

The History Professional

An Interview with Donna Graves

Donna Graves has worked as a public historian and cultural planner based in California since 1987. She has earned an M.A. in American Civilization (Brown University, 1982) and an M.A. in Urban Planning (University of California, Los Angeles, 1989). She was a Loeb Fellow at Harvard's Graduate School of Design, 2009–2010. Graves has worked with numerous organizations, including the National Park Service (NPS) and the California Japanese American Community Leadership Council, on urban preservation projects, specializing in the planning and preservation of under-represented populations and sites commemorating the contributions of workers and women. She contributed to the award-winning book *Sento at Sixth and Main: Preserving Landmarks of Japanese American Heritage*, has authored numerous articles and studies, and has presented widely on these issues. (donnagraves01@gmail.com)



Interview by Benjamin Guterman

Donna Graves

During graduate school, one of your first experiences with documenting and preserving public spaces was with The Power of Place nonprofit. What important lessons do you think you learned from that work?

Working as Executive Director of The Power of Place with founder Dolores Hayden was an incredible opportunity to weave together my long-standing interests in history, place, and art. Our efforts focused on refuting the commonly held notion that Los Angeles had *no* history by illuminating downtown sites where public memory could be expanded. We used new work in social history exploring gender, race/ethnicity, and labor history to show that the city had always been diverse, and looked for ways to embed these histories in public spaces through art, preservation, and urban design. The Power of Place made clear to me that the stories of everyday Angelenos could capture people's imaginations and lead them to new insights about their own communities. The organization operated from the somewhat-removed academic setting of UCLA; in my subsequent projects I've worked to find deeper ways to partner with communities in telling stories of place.

You've been very concerned with stories of people and communities who have been marginalized in American society. What do you think draws you to those stories?

I think that two aspects of my childhood in Orange County, CA, in the 1960s and '70s inspired these interests. As a child, the landscape around me was being transformed from orange groves and quirky places into strip malls and cookie-cutter housing developments. When I was a little older, I spent time at the local college because my single mother was getting a degree, and I saw protests there for civil rights and against the Vietnam War.

I'm sure these experiences of erasure and activism informed my passion for discovering the stories behind a place, especially those that have been overlooked or suppressed, and then thinking about how they can be told in ways that connect people more firmly to where they live. In my idealistic moments, I think these stories strengthen our connections to one another, as well.

What were your main findings in your 2012 research paper for the California legislature titled *The Legacy of California Landmarks*, and what prompted that study?

The study was required of the California Cultural and Historical Endowment, a bond-funded grant program intended "to raise the profile and scope of California historic and cultural preservation." My main finding was that our formally designated landmarks in no way reflect California history's rich complexity and diversity. Of course, anyone who knows the origins and trajectory of historic preservation in the U.S. would not be very surprised by this. But *Five Views: An Ethnic Historic Site Survey for California*, a project undertaken by California's Office of Historic Preservation almost 30 years ago, had already pointed toward a more inclusive future for preservation. (I encourage your readers to explore this inspiring project at www.cr.nps.gov/history/online_books/5views/5views.htm). While it has taken a long time for the field to catch up to the promise of *Five Views*, a growing number of efforts to create more inclusive cultural heritage projects are happening now.

How did you first become interested in Richmond, Calif., and its World War II history?

In 1997, I was hired by the Richmond Redevelopment Agency to develop a monument to the women who worked in the Kaiser Shipyards there during World War II. In the first two years of the war, Richmond grew from a small town of 23,000 to a 24-hour boomtown of over 100,000. The Kaiser Shipyards played a central role in this transformation, employing over 90,000 people who made the facility the largest and most productive in the world. Tens of thousands of women found new, high-paying jobs at the shipyards as defense industries loosened barriers against women doing "men's work."

The City of Richmond had envisioned a memorial project that focused on the local story, but when I found that there were no other tributes to women's contributions to the home front, they agreed that Richmond should be the place for the first national monument recognizing this chapter of American history.

In addition to the public artwork, we conducted oral histories, community memory-gathering events, a program for high school students, and developed a website.

How did the Rosie the Riveter Memorial project lead to a new national park?

At that time, Richmond was most known for its crime, poverty, and pollution. The city had not previously claimed its World War II history as a badge of honor, but the memorial project inspired many residents to rethink their story and proudly embrace the fact that Richmond held the largest shipbuilding facility in the world during WWII and that the city was a microcosm of the dramatic social changes that occurred on the home front.

The scale and complexity of the surviving physical resources around the city (a shipyard, factories, defense housing, a hospital, childcare centers, and more) caught my attention as we were developing the Memorial. When staff from the NPS regional office toured Richmond they realized that the WWII Home Front was not yet represented in any NPS units, so we developed a feasibility study for Rosie the Riveter/WWII Home Front National Historical Park, which was authorized by Congress in 2000, the same year the Memorial was completed and dedicated.

In what ways has the Rosie the Riveter site expanded our knowledge of life on the home front during the war?

