

THE INSTITUTE FOR HISTORICAL STUDY

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NEWSLETTER

AI: The Beast Is Loose!

By Steven Levi

An IHS member offers his thoughts on AI. And the dialogue begins. . .

If there is any one myth that is as old as humankind, it is that every advance, technological or otherwise, is going to “change everything.” I’m sure that when the first person “made” fire, everyone else in the cave was against it. They still wanted to run to the volcano to get “the real stuff.” Besides, this *portable* fire source was evil and would infuriate the gods. The telegraph put the wigwag (i.e., the method of sending signals by waving flags or lights) out of business. Then the telephone put the telegraph out of business, and now the iPhone is putting the telephone out of business. When cars began sliding around on the mud roads, people in carriages yelled, “Get a horse!” Now, with AI here and no longer on the horizon, consumers of online information wonder about the accuracy of what they’re reading, not knowing the source of it. And contributors to online sites are worried about being replaced by AI. Historians are also concerned about the sources of information that they uncover during their research.

In reality, we’ve already entered a golden age of information dissemination, and one group to benefit is historians. When most of us began our scholarly research, if it wasn’t in the archives in the city where we lived, well, good luck! You could go to your state’s archive and if you got a grant, the National Archives.

Where is this golden age evident? First, with each passing day, more and more original documents are found online. More and more newspapers are being uploaded, and there are websites where you can search for specific names! No need to scroll for hours through the years when your subject might be mentioned. Second, the door to subjects that some scholars call “of secondary importance” has been flung wide open! If you are seeking a subject for a great scholarly book, start with Google. This has opened many a gold mine for local historians—and PhD students looking for that “unique subject” for a dissertation. Far too often, the important historical facts for dissertations come from scholarly books on the subject rather than sources such as newspaper coverage. But there are scads of historical events that never make it to book form because departments over the years didn’t see them fit for a dissertation, or the imperial “we” didn’t believe there was enough primary documentation for a scholarly article, much less a dissertation. And now? One can find a Wikipedia article where the sources listed *do not* include a book, but rather many primary sources, such as media interviews, personal letters, and newspaper articles or obituaries. That’s how many of today’s unique dissertations—and books—begin.

Is AI a danger to society? Absolutely, if it’s not handled carefully. Let’s take schools, for instance. When a teacher gives a writing assignment, there is no way to know whether the essay turned in is from the student or a clever AI edit. This is particularly important in English classes because being able to communicate effectively is the key to success in life. If you can’t say it clearly, people won’t understand what you’re saying. Critical thinking, solid research, original writing are all crucial skills that students need to acquire during their educational years to have discerning, inquiring minds the rest of their lives.

Continued on outside back cover . . .

A Note from the Editor...

Once again, you are being asked to have your voice heard, as an Institute member, during these unprecedented times. As our Institute president informed you in a recent email, the National Archives at San Francisco and the Federal Records Center, both located in San Bruno, are scheduled to be permanently closed within the next three years, possibly starting as soon as this August. The local National Archives houses more than 750,000 records for northern California, Nevada, Hawaii, and islands of the Pacific. This would be a horrible loss for our community. I urge you to go online and visit the Save Our National Archives site to take action (e.g., sign a petition, contact federal officials, etc.): <https://www.saveournationalarchives.org>. If enough citizens speak up...

Note: Due to space constraints, a special one-page tribute scheduled for this issue to honor the late Bonda Lewis, a longtime IHS member, will appear in the Fall newsletter.

Upcoming Monthly Programs, Saturdays at 10 AM

8/15/26 – Ann Harlow, “Women Artists in Berkeley, 1900–1920”

9/19/26 – Karen Offen, “Adventures in Translation”

10/17/26 – Elizabeth Schott, “Dorothy Liebes and the Red Cross: Healing WWII Veterans with Art”

11/21/26 – Peter Crane, “Victor Serge: Revolutionary and Author”

December – No program this month.

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The NEWSLETTER is the official publication of the Institute for Historical Study, a scholarly organization designed to promote the research, writing, and public discussion of history.

Membership is open to independent and academically affiliated scholars who are in agreement with its aims and who have a commitment to historical study. Membership inquiries should be sent to the Institute address.

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PRESIDENT’S MESSAGE

Dear Institute members,

On July 4th, the United States observed a milestone in its history: the 250th anniversary of its founding. This semiquincentennial occurred during a presidential administration determined to suppress and rewrite American history. Since the beginning of the second Trump term, the Institute has endorsed statements by the American Historical Association and the American Association of Colleges and Universities and has produced its own statement demanding the accurate portrayal and teaching of United States history. We are now asking members to take action regarding the impending closing of the National Archives at San Francisco in San Bruno (see Editor’s Note on the facing page). This closure would be a terrible loss to historians and journalists researching important histories of the West Coast and the Pacific basin.

