Louis C. Jones and the Cooperstown Model

Working at the Nexus of Public Folklore and Public History

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In the 1920s, the famed poet and popular historian Carl Sandburg brought American folk culture to thousands of eager audiences as he crisscrossed the country delivering his unique mixture of lecture, poetry recitation, and folk song performance. In the introduction to *American Songbag*, Sandburg’s best-selling songbook, he wrote that he had visited “organizations as diverse as the Poetry Society of South Carolina and the Knife and Fork Club of South Bend, Indiana,” as well as “about two-thirds of the state universities of the country.” Through these performances, Sandburg showcased what he called the “human diversity of the United States.”

Not long after the publication of *American Songbag* in 1927, Louis C. Jones, a student at a small liberal arts college in upstate New York, witnessed one of Sandburg’s performances. Two decades later, in 1947, Jones would become president of the New York State Historical Association (NYSHA) in Cooperstown, New York, and later, in 1964, the founder of the Cooperstown Graduate Program (CGP), the country’s first master’s program designed specifically to train professionals to work in history museums. A literary scholar turned folklorist and public historian, Jones remembered that performance by Sandburg and his subsequent purchase of *American Songbag* as the beginning of a long career at the nexus of folk culture and social history. In the latter half of the twentieth century, the marriage of folklife and history in Cooperstown
that Jones cultivated would have a significant effect on the development of progressive public history practice. The fact that these two disciplines were so closely aligned at one of the key hubs for training history museum professionals influenced public historians to emphasize nonelite objects and narratives and present histories that complicated and challenged the status quo at a broad range of museums, historical societies, and historic sites throughout the United States.

For at least three decades, public history scholars and practitioners have recognized the significant intersections between the disciplines of folklife and history in the museum field, as well as the critical importance of public folklore in the development of contemporary public history practice. In the 1987 collection *Folklife and Museums: Selected Readings*, published by the American Association of State and Local History (AASLH), Jones, along with Candace T. Matelic, provided an introductory essay that touted the dual role of folklorists and social historians, beginning in the mid-twentieth century, in moving history museums and historical societies away from elitism and toward a focus on the “folkways” of nonelites. Their essay argued that the rapid growth of outdoor living history museums in the United States

![Louis C. Jones in the Folk Art Gallery of the New York State Historical Association, Cooperstown, New York, n.d. Courtesy of the Cooperstown Graduate Program.](image)
in the mid-twentieth century was an important consequence of productive collaborations between folklorists and social historians. The Farmers’ Museum in Cooperstown and Old Sturbridge Village in central Massachusetts, both of which opened to the public in the mid-1940s, were emblematic of the burgeoning popularity of folk-inflected museum experiences among history museum visitors. At both sites, staff members combined presentations of material culture with folklife, social history, and the history of technology to craft interactive programs designed to involve visitors in the everyday lives of nineteenth-century Americans. Their success inspired others to build on a model rooted in both social history and folklife research.

The role of folklorists in advancing public history practice accelerated in the 1960s and ’70s with the opening of popular living history museums such as Iowa’s Living History Farms, Prairietown at Indiana’s Conner Prairie, and Old World Wisconsin, as well as the nationwide celebration of the bicentennial of the American Revolution, which was characterized by thousands of programs that centered on community histories, local traditions, and ethnic cultures. This period also witnessed the founding of the annual Smithsonian Festival of American Folklife, which brought tradition bearers from all over the country and the world to the National Mall each summer to demonstrate their skills as well as to talk about their individual experiences and the histories of their communities.

In the updated collection *Folklife and Museums: Twenty-First-Century Perspectives*, which AASLH issued in 2017, public folklorist Robert Baron argues that “three decades ago folklife anticipated issues and practices now more widespread among museums.” Smithsonian festival curators, for example, pioneered a collaborative and polyvocal model of exhibition that presaged the practices of community curation and dialogic programming that are common among contemporary public historians. Festival curators practiced what public historians and oral historians have labeled “shared authority”: the idea that rather than monopolizing interpretive control, “experts” should craft historical narratives in dialogue with the “subjects” of their research—or, more radically, that they should facilitate the work of individuals and communities as they construct their own narratives and interpretations. The festival continues to involve folklorists, historians, and other scholars, including anthropologists and musicologists, in developing programs on this model. Similarly, folklorists working elsewhere have enriched museums and historical organizations through exhibitions, digital projects, folklife demonstrations, and
other public programs. More important, they have brought their high-level skills as cultural intermediaries, or “culture brokers,” to collaborative public historical work that involves cocuration and shared authority.

