

REMARKS

49th American Institute for Conservation Annual Meeting Keynote

Adam Wolfson, NEH Acting Chairman

Hi, I'm Adam Wolfson, Acting Chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities.

I want to begin by thanking Peggy for the warm introduction, as well as Eryl, the AIC board, and AIC staff for the invitation to speak today. I would also like to extend my gratitude to the membership of AIC and others attending today's meeting for your dedication to the preservation of our nation's cultural heritage. NEH could not do its work without the passion that you bring to conserving the objects, places, and cultures that form the tapestry of our shared human story.

I'm glad to be joining you, along with NEH's Chief of Staff Kelsey Coates, to offer a welcome from NEH. I'd also like to share a few words about the importance of developing a long-term vision for the preservation of cultural heritage in the United States. I hope that this vision, to be developed through the NEH-supported *Held in Trust* planning process, will inform the work of educators, policy makers, funders, and the general public.

The preservation of cultural heritage is fundamental to the work of NEH. Heritage objects represent the palpable traces of human history. They are the physical manifestations of individuals, families, and communities from our past, including their thoughts, achievements, and sorrows. Heritage collections define our historical identity and illuminate our origins, while providing physical touchpoints for sharing new stories, histories, and experiences.

Since NEH's inception in 1965, it has both supported and benefited from the work of conservators: exhibitions require objects, after all, while scholars rely on archives for their research, and K-12 educators develop lesson plans based on artifacts and digital collections.

As the field of conservation developed, so did NEH's support of this work. Starting in 1991, preservation-related activities previously supported through NEH's other divisions were consolidated under a newly formed division of Preservation and Access, or P&A. Today, P&A sponsors a wide range of grant programs to support the training of conservators, fundamental research into collection environments, assessments for collecting institutions, and disaster-preparedness and response efforts.

These remarks were given at the AIC and SPNHC Joint Virtual Annual Meeting on May 10, 2021, and a recording can be found at: https://youtu.be/iwkTpytgM_4

I have been fortunate to see some of these developments firsthand. In my 15 years at NEH, I have watched as P&A programs have expanded their reach and influence. Through its Preservation Assistance Grants program, P&A now supports preservation work in all 50 states, DC, Puerto Rico, and the US Virgin Islands. P&A's Sustaining Cultural Heritage Collections program was one of the first of its kind to encourage the field to think about the impact of climate and the environment on collections. I'm excited to see where P&A—and NEH and the field as a whole—will go in the years ahead.

While P&A's programs have been successful in supporting the conservation field, it has become clear that field-wide change requires a level of collaboration beyond a single program, grant, or organization. It requires that we ask hard questions about our past, present, and future, and that we engage with communities beyond the walls of our own institutions. It requires listening and reflection.

Towards this end, NEH's special initiative, "*A More Perfect Union*," seeks—among other goals—to preserve the objects, places, and stories that document our nation's struggle towards a more just, inclusive, and sustainable society.

As a part of this special initiative, NEH was pleased to enter into a Cooperative Agreement with FAIC in support of *Held in Trust*. Through this three-year collaboration, NEH and FAIC will explore such important topics as sustainability, climate change, and diversity, equity, and inclusion in the context of the conservation field. The project will culminate with a national meeting in 2022 with the goal of developing a long-range plan for sustaining the field of cultural heritage preservation.

Over the past year, the leadership team of FAIC and Project Coordinator Pamela Hatchfield have been developing a framework that will encourage the field to move from "surviving to thriving." The Steering Committee, Advisory Board, and Working Groups will collaborate with the broader community to engage with some of the pressing issues of our time – including climate change, racial equity, and institutional sustainability – for the purpose of developing a forward-looking plan.

The final meeting will present this plan and include a report identifying national priorities in terms of conservation research, resources, and education; establishing best practices for maintaining our diverse cultural heritage materials; and by suggesting pathways for building future leadership in the field to ensure the continued safety of our nation's cultural resources.

Ultimately, the project will help demonstrate the vital role that historic artifacts and documents play in telling America's stories—and the steps needed to preserve these resources.

These remarks were given at the AIC and SPNHC Joint Virtual Annual Meeting on May 10, 2021, and a recording can be found at: https://youtu.be/iwkTpytgM_4

NEH's founding legislation affirms, in its words, that "While no government can call a great artist or scholar into existence, it is necessary and appropriate for the Federal Government to help create and sustain not only a climate encouraging freedom of thought, imagination, and inquiry but also the material conditions facilitating the release of this creative talent."

Held in Trust can help release this "creative talent"—your creative talent and that of the field as a whole. Through a shared vision, *Held in Trust* will help encourage "freedom of thought, imagination, and inquiry" for the preservation and conservation fields.

I'd like to close with a few words about where we are today, to be followed by remarks from Kelsey Coates on NEH's support of the Biden-Harris Administration's priorities.

During the past year, NEH staff have been working remotely while continuing with our regular selection of programs. As you know, when the pandemic hit last year, Congress looked to NEH to assist the cultural sector. Through the CARES Act, NEH was pleased to distribute about \$75 million in emergency funding for the cultural sector, including our state partners -- the state and jurisdictional humanities councils.

Now, through the American Rescue Plan, Congress has again turned to NEH to support the cultural sector. The American Rescue Plan Act of 2021 recognizes the importance of the humanities to economic and civic life in the United States. The Act appropriated \$135 million in supplemental funding for NEH to provide emergency relief to humanities organizations that have been adversely affected by the pandemic. To learn more about how these funds will be distributed, please see the NEH website.

None of us have been untouched by the fatigue of the past year, the lives lost and disrupted, and the uncertainty that we face moving forward. But we will find a way of moving forward by drawing upon the collective wisdom of the humanities community.

Indeed, it is our hope that the plan that will emerge from *Held in Trust* will launch us all into a new era, where preservation will not just survive, but thrive. And as a thriving community of practitioners, it will support, encourage, and promote the diverse histories that weave together our nation. Thank you.