Through your publications, presentations, and discussions, you, as Institute members, uphold and preserve historical accuracy. The Institute provides a public forum for historical discourse through its monthly programs coordinated by Dan Kohanski. The long-established Writers’ Group, facilitated by Rob Robbins, provides feedback on members’ historical writings and aids members in publishing books and articles. Begun in 2025, the Jewish History Study Group, originally facilitated by Louis Trager and now by Leslie Friedman, and the Women’s History Study Group, facilitated by Jody Offer and me, host interesting member presentations. The new European History Study Group, facilitated by David Goldberg and Bert Gordon, focuses on book discussions. The California and the West Study Group, facilitated by Ann Harlow and David Mostardi, is in the preliminary stages of planning group visits to local historic sites.

I encourage you to maximize your membership benefits and share your love of history by attending monthly programs and study group meetings, participating in discussions, delivering presentations on your historical interests, writing articles and reports for the Institute newsletter, serving on Institute committees, arranging excursions, and hosting meetings.

Members can now apply for mini-grants through September 15, 2026, to help fund their historical projects. The Mini-Grant Committee will evaluate the applications. For more information, please visit the Mini-Grants for Members web page on the Institute’s website.

Please make a note in your calendar that Peter Stansky will be hosting the Institute’s Annual Potluck at his Hillsborough home on Saturday, September 26th, from 12:00 to 2:30 p.m. More information about this always stimulating and enjoyable event will be forthcoming.

—Elizabeth Thacker-Estrada

MONTHLY PROGRAMS

Open Forum:
Did Being an Immigrant
Get You Interested in History?
April 18, 2026

On Saturday morning, April 18th, members of the Institute for Historical Study gathered online for the Monthly Program, “Did Being an Immigrant Get You Interested in History?” The session was an “open forum,” or “roundtable,” meaning that there was no single organizer or moderator, but Dan Kohanski was kind enough to volunteer to serve as informal moderator.

Oliver Pollak, who taught English history as a professor at the University of Nebraska in Omaha, addressed what had led him to become interested in history. Born in London, he came to the United States to join family in this country and joined the Navy at age 17. He subsequently sought an academic position, a search which landed him at the University of Nebraska in Omaha, where he focused on the history of Myanmar (Burma).

Michael Several contributed his story as a third-generation American, whose grandparents had come to the United States at the beginning of the 20th century. Having grown up in Mount Kisco, a suburb just north of New York City, Michael shared several historically significant memories: his grandmother making “high-level” gin during Prohibition, which, one day, she accidentally spilled on a bus; seeing ships, such as the *Normandie*, docked along the Hudson River on Manhattan’s West Side; the burial of President Franklin D. Roosevelt; the tears, presumably of joy, at the end of the Second World War; as well as the official signing of the Treaty of Peace with Japan in San Francisco in 1951.

Maria Sakovich indicated that while the immigration of her families was not responsible for her interest in history, their stories influenced the choices and direction of her work in the field. She took a course with the late Professor Moses Rischin (1925–2020) at San Francisco State University, where one of the projects was to “trace your history through time and space.” What a revelation, she added, to discover that both the maternal Ferguson (arrival in 1812) and paternal Sakovich (arrival in 1913) families shared similar trajectories: beginnings in Montreal, leadership as clerics, wives with special roles, lives during turbulent times. Her subsequent historical pursuits have taken her into the areas of immigration, biography, and family history.

Looking back on his interest in immigration and history, Dan Kohanski talked about his father having immigrated from Lithuania during the 1920s. Dan, too, took graduate courses, in his case at New York University, and, in 1998, published a book, *The Philosophical Programmer: Reflections on the Moth in the Machine* (St. Martin’s Press). He also mentioned that his book, *A God of Our Invention: How Religion Shaped the Western World*, was published by Apocryphile Press in 2023.

David Goldberg discussed the visual projects on which he is currently working, and Trish Garland noted that “everyone has a fascinating story whether they think they do or not.” The conversation then turned to ethical wills: non-legal documents used by people to pass personal values, life lessons, and stories to future generations, a practice in Jewish tradition, with many examples, Dan noted, available in the New York Public Library.

Additional related topics were discussed, including epigenetics, or the way in which individual factors, such as a person's behavior and environment, may affect the ways in which their genes function, in other words, how behavior might modify genetic predispositions. Ancestral memory, a much-debated idea, holding that experiences, including traumatic experiences, and acquired skills might be inherited across generations via DNA, also came under discussion. The American genealogy documentary series, adapted from the BBC series of the same name, *Who Do You Think You Are?*, during which celebrity participants research their family history, was also mentioned.