In an essay in the foundational museum history collection *History Museums in the United States: A Critical Assessment*, published in 1989, Gary Kulik, an accomplished public historian who was at that time assistant director of the National Museum of American History, discussed how the intersection of folk life and history in Cooperstown had had a defining effect on public history. He emphasized Cooperstown’s pioneering contributions to history museum practice and noted Louis C. Jones’s “deep commitment to the history and culture of ordinary people.” Kulik wrote of the New York State Historical Association and the Farmers’ Museum under Jones, “It was among the very first museums to establish the importance of the commonplace and the everyday. . . . Through its seminars, its graduate program, and its presence in the profession, it exerted a strong influence.” Kulik recognized that the combination of social history and folk culture at NYSHA and the Cooperstown Graduate Program brought something to the field of history museums that was sorely lacking. “NYSHA established the importance of common people,” he wrote, “in ways that few American museums ever had.”

Although it can be difficult to define the phrases *common people* and *ordinary people* (and as a result, contemporary historians often avoid them), Kulik clearly uses these phrases to refer to nonelites—individuals who, to that point, had not received much attention from historians or history museums. Although social history was not entirely absent from the mainstream of the field in the mid-twentieth century, most historians in this period focused on political history and most history museums were primarily concerned with objects associated with well-known historical figures. At the same time, art museums, most notably the Metropolitan Museum of Art in its American Wing, were interested in collecting and displaying examples of fine craftsmanship, evincing a connoisseur’s approach to material culture rather than a social historian’s interest in context. Folklorists were more expansive, and perhaps progressive, in their interests. By the mid-twentieth century, folklorists had extended their purview beyond the collecting of ballads that had migrated with Euro-American settlers from the British Isles to Appalachia and were beginning to embrace the concept of *folklife*, a more all-encompassing term than *folklore*, that included material culture, folk art, and performance, as well as songs and tales. Folklife scholars were drawn to things like household
decorations, agricultural implements, and arts and crafts created by untrained artists, and they attempted to contextualize these things within broader social and cultural contexts. At NYSHA and the Farmers’ Museum, for example, Jones used museum spaces to assemble farmers’ and artisans’ tools and folk artists’ paintings and carvings and to showcase crafts demonstrations, all in the service of highlighting working people’s lives and illuminating the social and cultural characteristics of central New York State in the mid-nineteenth century.

From his leadership position in Cooperstown, Louis C. Jones sought to radically transform history museums and public history training in the post-war decades by arguing that they must be more inclusive of a diverse range of people and histories and shift their focus away from elite narratives and elite material culture. Most of his work focused on displaying and interpreting the histories of White working people in nineteenth-century rural New York; however, he also spoke fervently about the need for museums and historical organizations to interpret the histories of other ethnic groups as well as people of color. In the 1950s, a time of anticommunist red-baiting and reactionary politics, Jones was a high-profile advocate for the museum field to become more inclusive of working people's histories, ethnic histories, and the histories of people of color. Later, in the 1960s, in a keynote address to the American Association of Museums, he would speak out strongly for the need to diversify museum staffs, explicitly arguing that museum training programs needed to train more people of color and museums needed to hire more people of color—battles that museum professionals continue to fight today.

Jones was an early prophet for the kind of inclusive field many progressive public historians continue to envision. His efforts were significant and unusual for the time but, ultimately, did not succeed in making historical organizations notably more diverse. The rising Black museum movement of the 1960s and ’70s was far more successful in this regard, attracting talented Black scholars and activists to use museums as platforms to share African American histories and advocate for racial equality and social justice.13 Nevertheless, within the historically White institutions of the public history field, Jones was a powerful voice for change. As a midcentury White liberal scholar, Jones’s approach could be paternalistic at times; still, he was pushing the envelope in the field and his commitment to inclusive histories was genuine. His philosophy and approach emanated directly from the ways in which
he saw folklife and social history as intertwined disciplines that were especially relevant to museums.

Understanding the relationship between history and folklife is not simply an exercise in enriching public history’s genealogy; it has the potential to open productive collaborative pathways for contemporary public history practitioners and press them further in the direction of inclusivity. Public folklorists and public historians share many things in common and the close alliance between these disciplines in the past and present continues to offer transformative opportunities for history to demonstrate its relevance to society. Recognizing how the marriage of social history and folk culture has been critical to public history’s development supports the broader goal of making history more inclusive, collaborative, and responsive to the needs of diverse communities in the United States and beyond.

**Louis C. Jones’s Background**

Louis C. Jones had an unusual background for a state historical society director, and his perspective on the necessity of a new direction for history museums grew out of a generative mixture of folklore, history, and progressive politics. Jones came of age in a period that saw heightened interest in working people’s stories in the public sphere, and he was fortunate to find positions at institutions that allowed him to pursue his interest in researching and disseminating such narratives. In some ways, the combination of folk culture and progressive politics in Jones’s background is similar to that of better-known figures of the mid-twentieth century, such as Alan Lomax, Woody Guthrie, and Pete Seeger, yet unlike them, Jones was not a performer or public personality. He was, however, able to build a stable institutional presence at the New York State Historical Association and, consequently, had an important platform from which to share working people’s stories and define public history practice for two and a half decades.