The National Park is dedicated to telling the stories of *all* people on the home front, not only women's. As it has developed, the Park has documented and interpreted a wide range of experiences; it has not shied away from difficult topics such as the experiences of Japanese Americans and continued racial discrimination. My passion for this Park continues because the home front era holds such fascinating social histories with themes that are still resonant today. How do we live in a community that is increasingly diverse—racially, culturally, and

economically? How do we define patriotism and national security? What kinds of policies and places support working families best? How can examples like the Kaiser Shipyard health plan inspire us to address healthcare challenges now? How can we mobilize in the face of scarce resources?

What inspired your Preserving California's Japantowns project?

LA's Little Tokyo was one of the sites The Power of Place focused on, and in 2002–2003 I had the great fortune to work on a book with another UCLA grad, Gail Dubrow, titled *Sento at Sixth and Main*, which looked at sites along the West Coast that expanded our understanding of Japanese American history. Around 2004, I was invited to community discussions about the future of Japantowns in San Francisco, San Jose, and Los Angeles—the last that held any lively remnants of their cultural heritage. As we debated what and how to preserve in these places, I kept wondering “Where were the other Japantowns, and what is left of them?” California held the largest population of people of Japanese descent in the United States before WWII, yet their historical presence is invisible today in most of the cities and towns where they farmed, fished, built businesses, and established institutions. The statewide survey sponsored by the California Japanese American Community Leadership Council, “Preserving California's Japantowns,” was designed to answer that question as we conducted reconnaissance-level surveys of 50 pre-war Japantowns. Our website (www.californiajapantowns.org) makes the information we found about hundreds of historic sites available to people who can use it for planning and advocacy.

Can you briefly describe the background for production of the film *Blossoms and Thorns: A Community Uprooted*?

Beginning in the early 20th century, Japanese Americans in Richmond built a thriving community of cut-flower growers. I had been conducting oral histories and documenting this community for a few years when the last nurseries were sold around 2005 for a housing project. There was some debate about whether these were important historic sites and whether some of the buildings and structures should be preserved; I was an advocate for targeted preservation. It was a touchy subject for many within the Nikkei (Japanese American) community, and at one point, a very respected elder named Chizu Iiyama convened a small group to discuss how best to honor the legacy of the local flower growers. The meeting inspired a volunteer committee made up mostly of second- and third-generation Japanese Americans and myself. We discussed a number of options and ultimately settled on the idea of a documentary film, which we



Rosie the Riveter Memorial, Richmond, California. Photo by Lewis Watts.

hoped could be shared widely. I hoped it would be screened at the future Rosie the Riveter visitor center since the flower growers' legacy was intertwined with the home front story. The core group was primarily older Japanese-American women; all of our discussions about what to do, how to do it, and who should be involved were handled through the utmost diplomacy and consensus. I generally had to temper my more direct style of communication, but at times my status as an outsider allowed me to bring up delicate issues so we could move our discussions forward. We finally selected a wonderful filmmaker named Ken Kokka, a third-generation Japanese American, who was sensitive to the communication style and attention to process of his elders. It took us almost 3 years to produce a 19-minute video, but the resulting film, *Blossoms and Thorns*, is now screened regularly at the Park and has been shown in classes and libraries around the Bay Area.

The National Park Service has become much more committed recently to preserving Latino, African American, Asian American Pacific Islander, and LGBTQ history and sites. Did you have a contributing role in NPS discussions and planning for those new directions?

I would say I've had a contributing role by participating whenever I can. One instance was organizing the 2012 symposium "Multiple Views: California's Diverse Heritage Honored, Revisited, Re-imagined." Like me, Stephanie Toothman, NPS Associate Director for Cultural Resources, was deeply inspired by the *Five Views* project. With her support, and partnerships with the California Office of Historic Preservation and California Historical Society, I was able to organize a symposium that brought cultural heritage professionals, historians, and community leaders together to envision how the boundaries of historic preservation practice can be reshaped to create a more inclusive methodology and public narrative of place and memory. I also spoke at the recent "Co-Creating Narratives" symposium organized by NPS and George Washington University, and I serve on the NPS Advisory Panel for the Asian American Pacific Islander Heritage Initiative.

Oral histories have been vital for both your historical research and exhibits. Have you developed any new ways to employ those testimonies in your projects and make them more widely available?

First-person voices have a certain power of testimony, and I've been fortunate to be able to develop these kinds of records and use them to tell stories. Working with Susan Schwartzenberg, the very gifted artist who collaborated with designer Cheryl Barton on the Rosie the Riveter Memorial's design, helped me see how carefully selected excerpts of oral histories could be layered alongside personal snapshots and mementos as well as more official imagery, cartoons, and newspaper accounts, and icons of wartime propaganda. The Memorial components reconstructed personal and public memories in a powerful way. We were able to engage people's memories to shape the memorial but also to awaken a new sense of public meaning for Richmond.

A later project I undertook about Richmond's "main street," Macdonald Avenue, enlisted youth to interview seniors about their memories of the once-bustling commercial artery and craft a night of performance that inspired a very moving dialogue between the young people and their elders.