As the meeting approached its end, Oliver spoke of the importance of memory, relating it to taste in food, as in the memory of one's first bite of chocolate ice cream, a connection close to my own work in food history, i.e. as co-editor of "Food and France: What Food Studies Can Teach Us about History," a special issue of *French Historical Studies*, 38:2 (April 2015). Oliver recalled being given chocolate ice cream when his tonsils had been removed, at age eight, in a hospital in the UK, at a time when post-World War II food rationing was still in force. Currently researching the connections between ice cream and memory, Oliver asked that people send him 50-word ice cream memories. Maria commented on the relationship between family history and immigration, and Dan added that genealogy and immigration were hardly separable.

In summary, the Open Forum "Did Being an Immigrant Get You Interested in History?" offered up a plethora of rich and engaging ideas, worthy of the members of the Institute for Historical Study.

—Bert Gordon

"The Lady on the Dome" **Presented by Katya Miller** **May 16, 2026**

Katya Miller presented her research regarding her soon-to-be-published book about the statue on top of the US Capitol. She says it is the most seen *and* least seen feature of the Capitol. The statue has gone by several names: her official name, the *Statue of Freedom*; Armed Freedom; and mostly, Freedom. The statue is bronze and was designed by Thomas Crawford. It has resided on top of the Capitol since 1863. She wears a military helmet, holds a sword in its sheath in her right hand, and a laurel wreath and a shield in her left.

She is a Presence. She stands at ease with power. She is 19-1/2 feet tall and weighs about 15,000 pounds. The crest she wears on her head is at a height of 288 feet above the plaza on the east front of the Capitol. She was not made as a mythical goddess, but she has the charisma—and perhaps the abilities—of Athena or Athena's Etruscan counterpart, Minerva. Many details converged for her meanings. Crawford was commissioned to design the statue in 1854. The Civil War had not started but the major expansion of the Capitol had. Architect of the Capitol Thomas Walter designed the Capitol's new, bigger dome with a Goddess of Liberty statue capping it. Crawford wanted to sculpt something that would represent Freedom Triumphant in War and Peace.

Crawford worked in his studio in Rome. US Secretary of War Jefferson Davis, who was overseeing the expansion of the Capitol, was furious when he saw that Crawford's first design showed the statue wearing a liberty cap that, in ancient Rome, was worn by emancipated slaves. Davis, a Southerner, and Crawford fought over the cap. Davis told his military aide and Crawford's supervisor, Captain Montgomery Meigs, to remove the cap. Katya told her

listeners the push-and-pull politics trended toward war.

The statue has a native American blanket over her shoulder, her military helmet has stars on it, and there is a feathered eagle's head crowning her. The helmet, American eagle, and feathers replaced the cap Davis abhorred.

Crawford died in 1857 before the full-size plaster model was shipped from Rome to America. His widow, Louisa, oversaw the shipping. The model was cut apart and packed into six crates in April of 1858. The ship transporting the crates across the Atlantic leaked. The crew stopped at Gibraltar to fix the leak. It leaked again. They were forced to stop in Bermuda., where the statue's pieces had to be stored. Half of the crates arrived in New York City in December, 1858. They had to wait until March, 1859, for another ship to deliver the rest of the crates.

The crates of the disassembled plaster model were taken to a foundry on the edge of Washington. The bronze casting work stopped in 1861 when the war started, but eventually the foundry workers cast it and reassembled it. The bronze statue was completed late in 1862 and displayed temporarily on the Capitol grounds. Its cost—not including installation—was \$23,798.82. The dome, under construction, was ready for the statue late in 1863. Many of the men working on the Capitol expansion were former slaves. Slaves living in the capital were freed by the Compensated Emancipation Act of 1862. Raised on December 2, 1863, the *Statue of Freedom* received salutes from 35 guns at 12 forts circling Washington, DC.

In 1993, after 130 years on top of the dome, she needed repairs. The bronze had corrosion and pitting. Rusting and a crack in the pedestal's cast iron required four months of restoration work. She regularly gets cleaned and new coats of paint every two or three years.

Information about the *Statue of Freedom* on Wikipedia includes in parentheses that “casual observers” think the statue is a Native American because of the eagle and feathers, but there are also other icons on clothing and décor on the pedestal that harken back to ancient Greece and Rome. Nonetheless, there are obvious prominent Native American embellishments on the statue. In researching her book, Katya met Washington Native Americans and has become close friends with a Mohawk grandmother/clan mother. Katya attends meetings with them. Katya pointed out that this little-known, yet significant, statue is a powerful symbol of America for all of us.

—Leslie Friedman

“What Is Fire?”