Prior to joining NYSHA as director in 1947, Jones’s experiences as a student and young professor profoundly shaped his nascent perspective regarding the value of folk culture and social history and their role in transforming society. As a student in the late 1920s and early 1930s, Jones had a brief association with the radical left, specifically the Socialist Party. While he was an undergraduate at Hamilton College in Clinton, New York, in 1928, Jones reached out to the Socialist Action Committee in New York City as a representative of the college’s Emerson Literary Society in an effort to secure
“campaign material” that could be distributed, presumably among fellow students. In response, the committee sent fifty copies of their “national platform” and “Norman Thomas’s Letter to Progressives.” As a doctoral student at Columbia University in the early 1930s, Jones joined the Socialist Party, which was one among several leftist organizations in this period that seized on the economic crisis to offer alternatives to a capitalist system that had seemingly failed to provide even a minimal level of protection to working people. Many young people and college students were attracted to the radical left in this decade because of the economic ravages of the Great Depression as well as the significant cultural vibrancy of leftist-inspired artists, writers, and performers. Jones’s direct commitment to the Socialist Party rather than the Communist Party suggests that he was, perhaps, more interested in seeing progressive reforms to the existing system than a revolutionary overthrow of capitalism. At the same time, his willingness to be a dues-paying member of the Socialist Party implies a certain level of commitment to radical politics that “fellow travelers” may not have evinced in this time. Beyond paying dues and distributing some printed materials, it is not clear what activities he undertook as a socialist, and his commitment does not appear to have lasted beyond his years in school. Nevertheless, it is clear that he identified as a liberal, progressive scholar and continued to display a strong interest throughout his career in the lives and cultures of working people, both past and present, and he would publicly describe NYSHA’s audience and subject matter as working class. Thus although he may have later tempered somewhat the radical edge of his politics in order to function effectively in the conservative world of museums and postwar US society, he never abandoned his dedication to telling working people’s stories. This deep commitment in his own work, and in the institutions he led, was the strongest legacy of his brief involvement with radical leftist politics.

After Columbia, Jones taught briefly at Long Island University and then moved to the New York State College for Teachers in Albany. Trained as a literary scholar, Jones gravitated to folklore as a young professor. This change of direction had much to do with an influential colleague in Albany, Harold Thompson. Thompson had studied with George Lyman Kittredge at Harvard and was closely connected with John and Alan Lomax, providing the bibliography for the Lomaxes’ American Folksongs and Ballads in 1934. In 1939, he published a popular work of regional folklore called Body, Boots and Britches: Folktale, Ballads and Speech from Country New York, which was widely
read and well-reviewed in the *New York Times*. Later, he served as president of the American Folklore Society, and in 1944, he and Jones cofounded the New York Folklore Society.

It was Thompson’s approach to teaching, however, that had the greatest influence on Jones’s development. In the mid-1930s, Thompson began offering a popular undergraduate course on American folk culture, which covered everything from cowboy songs and outlaw tales to spirituals and the blues. Sandburg’s *American Songbag* was the textbook, and students were encouraged to sing, dance, and recite poems aloud in class. The diversity of Thompson’s content was striking and reflected his commitment to what today we would call multicultural education. Perhaps more significant, however, was the way Thompson empowered his students to become field researchers. Each time he taught the course, Thompson required them to collect folklore and local history from their families, friends, and neighbors. Over time, he built a large archive of student research, from both Albany and later Cornell, and he used their research as the basis for *Body, Boots and Britches*, as well as other projects, including radio broadcasts. Empowering students to conduct research in their home communities was a powerful way not only to gather excellent material from a wide geographical area but also to inspire active citizen engagement with local history and traditions. Thompson’s collaborative approach to historical and folkloric research—over 1,600 students participated in research through his courses over more than two decades—offered a model for Jones that he would later adapt at the Cooperstown Graduate Program. By sending students into the field to do their own research, Thompson and Jones made history personal, relevant, and meaningful. This type of research required listening carefully to people’s accounts of their lives and those of their families and communities and preserving stories that had not previously been part of traditional historical narratives.

When Thompson moved to Cornell in 1940, Jones took over his course at the New York State College for Teachers and so, for several years, he had the opportunity to adapt Thompson’s model and make it his own. In 1946, Jones published “Folklore in the Schools: A Student Guide to Collecting Folklore,” which offered practical advice for young people on how to conduct field research, suggesting both the types of materials they should look for as well as how to approach informants. Significantly, Jones recommended seeking out not only songs and tales—the traditional quarry of folklorists—but also “vernacular architecture,” “folk art,” and “narratives and folk history.”
Clearly, he was already thinking broadly about the relationship between folklore, history, and material culture. Moreover, he was expanding the purview of folkloric research to encompass greater contextualization. “Learn as much as you can about each informant,” Jones wrote, “where he was born, what kind of life he has lived, where he has lived, what work he has done, and where he learned the folklore you collect.” Jones was interested in having young people gather more than just snippets of folk songs or ballads; he was thinking about research in much the same way a social historian would.

