus, together, these individuals represent over three centuries of American history. Their Bowens ancestors remained at Drayton Hall after emancipation and moved to Charleston in the late 1800s. We have videotaped oral histories with a range of descendants, white and black. We produced public programs with them and other members of their extended families and with Lonnie Bunch and scholars at Drayton Hall. Descendants also participated in sessions at the annual preservation conference of the SC Department of Archives and History, the annual conference of the National Trust for Historic Preservation, at a program open to the general public in Charleston, and at the College of Charleston for three combined history and historic preservation classes and their professors. These marked the first time that descendants of a plantation, of slaves and slaveholders, had ever participated together in these state and national conferences or been featured at the College.

For all of these programs with descendants, the immediate goal has not been the finalization of reconciliation or forgiveness. Those two things are processes, and everyone is at different places along their journey. We should accept that. The main thing is their participation, so the public can hear from them. Thus, we have not demanded that the ticket of admission be reconciliation or forgiveness. That’s something for them to work out, and something for which Drayton Hall can create a safe place, so it may happen. I’ve found that descendants want people to learn about the history of Drayton Hall and of their families and wish

to contribute what they know in order to tell a more complete story. And that's enough for now; it's a lot more than what we started with.

In our visitor surveys, visitors have told us frequently that they want to learn about the people not just of the past, but of today. The descendants' points of view make for a more personal, complex, and nuanced story. In addition, descendants learn from one another, both cognitively and experientially. They desire to make life better, and see their participation as one way of doing so -- not the only way, but one way, an important way. We do expect respect for one another and for differing points of view, and that's healthy. We do not want false sentimentality, nor has it been offered. It is also important that the descendants know that Drayton Hall and its staff will genuinely support them. Participation will not lead to an embarrassing "gotcha" moment.

To learn more, I hope that all of the descendants can share their sentiments with other symposium attendees in the discussions and receptions so that it is not just me, a museum professional and historic preservationist, talking about an idea, but rather real people whose ancestors' history is fraught with the good and bad of our past, encouraging you and others to reach out, with courage, and try to build bridges and connect as best you can, within our very human limitations.

There are also "divides" between the fields of academic history and historic preservation which weaken both, but in future, I believe, that thanks to the broadening of our vision, we will find ways to bridge them. I'm thinking of the divides between academic history, history education K-12, history museums, archives, historic preservation, and heritage tourism. The wider public does not care about these divides in their reckoning of history. As an example, in the past, visitors to museums have seen exhibits about specific historical places and communities, but have not been informed about how to visit them or encouraged to do so. Mark Twain once declared, "Travel is the enemy of prejudice," and I envision future museum visitors enjoying exhibits and then being able to visit those places, meet those people or their descendants, go to their churches or restaurants or community centers, and learn not just cognitively but

experientially. In so doing, they deepen their connection with the papers read in the archives or the history seen in the exhibit, and thereby enhance the public reckoning of history.

The collaboration of different history organizations in Charleston after the horrendous massacre at Emanuel AME Church is a recent example of how such collaborations may bridge “divides” and enhance the public reckoning of history. Just three days after the shootings, the collaboration began. Stirred by the public outpouring of sympathy and support, I called Elizabeth Alston, a long-standing member of Emanuel, to talk about what might be done. Along with Drayton Hall descendants, Liz is coming up for this symposium.

She and I decided to call for a meeting of staff from different history and preservation organizations and to see how we might preserve the hundreds of objects being left in front of the church. In our minds were the Vietnam Memorial and other sites of tragedy like Sandy Hooks or the Boston Marathon. Exactly a week after the massacre, we met in the same place in the church where the shootings had occurred and were deeply touched. We planned a strategy to preserve the hundreds of artifacts, notes, and banners left by the public in front of the church as memorials. Some were simple note cards, some were teddy bears, wooden crosses, or even large plywood signs on which people inscribed their names and wishes literally in every available inch. To preserve this history, we worked with church volunteers and the pastor, and the city loaned us storage space in a community center. The process is still ongoing. The Catholic diocese of Charleston is now making more permanent storage space available. The National Museum of African American History and Culture has been a valued member of that committee.