Presented by Jim Gasperini

June 20, 2026

Jim Gasperini's talk “What is Fire?” on June 20th was a fascinating account of the long history of attempts to answer an elementary question: what is fire?

The discussion of fire opens a door to the consideration of the larger question, what is matter? Jim began with a diagram of the four classical elements from a 1472 edition of *De natura rerum* (On the Nature of Things) by Isidore of Seville. The Latin text in the topmost of four interlocking rings reads: “Fire. Sharp, Thin, and Mobile.” Jim next showed examples of how fire was considered one of a small number of fundamental elements in other cultures, including the Zoroastrians, the Chinese wu xing philosophy, and the indigenous Cree people of North America.

Jim next discussed the ideas of the atomists, who theorized that the world is made of tiny particles separated by voids, and imagined a special role for fire atoms. Aristotle argued against the existence of voids, which would mean that

“what is not” exists, “an absurdity.” He proposed instead that fire and the other terrestrial elements are continuous compounds of basic sensory “qualities:” hot, cold, wet, and dry.

Medieval and Early Modern efforts to reconcile science with the divine in the Western world were highlighted in Jim’s images of “‘The world as a machine,’ God, the Divine Architect, Illumination from Bible moralisée,” from 1250 and “The Scientific Method—Frontispiece of *Novum Organum* by Francis Bacon,” of 1620.

The late 17th-century development of phlogiston theory held that objects burned because they contained a substance that dissipated when they were set on fire. This substance was named “phlogiston.” Although this idea was useful for a time, it was disproved in the late 18th century by European scientists, including Joseph Priestley in England, Carl Wilhelm Scheele in Sweden, and Antoine de Lavoisier in France. A key development was their study of the combustion of metals, which produced a burned object called a “calx,” now known as an oxide. When a metal such as mercury burns, the resulting calx weighs more than before, not less. There must be something in the air that combines with the metal, which Lavoisier called “oxygen.”

Jim then turned to the “fates of the three scientists” mentioned above, illustrating that science and politics are frequently connected. Scheele died at age 43, from exposure to noxious chemicals with which he had been experimenting, but both Priestley and Lavoisier were victims of political strife. Rioters in Birmingham, England, in 1791 drove Priestly, also a religious dissenter, to emigrate to Philadelphia. Lavoisier, in addition to his scientific work, was an aristocrat and leader of a hated system of tax collection. He was executed during the French Revolution’s Reign of Terror in 1794. One of Jim’s images shows Lavoisier experimenting “with the respiration of a man in a barrel under a glass canopy.”

Moving toward the present, Jim explained that the classical elements correspond approximately to the states of matter, except for fire, unless understood as the energy that causes matter to move among solid, liquid, and gas. He briefly considered what “burning” means in the context of stars.

Fire, he concluded, maintains its appeal to humans, exemplified in an image he showed of a circle dance celebrating the summer solstice, known as Ivan Kupula Night in Ukraine and elsewhere in Eastern Europe. His image, titled “The enduring appeal of fire,” summed up this excellent presentation, showing fire as a phenomenon intricately and continually connected to evolving human life.

—Bert Gordon

BREAKING NEWS

Yuna Amie Lee is our newest member. She is a political scientist, historian, and science fellow whose research focuses on strategic foresight, science diplomacy, and the evolution of state capacity in times of uncertainty and complexity. Her recently published research includes “US Congressional Foresight” and “AI as Strategic State Capacity.” Among her current projects are “New Cold War Geopolitics in the Context of Diplomacy” and “Origins of Strategic Foresight in the United States, 1945–1980.” Her broader interests include statecraft, technology-driven future strategies, crisis management, and anticipatory governance. She says, “I learned of the Institute while I was attending a scholarly seminar in Denver, during which Ambassador Dennis Ross mentioned his connection with UC Berkeley’s national security and international relations programs and the Institute came up. I’m delighted to join this scholarly community!”

SPECIAL GROUP REPORTS

Jewish History Study Group Report

On April 12th, Dr. Stephen Morse presented a talk on “Genealogical Tips” to the Jewish History Study Group. He received his PhD in electrical engineering at NYU and taught at UC Berkeley and Stanford, but it was a career in industry that excited him. He was the father of the 8086 Intel processor and a family of Intel chips. He worked at Bell Labs, IBM, and Intel. When he retired, he wanted to delve into genealogical research. He introduced us to a potpourri of genealogical tools.

If one is researching individuals who came through Ellis Island, he suggested finding forms that will show family names and ship arrivals on specific dates. One can refine the search by looking for aunts and uncles traveling with the individuals, as there can be several listings of the same surname. Also people’s names and place names are commonly misspelled; for instance, Leah may show up as Lena.