While Jones was advocating for a more holistic approach to research that combined folklore, social history, and material culture, he was involved in a significant antidiscrimination project at the New York State College for Teachers. In 1945, White and Black students at the college formed a group to address issues of bias on campus. Subsequently, they invited some faculty members, including Jones, to join them and developed a campus-wide initiative called the “Inter-group Council.” The New York State College for Teachers also became one of nine colleges involved in a national research project on intergroup relations sponsored by the National Council of Christians and Jews and the American Council on Education. Both Albany’s initiative and the national project corresponded well with the antidiscrimination message famously advanced in Gunnar Myrdal’s landmark 1944 study *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy*. Many liberal-minded scholars and educators in this period believed, perhaps naïvely, that increased education and moral suasion could ameliorate, if not eliminate, racial discrimination in the United States. The horrific example of the Holocaust had demonstrated what ethnic and racial bias could lead to, and consequently, liberal educators and social activists hoped that White Americans would recognize through concerted educational efforts the need to challenge discrimination in their own communities. The Albany group was dedicated to challenging all forms of discrimination, including racial discrimination.

Jones was not the leader of Albany’s Inter-group Council, but he was on the “College Committee” and played a role in two projects that involved using folk culture to analyze and challenge racial and ethnic discrimination. One of the projects was a folk festival entitled “Out of Many Cultures—America,” which included performances of folk dances and songs from various cultures and concluded with the singing of “The House I Live In,” the anthem of postwar universalism popularized by Frank Sinatra. The essential message of both the song and the festival was that although people may come from
different places and have different cultural backgrounds, deep down they are all Americans and, therefore, share certain essential qualities. In other words, everyone is different, but everyone is the same. This type of universalism was common in the post-World War II era. Many people believed its message of essential commonality among all humans was a powerful remedy for sectarian hatred and ethnoracial bias. Critics would later argue, however, that in glossing over the differences among the world’s cultures, universalism was simply another oppressive ideology that supported white supremacy. In this immediate postwar moment, however, the notion that all people, or at least all Americans, were basically similar was intended as a counter to racist ideologies that continued to envision a hierarchy of humanity with White Europeans and Euro-Americans at the top.

Jones’s other project was a study of the “Use of Folklore in Intergroup Education,” in which he explored how classroom teachers could utilize folklore to “help children from minority groups . . . overcome a sense of inferiority deriving from their chance of birth . . . [and] overcome their scorn and antagonisms for children from other minority groups.” He also hoped to “discover if folklore can be used to ease intergroup tensions in the junior and senior high schools.” Although not a large study, it demonstrated that Jones saw potential for using folk culture to address social issues through education. In essence, Jones hoped that by stoking young people’s pride in their particular cultures, they might be better equipped to succeed in US society. He maintained that collecting and sharing folk culture could generate pride and self-confidence in individuals from multiple backgrounds and demonstrate to broader society that all cultural groups should be valued. To be sure, this was an exceedingly optimistic, not to mention paternalistic, perspective, but it was one for which he had at least anecdotal proof, not only from his study but also from the research his students and Thompson’s students had been conducting for over a decade.

Unfortunately, Jones did not stay much longer in Albany to continue this work; nevertheless, he carried into his next position the essential notion that folk culture could be a powerful tool in challenging discriminatory social attitudes. In 1946, Jones’s growing success as a scholar of New York State folk culture led philanthropist Stephen C. Clark Sr. to offer him the directorship of the New York State Historical Association. Clark had been responsible for bringing NYSHA to Cooperstown from Ticonderoga, as well as founding the National Baseball Hall of Fame. Relocating to Cooperstown in 1947,
Jones set about developing the historic infrastructure and collections of the Farmers’ Museum as well as expanding the institution’s other history and art collections. In this work, he brought his folklorist’s perspective to historical interpretation, arguing that museums should focus on working people’s narratives rather than the objects and stories of the elite.

The organization Jones came to was, in some ways, already moving in the direction of making history more inclusive. Dixon Ryan Fox, who was president of NYSHA from 1929 until his death in 1945, was a well-regarded social historian who had studied under Charles Beard at Columbia, published numerous books and articles on early American social history, and edited the twelve-volume *History of American Life* with Arthur M. Schlesinger Sr. Fox also spearheaded the effort to publish a series of monographs entitled the *History of the State of New York*, which included Arthur C. Parker’s pathbreaking volume *A Manual for History Museums*. Other NYSHA staffers—including Clifford Lord, Mary Cunningham, and Janet MacFarlane—pioneered outreach programming and disseminated New York’s history to broad audiences across the state. Moreover, NYSHA served as the incubator for the New York Folklore Society, led by Thompson and Jones, which became a separate
but still affiliated organization in 1944. Therefore, the organization that Jones took over was primed to lead a transformation in the way history museums approached interpreting the past and present of US society and culture.

