2026 OAH Annual Conference on American History
Philadelphia, PA | April 16 – 19, 2026

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The 2026 annual meeting of the Organization of American Historians (OAH), held in Philadelphia, provided me with an opportunity to reflect on the state of the historical profession at the moment of the 250th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence. As a first-time attendee and a doctoral student nearing the completion of my program, I approached the conference as an introduction to a major professional organization and as a space to consider how historians engage with political, institutional, and interpretive challenges. As much as I participated, I observed three themes across panels, workshops, and informal exchanges: the contested meanings of the American Revolution in the present political climate, the evolving practices and approaches of public history, and the importance of academic community in the process of shaping scholarly work.

The cityscape of Philadelphia preserved 18th- and 19th centuries architecture, presenting a carefully curated historical landscape. But this landscape was also contested and changing. Visiting the city during the semiquincentennial moment (America 250) certainly showed the tensions between commemoration and critique. The incident involving the removal of an interpretive panel on slavery at the National Park Service's President's House, followed by public protests with posters and flyers to recover the missing contents installed by local citizens, shows that the negotiation of historical memory in Philadelphia is still ongoing.

Exploring historic sites and commemorative efforts connected me with some of the questions raised at the conference: whose American Revolution is it, and how do *we* (as Americans), remember the event and its legacy? In Friday's state-of-the-field panel titled "The American Revolution," Dr. Christopher Pearl pointed out that different groups, such as Indigenous tribes, women, and households, the soldiers on the front lines, experienced the war differently and thus it was a multiple "American Revolutions." When the panel chair, Dr. Serena Zabin, asked about the recent turn toward microhistory and its values, Dr. Jessica Choppin Roney commented that while the Revolution was a large-scale social event that impacted many people, it was also shaped by their choices. She emphasized the importance of asking not only how events unfolded but also why they mattered to the historical actors.

I selected several panels engaged with the politics of commemoration, particularly in relation to "America 250." Rather than presenting the Revolution as a unified national origin

story, some panelists emphasized its contested nature. This perspective was reinforced in the session, “Rights, Revolutions, and Remembering,” which examined how cerebrations have served as sites of negotiation. For instance, suffragists used the centennial celebration in 1876 to advance political claims, while the centennial of Nat Turner’s rebellion became a platform for competing interpretations among Black Radical writers. George Washington’s 1932 Bicentennial, though lesser-known, showed room for new interpretations but also excluded stories like Black soldiers' roles in the Revolution from the play, “The Greatest American,” to reshape national memory. One audience member simply asked during the Q&A session, “Why is the US so obsessed with celebration?” In response, panelists emphasized that the commemorative moment was deeply political, and shaped interests and struggles of those who mobilize them.

I also observed how public history practices are marked by both innovation and precarity in several panel sessions. For instance, the experience shared by Dr. Kelli Barnes, 18th-and 19th-centuries historian and digital humanist, illustrate the vulnerability of work focusing on the Black community within shifting political and institutional priorities. According to Dr. Barnes, in April 2025, two months after she started the National Park Service’s Fellowship, her program was abruptly terminated due to large federal funding cuts (which public historians called the situation “DOGE-d”). Her continued work as a volunteer historian and the materialization of some digital projects highlighted the broader issues in the public history field that I have often heard about: the challenge of sustaining critical work despite unstable or sudden withdrawal of support. Simultaneously, other panelists shared creative possibilities, such as Dr. Stacy Swigart’s “Museum without Walls” project, which digitized collections moved from the former Philadelphia History Museum to Drexel University, showing how digitization also reshaped the relationship between collections and materials by making them searchable and accessible.

One of the fascinating presentations for me was Dr. Whitney Martinko’s “The Invention of the Permanent Collection,” which offered a perspective to frame museums as corporate entities. Although “museum needs money/funding” is nothing new, her framework highlights how museums function as not only cultural institutions but also legal and financial structures that manage and assign value to the objects. Using Peale’s Philadelphia (Philadelphia Museum Company) as a case study, Dr. Martinko pointed out the process of incorporating collections, insuring artifacts, and defining their “priceless” status, the company created a mechanism of ownership and valuation outside of traditional markets. This approach reveals that the “priceless” quality attached to the museum objects is constructed through cooperative practices and thus, made objects not commodities but also not public property.