On Ellis Island, there are three different search forms available, which provide overlapping functionality. Stephen has dubbed them the One-Step Search Tools. The Gold Form searches all New York passengers arriving at Ellis Island from 1892 to 1924 and provides enhanced features. The White Form covers the same years as the Gold Form, plus the years from 1924 to 1957, and provides additional features not found at the Ellis Island website. The third database searches all passengers arriving in New York from 1820 to 1957, not just those at Ellis Island.

Stephen hopes that IHS members will give genealogical research a try. He can be reached at steve@StephenMorse.org or stevemorse.org.

On June 14th, the Jewish History Study Group enjoyed a PowerPoint presentation about the development of a Jewish community in

Pasadena, given by Michael Several. It brought to life the residents of long ago and gave a sense of reality. He focused on the history of families and their social and religious events. In 1907, the High Holy Days—Rosh Hashanah/New Year and Yom Kippur/the Day of Atonement—were organized and led by Victor Harris, an early resident. They incorporated their temple and acquired a Torah, the first books of the Bible. The Ladies Auxiliary, formed in 1907, enlarged and reorganized its group into the Hebrew Aid Society in 1912. Its goal was to raise funds for a religious school. There were 24 children enrolled in the school—a small number, but the community was small in the early 20th century. It continued to grow.

In 1915 they opened the school and had Reverend Jay Cooperson and Reverend Goldstein to lead the holidays. It seems unusual that they used Reverend, but it was a commonly used title for rabbi then. World War I slowed or stopped the US development. In 1921, a new congregation, Temple B’nai Israel, formed and by 1923, it had become a center for social events as well as religious activity. The community eventually brought well-educated rabbis from the Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati.

Michael painstakingly found the names and professions of many of the residents. There were owners of shoe shops and clothing stores. The presence of businesses run by the Jewish residents allowed the Jewish community to know the families of other groups and have others acknowledge the businesses as a part of Pasadena. Mixing with other groups in Pasadena was not easy. There was some discrimination, such as keeping Jewish families out of country clubs. At the same time, many of the retail businesses were owned by Jewish families. There may not have been close friendships

through the businesses, but their business endeavors kept the small Jewish community in touch with Pasadena's broader population. As the community continued to grow, many Jewish families and businesses left Pasadena and moved elsewhere in the vast reaches of Los Angeles.

—Leslie Friedman

Women's History Study Group Report

Prior to the April 27th meeting of the Women's History Study Group, members read Jody Offer's play, *Just Vote*. The play dramatizes the events surrounding Susan B. Anthony and 14 other women in Rochester, New York, voting in the November 5, 1872, election and the court case that ensued. Asserting that they were US citizens, the women challenged Section One of the 14th Amendment, which states, "No State shall make or enforce any law which shall abridge the privileges or immunities of citizens of the United States." Anthony was arrested for voting, put on trial, and convicted. Jody, who has been playwriting for 45 years and has had 18 plays produced, wrote the play in 2020 for the 100th anniversary of the women's suffrage amendment to the US Constitution.

Just Vote introduces unsung heroes in the history of women's suffrage, including the voting inspectors who allowed the women to vote, and Susan's sister, Mary Anthony, who made Susan's work possible by maintaining the household and finances. The play also presents racial issues surrounding Black men's suffrage, by showing Susan's long relationship with Frederick Douglass and their disagreement over the 15th amendment to the Constitution. Douglass, like many, supported the right of Black men to vote before women would gain the franchise, whereas Susan felt all should have the vote.

The group enjoyed the play and felt it would be suitable for a variety of venues. Members praised the way the play balanced the activism

of the women of the Anthony family with their home life. Karen Offen observed differences between the American suffrage movement and that of England and France. The discussion included the history of Jody's efforts toward production, the public reading it had at a fundraiser, and ideas for promoting it.

On May 25th, attendees discussed Dot Brovarney's interesting introduction to her book about the women of the *Overland Monthly*: Ina Coolbrith, Millicent Shinn, Ninetta Eames, and Mary Austin. Participants provided feedback on structure, naming consistency, and clarity issues, as well as Dot's approach to organizing the book thematically instead of chronologically. Participants suggested ways to incorporate a loose chronological or narrative order to help readers follow connections among the women. The group also recommended the inclusion of brief selections of the women's writing to illustrate their personalities and influences. The suggestion was made to clarify institutional and personal relationships, especially regarding author Bret Harte, the *Overland Monthly*'s first editor, and to provide background information on the magazine's significance.

On June 22nd, Pamela Peirce presented a talk inspired by her research in writing a biography of a woman who spent four years in a mental institution in the early 20th century. She spoke of the changing rights and societal situation of women in the "Long 19th Century," from around 1890 to 1920.