**Folk Culture’s Potential to Transform Historical Organizations**

In January 1950, in a keynote address to the annual meeting of the Minnesota Historical Society in Saint Paul, Jones illuminated the vital connection between folklore and history and its relationship to the public history community. In this speech, he made the case that museum professionals’ embrace of folk culture and social history would be transformative for US museums and was an absolute necessity in a changing society. Jones prodded his colleagues, stating that the “historical societies of America must start thinking, in a way they have never thought before, about the workingmen and women who are the essential creators and defenders of our democratic faith, about the men and women who caught the later boats and whose children who stand among us as proud, full-fledged citizens.”²³ He argued that the key to museums and historical societies remaining relevant and popular was by telling the stories of “the traditional ways of life among our people, and particularly among those classes of our society whose story has been neglected.”²⁴ Working people, immigrants, and others whose stories historians had largely ignored should, he maintained, be the focus of a transformed public history.

Jones reiterated and expanded this message in two articles he published the same year in the brand new *American Heritage* magazine, published by the American Association for State and Local History. Founded in 1940, AASLH had emerged in response to the American Historical Association’s neglect and mistreatment of historical societies and other non-university-based organizations. It became a critical professional resource for public historians as they sought to share resources and ideas with one another.²⁵ In his article, “Folklore in the American Heritage,” Jones contended that presenting social, cultural, and labor histories of working people was an area where folklorists and historians could profitably collaborate. He made the case strongly that elite histories, which prioritized analyses of military and political events, were not connecting with the vast majority of public audiences and that instead, historians, folklorists, and museum professionals should work together to research and present working people’s stories. At the Farmers’ Museum and the New York State Historical Association in Cooperstown, Jones wrote, “We are trying to show with dynamic emphasis . . . that this country was made by
the labor of its working people.” This approach, he maintained, had already shown its popularity with visitors: “The public which comes to us . . . is essentially a working class public, farm people and factory people. And one of the reasons that our visitors are increasing at the rate of 100% each year is, to my way of thinking, because we are interpreting the history of this country in terms of labor and labor is something that the great mass of our people understand.”

In the next issue of *American Heritage*, Jones pressed his message even further. He not only emphasized the importance of working people’s histories but directly attacked the exclusivity, elitism, and classism of historical societies across the United States, observing that “the racial complexion of the people [involved with historical societies] is almost entirely old stock Anglo-Saxon, and yet this is often in communities with large groups of people whose ancestors have come from southern and western Europe.” Moreover, he wrote, “I have yet to see a Negro and seldom see a Jew attending one of these local historical society meetings, though certainly in some communities the Negro and Jewish families are among the most interesting in the town.” Jones expressed his displeasure with this state of affairs, but he offered a rallying cry to the next generation of public historians: “I believe if we tackle this problem with imagination and with consciousness, we can interest the working men and women of all racial stocks in their local and state histories.” The key, he contended, was to “shift our emphasis in our museums and in our programs so that their story is included.” The key, in other words, was to be more inclusive.

In the culminating paragraph of the essay, Jones laid out a statement of purpose, for both himself and the field, as it moved into the future. He argued that changing the focus of historical interpretation would make history and historical organizations more relevant “to the lives of the mass of the people themselves.” He maintained that in order to accomplish this goal, historical organizations should present people’s “work and the work of their ancestors” and communicate history that “represents America in terms which men and women can easily translate into the terms of their own lives.” Such a transformation in public history was critical not only because “it promises . . . to make our historical societies stronger,” but because “it promises to strengthen the moral and spiritual fibre of a country which must stand strong and free and filled with self-knowledge if we are to move out and beyond the realms of bickering nationalism which engulf us.” Although it is difficult to parse exactly
what he is referring to here, Jones appears to be simultaneously offering a critique of Cold War geopolitics and ethnoracial division. In this McCarthyite era, it is unsurprising that he is a bit coy about such a statement; nevertheless, the larger message about overcoming national chauvinism aligns with his central message of making historical organizations more inclusive and relevant to working people’s lives. He reinforced this message with his closing lines: “We have here an opportunity to move forward into the second half of the twentieth century on a far broader program and with a far broader base that we have had before. Did I say an opportunity? I think we have an obligation.” No longer could history museums and historical societies cater to a privileged few and showcase elite relics and expect to garner public support. With these public statements, Jones was calling for a transformation in public history’s content and audience.

Reorienting the Training of History Museum Professionals
In May 1969, in a keynote address to the American Association of Museums meeting in San Francisco, Jones outlined his vision for museum studies and public history training. He stated bluntly that “the old assumption that anyone who is competent in an academic area will be an adequate member of a museum staff is outmoded” and chided scholars who saw the primary function of museums as research, asking, “If the first concern [of museums] is research unrelated to exhibits, why bother with the public?” Moreover, he remonstrated that “if we are going to let the people inside and even encourage their visits, then we must be prepared to communicate with them.”

Jones hoped that the curriculum of the Cooperstown Graduate Program, which he had founded in 1964 as a partnership between NYSHA and the State University of New York at Oneonta, would create a new generation of museum professionals who were prepared to communicate effectively with broad audiences. His message had a progressive edge, making it more than simply a typical appeal for field-wide improvement and professionalization.