Beyond the formal sessions, the conference also highlighted the importance of academic community and support systems. Attending the OAH Graduate Student Committee's Writing Group reception provided an opportunity to connect with peers across institutions in an informal manner. Our table had conversations about teaching, research, and the challenges of navigating academic life. The working group emphasized that scholarship is not an isolated endeavor but a collective process. That point resonates in the panels. Hearing scholars reflect on their academic journeys, such as how research questions evolved, how projects took unexpected directions, offered valuable insight into the history profession as a collective endeavor.

In many ways, I observed that the OAH conference served as more than just a research presentation venue, unlike many graduate conferences I attended, but also as a forum for forming and maintaining academic networks. I appreciated that many panels reflected longer-term collaborations, such as special journal issues, research groups, and local networks, which demonstrates the collective nature of scholarly production. For me, attending the OAH conference helped foster a sense of belonging within a broader scholarly network.

2026 OAH Conference on American History

Ena Ozaki

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Commemorating the United States Semiquincentennial, the 2026 OAH conference in Philadelphia served as a space where historians discussed the complexities embedded in the nation's past that can easily be overshadowed by a festive atmosphere. The plenaries and sessions I attended critically examined this milestone year as a lens through which to reflect on the persistent legacies of racism and colonialism in the classroom, in scholarship, and in cultural institutions. I am grateful to have been part of these discussions at the OAH conference this year, both as a recipient of the OAH–JAAS travel grant and as a speaker on the OAH–JAAS co-sponsored panel.

Our panel, "Dissent and Difference: The Press, Cultural Expression, and Education," was arguably one of the sessions that complicated the patriotic celebration of the anniversary. The panel showcased the breadth of social activist efforts through papers by Dr. Miyuki Kita, Dr. Shuichi Takebayashi, and myself. Despite differences in the time periods our papers addressed—I was the only speaker focusing on the nineteenth century—they collectively explored various forms of activism: the voices of women journalists gathered in Chicago challenging Victorian gender norms; the educational activities of Northern Jewish students tackling racial inequality in Virginia; and the literary and cultural activism of Ed Sanders and his peers in the New York Beat literary circle in support of free speech, civil rights, and pacifism.

My paper, "Reframing 'Press Women': Professional Voices at the World's Congress of the Public Press," explored women's participation in the Public Press Congress held at the Columbian Exposition from May 22 to May 28, 1893. One of the concurrent congresses organized by the World's Congress Auxiliary, the event aimed to reaffirm the sociopolitical influence of print media and to discuss its public role in shaping opinion and intervening in political culture. For women attendees, it served as an exceptional space in which women in journalism and literature could share their professional experiences and voices transnationally. I argue that women used the congress to redefine their place as workers and professionals in the industrializing United States and the wider world while also showcasing and celebrating their achievements. Women's

printed voices in preliminary addresses reveal a tension between the male-centered organizing headquarters and the women organizers and participants. Women in leadership positions sought to challenge gender boundaries by highlighting their potential as a workforce in the rapidly industrializing world that the fair itself represented.

Chair and commentator Dr. Judy Tzu-Chun Wu framed our papers in terms of the power of knowledge production and community building. Her comments prompted me to revisit the question of platforms: politics in classrooms, bookstores, a fairground, or on the pages of publications ranging from official program booklets of the world's fair printed on glossy paper to DIY magazines produced on mimeograph machines using low-cost materials. This, in turn, led me to think further about the performative aspects of social activism—in my case, the implications of the World's Congress as a site of political performance. Dr. Wu's comments, along with questions from the audience, also encouraged me to reflect more deeply on the nuances of dissent. My paper, for example, showed how women tactically navigated the gendered labels and language that had marginalized them in order to intervene in public discussions about the press as a public institution. These reflections reminded me that dissent often emerged not outside existing structures, but through strategic engagement with the very platforms and discourses that shaped public life.