She found ambiguity among male writers, who were perplexed by emerging differences among women. Also, some men wondered if women would remain "sweet and innocent" if they entered the political and business world of men. She noted that Joan of Arc was a hero of the "New Woman," and that Mark Twain admired her innocence and modesty in combination with her agency, while Shakespeare's Ophelia had been admired by Victorians.

Throughout, Pam emphasized economics as a strong factor in the “liberation” of women, and that there are vast differences among women. The industrial revolution changed women’s lives by creating jobs women could hold. Like men, women have always lived varied lives, but this has become more evident since they’ve begun to have greater choices and opportunities.

—Elizabeth Thacker-Estrada,
Pamela Peirce, and Jody Offer

European History Study Group Report

On Friday, July 10th, the European History Study Group of the IHS met to discuss members’ specific interests within the context of European history. We also welcomed Merle Easton, who shared her interest in the history of Ukraine. Liz Thacker-Estrada talked about her interests in mid-19th-century interactions between Europe and the US, as well as in English history, especially the eras of Queens Elizabeth I and Victoria.

David Goldberg recalled his family’s origin in Poland, where the cultural influence of the Black Madonna of Częstochowa, a highly venerated icon, and a long-standing destination for religious pilgrims up to the present, helped shape his family’s images of their homeland. I talked briefly about my early fascination with fin-de-siècle Vienna and the role of the Catholic Church in addressing the rise of an industrial working-class there at the time. Peter Stansky briefly introduced himself as an archival historian focused on Britain from 1850 to 1956, with particular interest in Orwell, though he noted having no current projects.

Peter Crane talked with us about the failure of the 1848 revolutions in Central Europe and the resultant flow of migrants to the United States, highlighting the example of Carl Schurz, a German revolutionary who, following the failure of the revolutions, migrated to the United States,

where he became an anti-slavery activist and had a political career including serving as Secretary of the Interior under President Rutherford B. Hayes. Post-1848 German refugees played important roles in American life, bringing, for example, the idea of kindergarten for young children to the United States. He recommended works by Svetlana Alexievich, a Belorussian writer, whose book *Zinky Boys* documented the stories of dead soldiers during the 1979–1989 Soviet-Afghan War. Their bodies had been returned home in zinc coffins. The book became controversial, as many in the then Soviet Union criticized it for having dishonored the Soviet soldiers who fought in Afghanistan.

The group’s consensus was that for the moment our meetings would focus on the discussion of specific books, although individual presentations and other formats were not ruled out. Several books were considered for the next meeting, scheduled for Friday, October 9th, at 11 a.m. The 1848 revolutions, discussed in previous meetings, continued to interest the group but it was decided that rather than discuss Priscilla Robertson’s *Revolutions of 1848: A Social History*, first published in 1952, which had been mentioned in prior meetings, we would focus on the more recent *Revolutionary Spring: Europe Aflame and the Fight for a New World, 1848–1849* by Christopher Clarke, published in 2023.

Consideration of other books included Robert Paxton’s *Vichy France: Old Guard and New Order*, published in 1972, which argues that most French did not resist the Nazi German occupation of their country during the Second World War, as some had claimed after the war. In France this led to what has been called “La Révolution Paxtonnienne,” a major change in how that period has been described. The film *Le Chagrin et la Pitié* [*The Sorrow and the Pity*] by Marcel Ophüls, released in 1969, contributed to shifting perspectives about World War II France.

After discussing other works including William Henry Chamberlin's *The Russian Revolution 1917–1921* (1935), Mikhail Sholokhov's novel *And Quiet Flows the Don* (1925–1940), as well as works by Vasily Grossman and Isiah Berlin, the group decided to read Edmund Wilson's *To the Finland Station* (1940), a history of revolutionary thought and action, from the French Revolution of 1789 through the 1917 revolutions in Russia.

—Bert Gordon

Writers' Group Report

At our April meeting members read and discussed Chapter 4 of Liz Thacker-Estrada's biography of First Lady Abigail Powers Fillmore. The chapter covered the years of her husband Millard's third term in Congress (1841 to 1843). During that period Millard served as head of the powerful Ways and Means Committee. Abigail met important politicians such as Henry Clay and celebrated visitors to the nation's capital, including Charles Dickens. The group found the chapter to be a very well-written narrative that covered well Abigail's public activities and her private pursuits. Members urged Liz to present more detail on Abigail's public duties, and also to provide more information on the important figures she met and on the social life of the capital. Because the chapter ended with Abigail sustaining a serious injury, the group suggested including more information about medical practices of the time.