The relationship between folklore and history was critical to his vision of a fundamentally transformed approach to training. “Local history museums,” he stated, “are really folk museums” and their collections are not at a “sophisticated or connoisseur’s level” but rather a “folk or popular level.” In a field dominated by the aesthetics of elite connoisseurship embodied in the Metropolitan Museum of Art’s American Wing, Jones’s call to train students in how to interpret the material culture of ordinary people was provocative.
He offered a perspective on material culture that encouraged placing objects in social and historical context and, more important, relating them to the lives and work of nonelites. Beyond a focus on aesthetics and the particulars of materials and production, he encouraged students to analyze how people used material culture and explore the significance of objects in everyday life. Jones saw this approach as a critical move away from historical societies’ and museums’ almost universal focus on “the leaders and the rich” and the practice of choosing artifacts “on grounds of association, real or imagined, with them.” Rejecting the associational collecting that had long defined history museums’ practices, a new generation of museum professionals would interpret material culture on the basis of objects’ societal purposes and meanings.

Along with this shift in approach to material culture, Jones offered a strong statement in his 1969 American Alliance of Museums (AAM) keynote regarding the overwhelmingly White demographics of museum staffs and training programs. It echoed his critical comments almost two decades earlier about the racial composition of historical societies:

Before we drop the subject of recruitment we had better take an honest look at the fact that there is a mere handful of Negroes working at a professional level in American museums. I visit about 40 museums a year in this country; I see thousands of black children; I see black janitors and guards; once in a while in the big city museums I see a black docent, but aside from that the jobs all belong to whitey. The logical point of entry to the profession is through graduate training programs. The jobs are opening up for Negroes, it is part of our responsibility to fill those openings with trained, young black professionals and to push for more openings. The truth of the matter is that the museum profession has failed to communicate with the whole college generation, black and white, and it is time we turned our minds and talents to that very pleasant duty.

This statement, perhaps more than anything else he said that day, held the potential to radically transform the museum field. It was a message that museum leaders desperately needed to hear. In a paper delivered three years earlier at the 1966 AAM annual meeting, curator Keith Melder had written, “Historical museums in this country have treated the Negro as though he did not exist. It is little wonder that many Negroes are indignant at such treatment.” Outside of the relatively small but growing Black museum
movement, little had changed by the time Jones spoke in 1969. In January of that year, the Metropolitan Museum of Art had opened the *Harlem on My Mind* exhibition with disastrous results, demonstrating vividly how White curators and administrators—even well-intentioned ones—could easily alienate and offend Black audiences. The Met’s decision to feature photographs, music, and newspaper headlines about Harlem rather than the work of African American visual artists drew fire from critics and activists who protested outside the museum. Around the same time, the Smithsonian was responding to criticisms that it had ignored African Americans in its museums. In this period, the Smithsonian’s newly founded Anacostia Neighborhood Museum began creating important exhibitions that presented Black history as well as contemporary social issues relevant to Black communities. Moreover, the Anacostia museum was bringing a number of African Americans, including director John R. Kinard, on board as staff members. The institution’s other museums, however, were much slower to change, and by 1969, virtually no progress had been made in incorporating African American historical narratives into the institution’s larger museums.

When he spoke at the AAM meeting in 1969, Jones was not a lone, or ignored, voice in the wilderness; he was clearly a leader in the museum field. Yet his vision was deeply challenging to the status quo of history museums and historical organizations. Nevertheless, as Jones’s approach and philosophy spread across the country to hundreds of history museums, historic sites, and historical societies, his conception of the intertwined practice of folklife and history encouraged a community-based public history that emphasized the lives of working people and strove for inclusivity.

A critical partner for Jones at the Cooperstown Graduate Program was folklorist Bruce R. Buckley, who joined the faculty from Indiana University’s famed folklore program. Buckley, however, was much more than simply an academic folklorist. In 1949, while in college in Ohio, he had hosted a radio show called *American Folkways*, which was picked up by the National Educational Radio Network. After college, he recorded an album of *Ohio Valley Ballads* for Folkways Records and continued to perform as he pursued advanced studies in folklore. He also got involved with television programming, producing and hosting a television show also called *American Folkways*. According to Buckley, each show involved various performances and “had a theme of history, geography or human experiences.” In this period, Buckley also produced educational films as part of Indiana University’s Educational
Media Department, developing “films for seventh grade social studies classes, using folklife and local history as a unifying theme.” By the time he came to Cooperstown in the 1960s, then, he had accumulated a wide range of experiences in public-oriented projects at the nexus of folklore and history. At its root, Buckley viewed his work as advocacy for subaltern peoples, writing “public folklore advocates for the goals and aspirations of voiceless groups struggling for recognition and equality. Its aim is the communication of the knowledge, attitudes and skills of a folk group to another group with the intent of changing the other group’s perspective.” Although he had excellent academic training from Indiana’s faculty, including Stith Thompson and Richard Dorson, Buckley’s great skill was in the communication of folk traditions and local history to broad audiences, including children.