Do you find that when writing historical and exhibit texts for sites with several, often conflicting, accounts it's best to simply present the facts and let visitors draw their own conclusions?

I wouldn't make a blanket statement to that effect. We often note at Rosie the Riveter that the park holds "conflicting truths" as Ranger Betty Reid Soskin calls them. For example, many of the people we've interviewed have recalled the home front period as a time of remarkable social cohesion "when everybody worked together." Yet plenty of these same interviewees also recall instances of ugly racial discrimination, or of rabid anti-Japanese sentiment and their Japanese American neighbors "disappearing" for the duration. All of these perspectives are woven into the permanent exhibits at the park Visitors Center, which opened last year. I believe most visitors can understand that historical truths are contingent on who is doing the retelling, especially if the exhibits situate the narrator in relevant context.

Blogs at www.shfg.org

- *Diplomatic History*—Department of State online resources on WWII U.S. diplomats and Franco-American relations
- *Digital History*—Preservation of and access to the diary of Alfred Rosenberg, of the Third Reich's *Einsatzstab Reichsleiter Rosenberg* (ERR)
- *Declassification*—Katyn Forest Massacre Documents Release
- *Medicine & Science*—Using ships' data to understand changing weather and climate change.

Review our blogs at www.shfg.org.

Comments and contributions are welcomed.



The Rosenberg ERR diary (U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum)

A Timeline of Federal History



Treasury System Reorganized, 1778

On September 26, the Continental Congress created an Auditor, Office of Comptroller, Office of Treasurer, and two Chambers of Accounts. A committee was also selected to design the Seal of the Treasury.

A timeline of dates important for federal history work is now online at <http://shfg.org/shfg/programs/resources/timeline-of-federal-history/>

Please send comments and suggestions on the timeline to webmaster@shfg.org.

The east entrance of the first Treasury Building in Washington, DC, 1804.

Your Mapping Asian Pacific Islander America project website relies heavily on community involvement and initiative in identifying and protecting valuable historic sites. How effective has that been?

In spring 2014, Asian Pacific Islander Americans in Historic Preservation (APIAHiP) launched “East at Main Street,” a crowd-sourced online mapping project of places across the United States that matter to diverse Asian and Pacific Islander American communities. Few sites associated with APIA history and culture are recognized as landmarks. This project is especially timely because it complements the National Park Service’s Asian American Pacific Islander Initiative. “East at Main Street” (www.historypin.com/project/51-east-at-main-street/) is a great site that allows people to share photos, video, audio, and text about significant places, and comment on what others have posted, but the project co-director, Michelle Magalong, and I are finding that getting people involved takes the same kind of careful, sustained outreach as any community-based project. Our hope is that, as it grows, “East at Main Street” will offer a wealth of community-based knowledge to the National Park Service in its process.

How did you get started on the recent LGBTQ history project for San Francisco, and what results do you hope for?

I organized six “community conversations” with under-represented communities for the California Landmarks study. One of the liveliest was in San Francisco and focused on preservation and LGBTQ historic sites. Shayne Watson, an architectural historian who attended the meeting, approached me later about applying for support from the City of San Francisco to develop an LGBTQ Historic Context Statement. (Historic Context Statements are tools for planners and residents to understand aspects of their history as they are reflected in the physical/built environment). The very first such study had been done in San Francisco in 2004; it is excellent but relatively brief. Our proposal was to develop a comprehensive citywide study that begins in the 19th century and continues into the 1990s to capture the period of the AIDS epidemic. We will be finishing it in the next

few months and hope that it will be adopted by the city in spring 2015. I should mention that the City of Los Angeles has also produced an LGBTQ Historic Context Statement, so California is leading the way in documenting this aspect of our history.

Are you thinking ahead to any new projects?

I have my fingers crossed that funding comes through for an exciting project in a historic park in Philadelphia led by the Fairmount Park Conservancy. Next year I’ll be working with a great design team to transform a former naval weapons station into a new regional park, which will include a joint visitors center with the National Park Service. The area is associated with the Port Chicago Naval Magazine National Monument, site of the largest loss of life on the WWII home front. I’m excited because the overall site reflects a number of fascinating themes including civil rights, the Cold War, and antiwar protests. I’m also working on two new projects that focus on LGBTQ history. My colleague Shayne Watson and I are partnering with the national oral history project StoryCorps to record some of the people we’ve interviewed for our study in San Francisco. We’ll incorporate these interviews in a crowd-sourced map of LGBTQ sites throughout California that Shayne and I have begun creating. It will launch in spring 2015. I’m also developing an exhibit about LGBTQ home front experiences for Rosie the Riveter/WWII Home Front National Historical Park. WWII was a particularly important period in LGBTQ history in the United States, and the exhibit will begin to flesh out this fascinating story and show how the war years helped lay the foundation for later advances in community-building and civil rights organizing.

And, as always, I’m keeping my eyes open for new opportunities to document and interpret community histories that connect little-known aspects of our past to our present. ❖

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