For the upcoming first anniversary, a range of public programs are being developed in collaboration with museums and community organizations between June 15 and June 25. For this first anniversary, Emanuel wanted an exhibition and turned to our Memorabilia Sub-Committee to develop it. In consultation with church members, we decided that the theme should be “healing,” since that recognizes both our sickness and our health and is something we are all in need of. The City of Charleston donated the

first floor of a building across the street from Emanuel, a museum designer was hired, donating a lot of her time, and we decided to showcase 15 quilts from the more than 400 that were sent to the church as gifts from around the world, many with inscriptions expressing heartache, sympathy, and the desire for healing. Fifteen quilts: 9 for the 9 victims, 5 for the 5 survivors, and one for the church. In addition, there will be selected images and artifacts. A private viewing will be offered for the families. At the end of the exhibit, visitors will be asked to reflect on their own situation and identify one thing they can do to help “heal” their community upon their return home. They write that down on a card and deposit it in a box, and it is for them to carry through with their pledge. In this way, we hope that visitors will honor the victims and survivors not just by visiting the exhibit but by going back to their own communities across the nation and doing something in their own lives to help heal their community and themselves. We hope to turn museum experience into action.

Why is this important? Reconciliation is hard. There is still so much to overcome, and Charleston, with its fractious history, has a long way to go. So the goal of this preservation and museum effort is to help the reconciliation process and to benefit future generations. Our hope is to save and exhibit the physical evidence by which the public responded to the tragedy, objects which testify to the hearts and minds of those who gave them. These objects will not achieve reconciliation but can be used towards that end, so that the Charleston community and the nation at large can begin to transform bad things into good, now and in the future. Such efforts for the transformation of evil into good, also known as redemption, enhance the public reckoning of history. Across the spectrum of religions and races, people seek redemption. Such efforts are never done, as we well know, but it is those efforts for redemption that uplift our hearts and give meaning to our lives.

Another question that deals with the public reckoning of history is how to enhance the current relationship between a history museum and the communities that have been the source for the history the museum presents? Too often the common practice has been for museums to do research in a community,

remove historical resources (buildings, artifacts, photographs, or oral histories) from that community, preserve it in their collections or archives, use them in an exhibit, and return little to nothing back to that community in exchange. The community and its people hardly benefit, and the appreciation for that local history is not lifted up for all the more people to respect. The public reckoning for history by the community is hardly enhanced. In the future, we will see this pattern change. How? The NMAAHC is already moving in this direction, so that when historical evidence is volunteered from a community, the community itself will benefit by way of having those materials used as sources for public programs or lectures, heritage tours, web site development, local exhibits, and especially the enrichment of school curricula and teacher training. History workshops may be held. All of this has the advantage of connecting the local and the national, of completing the circle and thereby lifting the public reckoning of history in positive ways.

An ongoing question regarding the public reckoning of historic preservation deals with young people. How do we find innovative and effective ways for history to become a part of the lives of young people, so that as they assess the importance of history, they too feel connected to it? One response, as Stephanie Meeks, President of the National Trust for Historic Preservation, has explained, is to find ways to reach out to the young and connect to “where they are.” They are, as she said, “digital natives.” Before asking questions to adults or learning from books, they first turn online and to the Internet or social media. So we need to (and I think we will) find ways to translate both what we are doing and why into ways that reach them digitally. Many of you are doing this already, and such will be expanded upon in ways that we today can hardly imagine.

As we strive to enhance the public reckoning of history, we must always be appreciative of one thing: surprise. All of us, — young and old, African American, Caucasian, Latino, or whatever — need to be open to surprise. We need to be prepared for surprise, and not be afraid. For if history teaches us anything, it is that the future will bring us surprise.

What is the one ingredient needed for any of this to happen? Courage. Because if we are to mainstream an appreciation for history and historic preservation into the public reckoning, we need to build bridges. For that to occur, we need courage and not give in to cynicism, whose call is all too easy to heed and which can convince us that by not trying, we are being “realistic.” As good bridge builders know, a bridge, to be effective, cannot serve just one side of a divide. It cannot serve just one segment of the public. Our communities have diverse “publics” to connect, and often those “publics” may not agree or even not like one another. And the funding or the support of our board may not be there to start off with. Also, the other side of a bridge may be just that, the “other side”, and it may be only dimly seen or misperceived, and may generate fear of conflict or rejection. Thus, the need for us, as individuals and as organizations, to have courage and to put cynicism aside. To be effective bridge-builders, we need to work together and ameliorate our “disremembering.” We need to push one another beyond our comfort zones, whatever our station in the profession or in the public, and create expanding circles that engage people in the preservation of history, including its tragic moments, in order “to uplift our hearts.” If we can find ways to do that, the public reckoning will take care of itself.