Another key faculty member was Per Guldbeck, who had come to Cooperstown after serving as archaeologist at Mesa Verde National Park and chief curator of the Museum of International Folk Art in Santa Fe. At the Farmers’ Museum, Guldbeck was most responsible for the creation of an influential exhibition called _The Farmer’s Year_, which chronicled rural agricultural life in great detail. In his essay in _History Museums in the United States: A Critical Assessment_, Gary Kulik wrote that this exhibition had a tremendous impact on the field because of its thematic approach and engaging design. Combining material culture, paintings, and drawings, the exhibition presented a compelling narrative that simultaneously conveyed a key insight about farming—its seasonality. It was an exhibition that engaged visitors of all backgrounds, focused on working people’s lives, and combined material culture, folklife, and social history. As Kulik notes, however, the exhibition was influential not only because of its quality, but because it became the model to many Cooperstown students of what a good museum exhibition should look like.

The student who best synthesized the melding of folk culture and history into progressive practice was the Cooperstown Graduate Program’s most famous alumnus from its founding years, public folklorist Henry Glassie. A member of the program’s first class in 1964–65, Glassie has recently commented that he “always had a vision of engaged scholarship, right from the beginning—a folkloristic version of public history.” It would be inaccurate to claim that Cooperstown was the only, or even the primary, place that pressed Glassie in this direction—he had formative experiences at the University of Pennsylvania as a doctoral student and elsewhere that surely contributed to his perspective on engaged scholarship. Nevertheless, the model of Jones,
Buckley, and Gulbeck, and the practical training he received in Cooperstown undoubtedly contributed to his ability to work effectively outside the academic realm. In the late 1960s, one of his first projects after graduate school was documenting in-depth the Poor People’s Campaign and creating a photography exhibition about it. Around the same time, he was involved in the founding of the Smithsonian’s Festival of American Folklife, and as state folklorist of Pennsylvania, he worked with educators to create a “bibliography of ethnic culture for Pennsylvania.” Moreover, in the 1970s, he was a major consultant for Conner Prairie in Fishers, Indiana, and the Museum of American Frontier Culture in Staunton, Virginia.

As a trailblazing expert in vernacular architecture, Glassie understood how examining folk culture, history, and material culture led to insights about social life and relationships of power. A 1971 essay, coauthored with Betty-Jo Glassie, made the case passionately for a more inclusive approach to public history: “Dingy industrial housing, cropper’s shacks, bourgeois ranchers, vintage beatnik pads, New Mexican haciendas, Church of God of Prophecy store fronts—all manner of buildings deserve a place in the making of our past, not just those few which fit the going myth neatly. With most kinds of buildings gone, it will be easy to forget most kinds of people, the workaday
farmers and factory hands, the people that old style historians are accustomed to call little. Although Glassie was certainly an exceptional example, he was representative of a broader movement among young public historians toward engaged, pluralistic, and community-based scholarship and practice in this period. The organic intersections between folklife and history were at the core of this transformation. Glassie and other students of this era maintained that history museums should no longer be bastions of elitism and that they had the potential to become sites where ordinary people could find their histories and communities represented and their stories told.

**Conclusion**

The current director of the Cooperstown Graduate Program, Gretchen Sullivan Sorin, enrolled in the program’s history museum studies degree track in 1974. The program’s first African American student, Sorin became a pioneering exhibitions curator and a powerful voice for diversity, equity, and inclusion in the museum field. As she prepared to graduate from Douglass College with a degree in American Studies, one of Sorin’s professors recommended the program to her because a previous student had attended. At the time, Jones and the rest of the program’s faculty did not engage in active recruiting of students of color. Although Jones hoped to diversify the field and preached the necessity of such work, he clearly had no idea how to go about it. According to Sorin, this was a major weakness of his approach to transforming museums and public history. Sitting and waiting for students of color to find Cooperstown was not going to make a significant dent in the overwhelmingly White demographics of the field. Thus although Jones, Buckley, and the other faculty welcomed Sorin and encouraged her aspirations to become a museum professional in the 1970s, she recognized when she became director of the program in 1994 that a much more concerted and active effort to identify, recruit, and retain students of color needed to be implemented. In addition, the curriculum needed to be adapted to reflect the true diversity of US society. Building on and significantly expanding the inclusive spirit of Jones’s original vision, Sorin has furthered the work of making public history inclusive and service-oriented and transforming it into a field that emphasizes narratives of the ignored or underrepresented.

Today, museums and other public history institutions strive to be relevant and responsive to their communities, public service-oriented, diverse and inclusive, and collaborative and multivocal. This is an ongoing project that
remains, in many ways, incomplete. It is critical to recognize, however, that the paradigm shift in public history and museum practice of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries followed from the essential groundwork of influential public historians who brought social history, cultural pluralism, and working people’s narratives to the center of US history museums, historic sites, and historical societies in the mid-twentieth century.

