The History Professional

An Interview with John Suau

John Suau became the Executive Director of the Historical Society of Washington, D.C. in 2014, where he not only oversees historical programing but also helms the ongoing redesign of the Society’s home at the historic Carnegie Library Building. Prior to his appointment, he served as Executive Director of the Mid-Atlantic Association of Museums, and as Manager of Meetings, Professional Education, and Diversity for the American Alliance of Museums.

Interview by Thomas Faith

What are your current duties at the Historical Society of Washington D.C.?

I am the executive director of the organization; since we are a very small staff of 4 full-time employees, I am a soup-to-nuts “change leader” for the organization.

You had an extensive background in museum work before becoming executive director of the Historical Society, but is there a particular aspect of your personal or professional experiences that you think most influences your approach to your current position?

I think that all of my previous experiences have informed my current role, but perhaps my tenure at the American Alliance of Museums (AAM) and my role as executive director for the Mid-Atlantic Association of Museums (MAAM) may have been the most important. The 10 plus years of work in the Washington area planted seeds to some of the most significant relationships I have maintained over the years. They have allowed me to advance the mission of the Historical Society and to recreate the Historical Society in a collaborative arena—since my approach has been one of collaboration since my first day.

What are some strengths of the Historical Society’s collection related to the history of Washington, D.C.?

Our entire collection is related to the history of the District. We have great resources for researchers in many areas. Out business archives have records of such defunct department stores as Woodward & Lothrop, hardware stores (Hechinger), breweries, funeral homes, and banks. Our maps, atlases, and directories all support homeowners researching their house histories. Our strength resides in the diversity of our collections, from ephemera such as menus, tickets, pamphlets and posters to works of art and thousands of photographs. They all help to inform researchers about what came before as we continue to collect today’s D.C. for future researchers.

How does the history of the District inform the study of the history of the federal government?

D.C. history, whether local or federal, is American history. The relationship between the local and the federal in Washington, D.C. obviously is both dynamic and intertwined. While the Historical Society has traditionally focused on local stories often overshadowed by federal concerns, it is impossible to talk about local history without contextualizing it within the national story as well as the federal government’s ongoing use of D.C. as a testing ground for its experiments and whims. Today, we seek to find the sweet spot where the local and federal stories meet to create U.S. history.

How does the partnership between the Historical Society and Apple work in practice?

This is a new paradigm for both the Historical Society and Apple. The Historical Society holds the master lease in the Carnegie Library with Events DC until 2098, so the partnership is actually a tri-party, cross-sector collaboration between the public, private, and non-profit sectors. The project is based in the reality that the Apple Global Flagship store will coexist next to the Historical Society. As a part of the project, Apple has provided resources to enable the Historical Society to relocate operations to the Newseum during the restoration of the building. Apple’s restoration of the Carnegie Library will result in a new and better home for the Historical Society’s collections, programs, and operations.

How did the idea for this partnership originate?

Apple approached the Historical Society in early 2015. Apple has similar global flagship stores in historic buildings in important cities around the world.

What will the renovated Carnegie Library Building feature for visitors and researchers?

We will continue to run the Kiplinger Research Library on the second level of the building. The structure will be modified and updated so that collections will have state-of-the-art climate controls and secure access. The building, restored in great measure to its original plan, will feature two new Historical Society public spaces to host exhibits and public programs. In the new situation, our public hours will expand so researchers will have
greater access to the Historical Society’s collections. The project will expose more of the historic building to the public than any time in its history. We foresee a huge increase in our visibility, with projections of an average of more than 10,000 visitors coming to the building each week.

**What stage is the plan in now?**

We have finalized the conceptual plans and the historic reviews have been completed. We are working with Apple on the final designs, with the ultimate goal of returning to the Carnegie Library in late 2018.

**What lessons have you learned from working with a for-profit entity?**

From the beginning of our discussions, it was clear that this type of partnership was as new to Apple as it was to us. I have a real respect for Apple and their emphasis on design. The expertise that they bring to the table is paralleled by the resources they are able to leverage to support this project. Alone, the Historical Society would struggle to get the necessary building updates to allow us a 21st-century presence in the Carnegie Library. The Apple team has been extremely collaborative. I dare to venture that as a result of our partnership, they understand better our expertise in content about the city. Together, we envision a transformative partnership that will evolve over the next 20 years or more.

**What is your favorite aspect of your duties?**

I thrive on connecting people and realizing new projects. I am passionate about lifelong learning, for myself and for others. I enjoy the wide variety of things I have an opportunity to influence and help to change. I enjoy updating the Historical Society’s relevance to new and younger audiences, and I love seeing the results of our work manifest in Washington History (our biannual publication about the history of DC) and our annual History Awards, when we honor the people and places in the city that make Washington, D.C. an amazing and wonderful place to live and work.

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**Ground is Broken on Dwight D. Eisenhower Memorial**

On November 2, 2017, in Washington, Members of Congress and the Administration; members of the Eisenhower Memorial Commission; the Eisenhower Family; and friends of the Eisenhower Memorial gathered to celebrate the groundbreaking of the Eisenhower Memorial.

The event, emceed by Greta Van Susteren, featured the President’s Own U.S. Marine Band Brass Quintet; a Presentation of Colors by the Color Guard Unit from USS Eisenhower; an Invocation by Father Leo Blasi, Priest at the Immaculate Heart of Mary Church in Hays, Kansas, and vocals by teenagers Emma and Annie Bathurst of Abilene, Kansas, Eisenhower’s home town.

Speaking at the ceremony were: Senator Pat Roberts and Congressman Mike Thompson, Chairman and Vice Chairman of the Eisenhower Memorial, respectively; Susan Eisenhower; and First Captain of the West Point Corps of Cadets, Simone Askew. In his remarks, Senator Roberts, observed:

“We build this memorial today not only to honor a single person, but as a symbol for all generations of the greatness of America and what our values have made possible at home and abroad,” Roberts said. “Lest anyone forget what can be achieved in the land of the free and the home of the brave, let them come here and understand what Eisenhower, and America, have done. And what they, in turn, will do for themselves and for our nation’s future.”

Groundbreaking participants included members of three generations of the Eisenhower family, ten members of the bipartisan Eisenhower Memorial Commission; and memorial designer, Frank Gehry.

Following the ceremony, memorial designer Mr. Gehry, commented,

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