My OAH experience over the past several years has informed, inspired, and enriched my research, ultimately contributing to the completion of my dissertation. I deeply appreciate the inspiration I gained from the people I met and interacted with in various ways at the conferences. Mentorship programs organized by OAH and the Society for Historians of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era (SHGAPE) provided especially valuable opportunities to connect with experienced scholars working on culture, gender, and politics in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, many of whom were willing to read my drafts and offer insightful feedback. In my dissertation, I highlight the importance of community as a force for the empowerment of women in journalism, and through my conversations with mentors at OAH, I came to appreciate that value myself. As someone who has benefited from this community of historians and who will be working outside the United States, I genuinely hope that the scholarly interactions and international exchanges that OAH has fostered will continue.

2026 OAH Conference on American History

Kaori Yamazaki (The Ohio State University)

Attending the 2026 OAH Conference on American History in Philadelphia was an invaluable experience and an important opportunity for me. As a first-year PhD student who had not previously attended any conferences in the U.S., the support from the OAH and JAAS enabled me to participate, familiarize myself with the conference environment, and engage with an academic circle. I attended several panels, not only within my direct field of study but also beyond it, which allowed me to broaden my intellectual interests.

One of the most fascinating aspects of the conference was the opportunity to observe how members of the OAH and the JAAS interact, collaborate, and sustain scholarly conversations across national boundaries. These interactions created a space for sharing current research, topics, and trends in both U.S. and Japanese scholarship. For example, the panel "Geographies Solicited," organized by the OAH–JAAS Historians' Collaborative Committee, featured four presenters who examined Indigenous peoples' experiences in diverse locations such as Denver, Hawai‘i, and Virginia, as well as in political contexts. Each presenter offered a distinct methodological and analytical approach, highlighting overlooked moments, figures, and forms of resistance while centering Indigenous agency. Although Indigenous history is not my primary field, the panel introduced me to new perspectives and emerging approaches. Another panel, "Dissent and Difference: The Press, Cultural Expression, and Education," also organized by the OAH–JAAS Collaborative Committee, was particularly useful for me as I hope to present my own research at future OAH meetings. Observing how JAAS members, including current graduate students, prepared and delivered their presentations gave me valuable insight into the expectations.

As one of the largest historical associations, the OAH conference offers an exceptionally wide range of panels, making it possible to find sessions closely aligned with one's research interests. The panel "Moral Americans: Humanitarianism in the Shadow of the Vietnam War" was especially relevant to my work. My research focuses on U.S. human rights diplomacy during the Cold War, and this panel allowed me to engage with current scholarship in the field. I learned how historians are expanding on earlier works, such as Gaddis Smith's *Morality, Reason, and Power*, by examining not only high-level political actors but also non-governmental organizations. At the same time, scholars continue to debate the relationship between moral ideals and political power in foreign policy. Witnessing these discussions helped me better understand both the continuity and evolution of historiographical debates surrounding human rights and humanitarianism. I also had the opportunity to speak with presenters whose work I hope to engage with in the future, which was particularly exciting and motivating.

The conference also encouraged me to reflect on my broader goals as a historian in training. In addition to panels presenting cutting-edge research, OAH offered sessions focused on education. The workshop "Teaching History in States with Mandated HST/Civics Curriculum" addressed the challenges teachers face under state-mandated curricula and current political pressures. As a graduate student primarily focused on coursework and research, I had not fully considered these issues. Hearing directly from educators about their experiences and discussing ways to respond to recent restrictions on teaching more nuanced perspectives was both eye-opening and meaningful. It reminded me that historians do not work in isolation. Instead, they are part of a broader network that includes educators and the public. This session prompted me to reconsider why I study history and how my work might

contribute to society. It was also valuable in helping me better understand the U.S. education system and compare it with that of Japan.

Another highlight of the conference was the book exhibition. Given the relative scarcity of accessible physical bookstores in many parts of the U.S., it was exciting to browse a wide range of books gathered in one place and organized by publishers. As I am preparing for my general exams, I realized that bringing my reading list would have been helpful for identifying relevant materials. The availability of discounted books and shipping options made the exhibit particularly beneficial for graduate students working within limited budgets.

Finally, attending the OAH conference with the support of the JAAS grant provided valuable opportunities to connect with both new acquaintances and familiar colleagues. Meeting scholars, publishers, and editors in person was far more engaging and rewarding than online interactions. For me, it was also comforting to reconnect with scholars from Japan and to converse in Japanese. I am sincerely grateful for this opportunity and hope to participate in the conference again in the future.

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