This narrative of public history’s history counters the widely held perception that history museums and other historical organizations were backward, elitist, and conservative institutions until the “new social history” began to transform them in the late 1970s and ’80s. The transformations often credited to the influence of the new social history were clearly well underway earlier. This popular narrative has privileged the influence of academic historians while erasing the pioneering contributions of public folklorists, public historians, and educators. Many scholars believed, and continue to believe, that museums and other history organizations needed to be saved, or redeemed, by enlightened scholars who had the true interests of the people at heart and offered critical rather than romanticized narratives of society and the status quo. The example of Louis C. Jones and Cooperstown suggests instead that it may be academic scholars who have something to learn from publicly engaged scholars working at the nexus of folklore and history.

Notes

2 The Cooperstown Graduate Program was created through a partnership between the State University of New York at Oneonta and the New York State Historical Association in 1964. It included two tracks, or degree programs—one in history museum studies and another in American folk culture. It is important to recognize that the Winterthur and Hagley programs pre-date the Cooperstown Graduate Program by about a decade. Although both Winterthur and Hagley trained many students who went on to become distinguished museum professionals, their curricula focused primarily on decorative arts / material culture and business/technology history, respectively, rather than primarily the training of history museum professionals. In addition, New York University’s Institute of Fine Arts, which was founded in 1932, has trained many successful art museum professionals. In addition, both Paul J. Sachs at the Fogg Museum at Harvard University and New York University’s Institute of Fine Arts, which was founded in 1932, trained many successful art museum professionals.


Gary Kulik, “Designing the Past: History-Museum Exhibitions from Peale to the Present,” in History Museums in the United States: A Critical Assessment, ed. Warren Leon and Roy Rosenzweig (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989), 24. Despite Kulik’s forceful case for Cooperstown’s significance to the field, subsequent scholars of public history’s history have not paid much attention to Jones, NYSHA, or the Cooperstown Graduate Program. A common narrative of the origins of public history training identifies its genesis in academic history departments in the mid-1970s. In the widely read book Museums, Monuments, and National Parks: Toward a New Genealogy of Public History (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2012), Denise D. Meringolo helpfully expands and complicates the genealogy of public history; however, Cooperstown receives no mention. In the article “The Pragmatic Roots of Public History Education in the United States,” Public Historian 37, no. 1 (February 2015), on the roots of public history education, Rebecca Conard broadens the genealogy of public history training to include a whole range of academic programs, including museum studies, archival science, historic preservation, material culture, historical administration, and applied history. Conard identifies the Cooperstown Graduate Program as the “first humanities-based museum studies program,” a characterization which acknowledges the program’s intertwining of history and
folklife. At the same time, Conard’s description is somewhat misleading as it downplays the fact that Louis C. Jones created CGP specifically to train history museum professionals. Indeed, the degree it awarded to public historians was a master’s in history museum studies, along with a separate track in American folk culture, and the vast majority of the program’s alumni went on to work with historical organizations. It would be more accurate to write that CGP was the first history-based museum studies program. Conard also gives too much credit for the creation of the program to Fred Rath and shifts the focus away from Jones’s role. As executive director of the National Trust for Historic Preservation in the 1950s, Rath was a key figure in the burgeoning historic preservation movement, and he was associated with CGP through his work as associate director of NYSHA. However, it is important to recognize that the Cooperstown Graduate Program was Jones’s brainchild and other NYSHA staff and CGP faculty played a larger role than Rath in shaping the program’s philosophy and curriculum.


14 G. August Gerber (national campaign manager, Socialist Action Committee), letter to Louis C. Jones, October 13, 1928, Louis C. Jones Papers, Fenimore Research Library, Cooperstown, NY, box 9, folder 77, 410.9/77. Unless otherwise noted, all other archival sources are from this archive.


18 Louis C. Jones, memo to Dr. Frederick Bair, “Anti-discrimination and the Teachers College,” n.d., box 20, folder 43, 410.20/43.

19 “Inter-group Council Presents Out of Many Cultures—America,” April 6, 19[46?], box 20, folder 44, 410.20/44.


24 Jones, 13.


27 Jones, 72.


30 The Cooperstown Graduate Program’s curriculum focused on everyday types of objects as well as the people who made and used them. Jane Spillman, interview by author, April 11, 2017.

31 Jones, Three Eyes on the Past, xxiv.


33 Keith Melder, quoted in Walker, Living Exhibition, 126.

34 Burns, From Storefront to Monument, 104.

35 Walker, Living Exhibition, 126–27.


38 Buckley, 9.

39 Buckley, 1.


42 Glassie and Truesdell, 71, 73.
43 Glassie and Truesdell, 75.


45 C. R. Jones, interview by William S. Walker, May 26, 2017. In addition, the author wishes to thank the numerous alumni of the Cooperstown Graduate Program who have shared their recollections of the early years of the program with him over the past decade.