In May, we considered three chapters of Marilyn Geary's memoir/travelogue, *Taking the Italian Waters: Confronting Aging in a Land of Ancient Hot Springs*. The first, Chapter 14, focused on the spa La Foce, Chapters 15 and 16 on the one at Chianciano. Taken together, these chapters differ considerably from the earlier portions of the book reviewed by the group. To be sure, they amply describe the baths, estates, gardens, and

museums that Marilyn visited, but the heart of these chapters are the self-reflections that these encounters provoke. At La Foce, Geary reflects on the achievements of others—the heroism and literary brilliance of Iris Origo, and the success of Alice, her own college roommate, who went on to become a famous food expert and restaurateur. Marilyn muses critically on her own shortcomings and other aspects of her life. An encounter with Etruscan artifacts in the museum at the Chianciano spa leads her to reflections on aging, death, personal grief, and the position of women in the world. The group was impressed by Marilyn's fine style and moved by her frank presentation of her innermost thoughts and feelings. We look forward to her further descriptions and reflections.

In June the group discussed Michael Several's "Oral History"—a fictional interview, imagined to be conducted in 1930, with John Riddell Berry, a real person, but about whom relatively little is known. Several has his subject, Berry, discuss slavery and abolitionism in western Pennsylvania in the years before the Civil War. Berry would have been a young boy at that time, so most of what he is supposed to "know" is based on scraps of childhood recollections and subsequent research. The segment shows that Several himself has done considerable research on the subject, using previously published accounts. The group felt that this segment was well-written but expressed some concerns about the fictional "oral history-interview" approach. Might there be some better way for Michael to present the material he has gathered? Would a more straightforward novelistic treatment be better? The discussion at the meeting was lively and positive, and there was hope that as Several gets further into his material other paths forward may suggest themselves.

—Richard Robbins

MEMBER NEWS

Ann Harlow gave an illustrated talk on June 20th at the Berkeley Hillside Club on “Berkeley Women Artists, 1900–1920.” She retired in April from the presidency of the Berkeley Historical Society and Museum after four consecutive years in the position; now she is the board secretary, as well as the publicist, co-webmaster, office coordinator and a docent.

Jennifer Taylor, founder and editor of *East Wing Magazine*, an online publication about US first ladies, interviewed **Elizabeth Thacker-Estrada** for the article, “In Defense of Mary Lincoln.” Liz provided background information on the status of women during Mrs. Lincoln’s lifetime. Published on July 8th, the article details an interview with Lois Romano, the author of the recently published *New York Times* bestselling book *An Inconvenient Widow: The Torment, Trial, and Triumph of Mary Todd Lincoln*. Liz and IHS member Patricia Southard will be presenting the Monthly Program, “First Ladies and Women’s Rights: Mary Lincoln to Mary McElroy, 1861 to 1885” in March 2027. Mrs. McElroy was the sister of widowed president Chester Arthur.

An article by **Liz Schott**, “California’s First Incubator Baby? The Remarkable Life of Dorothy Wright Liebes” was published in the Spring issue of *Sonoma Historian*, the journal of the Sonoma County Historical Society.

Three Institute members contributed brief articles to NOTUS (News of the United States), a nonpartisan politics and policy publication, for a special semiquincentennial 4th of July forum. In responding to the question “Name a person who changed American history, but who most of us have never heard of,” **Peter Meyerhof** wrote about scholar Donald Robertson, who schooled President James Madison, the “Father of the Constitution,” in the ideas of the Scottish

Enlightenment; **Katya Miller** wrote about the *Statue of Freedom*, which stands atop the US Capitol building; and **Jody Offer** wrote about Biddy Mason, who successfully petitioned for her freedom from slavery in 1856 and became a nurse, real estate entrepreneur, philanthropist, and Church founder. The publisher is finalizing the list of contributors.

Merle Easton, former president of the Victorian Alliance and a retired architect, has joined the Institute. Raised in Sitka, Alaska, she received her BA in architecture from the University of Washington in 1966 and went on to work at numerous architectural firms in Philadelphia before heading to San Francisco in 1979 to continue her career in the Bay Area. She is currently focused on her memoir, *Full House: The Life and Times of a Gender-Breaking Architect in the 1960s–80s*, being ghost-written by IHS member, writer, and book editor Rose Marie Cleese. Merle lives in a vintage Victorian just east of the Anza Vista neighborhood.

On April 18th, **Leslie Friedman**’s latest book, *Coming Home to India: A Dancer’s Odyssey*, was launched at Stanford University’s annual “A Company of Authors” event. Her book chronicles her adventures performing throughout India on a three-month tour supported by the Fulbright Lectureship and an extension of the tour to Sri Lanka, Egypt, and Tunisia sponsored by the US State Department. Her unique dance performances, emphasizing movements, music, and expression, led every country she visited to invite her back. IHS member Peter Stansky raved, “I much enjoyed reading your book. Wonderful and insightful times in India!” For more information or to purchase a copy, go to www.livelyfoundation.org/wordpress/?p=5520.

—Rose Marie Cleese

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IN MEMORIAM

Elizabeth “Liz” Nakahara

IHS member Elizabeth “Liz” Nakahara, who passed away on January 2, 2026, will be sorely missed by the Institute’s writer’s group, with whom she shared chapters of her perceptive book, *Chasing News, Capturing History*. It was about photojournalists specializing in international, hard-news coverage and the evolution of their role over the past four decades. This work eventually grew to almost 600 pages. Over the years she interviewed more than 80 photographers, videographers, photo editors, and soundmen. Liz was born on May 14, 1950, to Peter and Aiko Nakahara. An excellent student, she graduated from James Lick High School in San Jose, got her undergraduate degree at UC Berkeley, and earned her master’s degree at the University of Kansas School of Journalism. In 1980, she was one of a select group to attend the Summer Program for Minority Journalists established by Robert Maynard, who became the first African American owner of the *Oakland Tribune*. She wrote for *The Washington Post*’s Style section and for the online magazine *The Digital Journalist*, and she studied the White House Press Corps. She traveled extensively, visiting Japan, France, Haiti, Lebanon, South Korea, Iran, Italy, and Australia. During one of these trips she met Ellen Huppert, who invited her to join the Institute. Quiet and tenacious, she’ll be remembered fondly by all who got to know her.

—Elizabeth Thacker Estrada

Mary Judith Robinson

Longtime IHS member Mary Judith Robinson, passed away on May 16, 2026, in San Francisco. She was born on April 1, 1939 in Kansas City, Missouri. She was the author of 11 books, which focused on individuals who changed the country. Her first book was *The Hearsts: An American*

Dynasty (University of Delaware, 1991). In her book, she highlighted the accomplishments of Phoebe Apperson Hearst, who financed buildings on the UC Berkeley campus; created the first women’s scholarships at a public university; and underwrote seven free kindergartens. Judith’s book *You’re in Your Mother’s Arms: The Life and Legacy of Congressman Phil Burton* (self-published, 1994) paid tribute to the man who served in the House of Representatives representing California’s 5th Congressional District from 1964 to 1983. He was a staunch environmentalist and advocate for civil rights. Before she began writing books, Judith had an exciting career as a journalist. After she graduated from UC Berkeley with a BA in English in 1961, she spent a year in Europe before heading back to San Francisco to work for Associated Press. When they offered to let her work in the library, she walked down the street to UPI, which sent her to Maine where she ended up interviewing such notables as President and Mrs. Johnson and Senator Margaret Chase Smith for the news outlet. She worked for the *National Journal* in Washington, DC, before becoming the legislative aide for Senator Gaylord Nelson (D-WI). There she played a key role in legislation concerned with biomedical research, health policies, and environmental protections. She returned to San Francisco and a job at the *San Francisco Examiner* as an editorial writer, one of few women in that position at the time. Descended from the Kip family, one of the first families to settle in New Amsterdam in the early 17th century, she was a member of the National Society of Colonial Dames of America. In 2017, she published a book about her great-great grandfather, *Gold Rush Bishop: William Ingraham Kip, First Episcopal Bishop of California and His Family* (Telegraph Hill Press)—just one more of her achievements.

—Leslie Friedman

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But AI, used thoughtfully, can be a godsend. As an historian, I've found AI to be an incredibly accurate tool. When I combine a name and a city, for instance, I will get an entire raft of possible links. Then I whittle them down to the person I am looking for. What matters most to me are references to sources, archives, libraries, or special collections that I have never heard of.

AI is also very good at foreign collections. In a newspaper article from 1910, there was a "rumor" that the escaped convict I was searching for had fled the country. Ten years ago, I was stuck with the rumor as a footnote. Today, using AI, I found the convict in Canadian archives under a variation of his name. The search cost me only time, not money. Since some of my research involves unions, I don't have the time to search for a specific member in a union that's a national union—such as the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), for instance. Instantly, AI can give me a lead on every IWW member with that name and the city where they joined the union. Then I have a starting point to look for my specific person.

As a personal note, during the First World War in Alaska, some Norwegians were hanged in Ketchikan because they wouldn't register for the draft. I had the surnames—Olson—which was not much help. But using AI, I was able to find Olsons living in senior homes in Southeast Alaska, and I sent them letters to see if they were related to the resisters. I could never have done that before AI.

You cannot stop AI. We are a technologically advancing society, whether we like it or not. It is the future. How do you deal with it? The best answer is to keep in mind the adage that technology is a dragon. If you stand and fight, you will be eaten. If you turn and run, you will be incinerated. So you ride the dragon and go where it goes.

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