

# GROTON HISTORICAL SOCIETY

## Newsletter

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Bellows Falls appraiser Andrew Katz examined this Civil War-era parade uniform, which belonged to William Peck.

## Local Historian Gives Talk at GHS in August

### *Richard Balzano speaks about 'The Precarious States of Freedom' in Northeastern Vermont*

LOUISE REYNOLDS

*"Most of you are probably aware that there was some form of slavery in Vermont. But the conventional history and popular wisdom for many years was that there was no slavery in Vermont...The Vermont constitution outlawed slavery. But the vague and uncertain terms by which Vermont's constitution abolished slavery created a space in which the roles of former—and future—people of color went undefined," Ryegate historian Richard Balzano began on August 24 at the Peter Paul House.*

*Balzano spoke to an overflow crowd of more than 100 people who came to learn about bondage—slavery, poor farms and indentured servants—as well as the town histories that obscured their existence in northeastern Vermont..*

*Balzano based his talk on an article he wrote for the Vermont Historical Society in 2022, "Informants and Artifacts: Local Histories' Representations of Bondage and the Precarious States of Freedom in Northeastern Vermont."*

*What follows is the edited version of a conversation I had with him over coffee at P&H a few weeks later. A link to the original article in Vermont History appears at the end of this article.*

**L.R:** When Deborah Jurist introduced you, she said, "As we continue to study the past and try to understand how Americans can become so dangerously divided and untrusting of each other, we learn that we must be as honest as we can be about our own past. We must understand it, apologize for the damage it might have created, accept it and always try to do better."

**From your perspective, what is the role of a historian in that endeavor?**

**R.B:** It depends on the field and the person. Some historians are propagandists; they don't conceive of the projects themselves. They're part of a larger agenda. And then a lot of us... there's sort of a social justice element to it. I look at myself as a 'detective of the past.' A lot of what I do within my specialty deals with international law and domestic law, and I try to



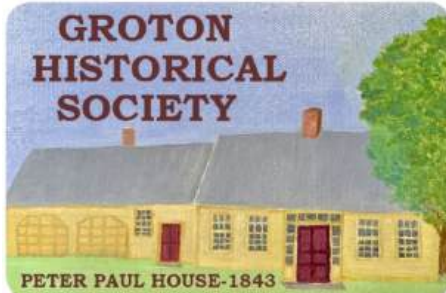
Ryegate historian Richard Balzano speaks at the annual meeting of the Groton Historical Society Aug. 24. Balzano spoke about how early town histories portrayed or obscured various conditions of servitude in northeastern Vermont.

find people breaking the rules in the past and righting wrongs. What's the endgame? You hope there's some restorative justice or some restitution, but that never comes.... For me, it's like detective work. And a lot of time it's raising consciousness and giving a voice to the past.

**Your specialty—you just described one common thread—righting wrongs, discovering untruths—what, normally, is your field of inquiry?**

That's the motivation. I'm somewhat of a hybrid of U.S. and Latin American historian. Inter-American relations and therein; modern 20th century; long 20th century, really focusing in on the Cold War. I wrote my PhD thesis on U.S.-Guatemalan oil diplomacy—petro diplomacy—in the 20th century, and the way development and oil interests intersect with human rights and U.S. foreign aid at the time. And so, all these little sub-fields I touch on—I dabble in human rights, international law, domestic human rights, foreign assistance law and the like. I've gone down the path of sanctions as well—and again, it's just trying to catch the baddies.

*Continued on p.3*



## President's Report Fall 2024

*History, unlike legend, is composed of things we understand halfway, and seek to grasp ever better.*

—Historian Timothy Snyder

The focus for the year 2024 has been updating our collection records, setting up new infrastructure to store and protect it and preparing space for new collection donations.

Thanks to one very generous anonymous gift, we began the process of creating an artifact and document vault. The basement bedroom has been upgraded for storage. There is now shelving and a dehumidifier, with archival boxes and the beginnings of a cataloging system.

A great example of this work concerns our collection of Groton Town Reports, going back to 1884. Thanks to a collaboration with the Library, a “finding tool” has been created that shows the duplication and missing issues of town reports both at the Library and the PPH. Once the catalog is finished, the GHS will possess as close as we can get to one complete set of town reports, sorted, recorded, and stored in archival boxes.

The artifact signage at the PPH continues to be updated to be more visible and complete.

A new display case for the Civil War items has been donated by a member. It's a beauty that came from Bob Somaini of the East Barre Antique Mall. He has been a dedicated supporter and member of the GHS for years!

As part of a necessary process to update the PPH insurance, we have engaged the services of an appraiser to ascertain, finally, the value of our most prized items— and perhaps uncover the value of a few things we have not considered as significant. More on that in the next issue.

**With warmth and fellowship,  
Deborah Jurist**



Thanks to a generous donation, Civil War artifacts will have a new home in this display case.



**GHS President Deborah Jurist listens to Andrew Katz, of Windham Antiques in Bellows Falls, discuss William Peck's Civil War-era uniform, one of the most popular items at the Peter Paul House. Mr. Katz, a professional appraiser, visited the PPH in October to see some of the more valuable artifacts and provide board members with a realistic valuation for insurance purposes, as well for keeping the collection accurately curated.**



**Allen Goodine and Brent Smith examine a donation of photos and documents during Fall Foliage Day Oct. 5. The Peter Paul House hosted a record turnout.**

*“Local Historian” continued*

**How much is context really important in your research? You must have to master an incredible amount of context to be able to sink roots into that portion of the subject you really research.**

So, the first year of your PhD program you are waking up before the sun comes up and you start reading and you're falling asleep with your books in your hand. You're a bad husband, you're a bad father, you're a bad everything other than absorber of information. If I could do it all again, I wouldn't choose a topic with four different sub-fields, like aid, oil, human rights and the Cold War. Luckily, I got a lot of that done in my masters, and luckily I went back to school in my mid-30's, when I had 15 years of progressive reading under my belt.

The cool thing about researching slavery in Vermont, there's not much. You've got a couple of books about slavery in New England, and then there's a small handful of scholarship—local scholarship—on the institution of slavery and bondage and poor laws in Vermont. Most of it's in *Vermont History*, the Historical Society's journal. So, getting acclimated to that topic was quite easy—quite easy when “go mode” means reading three, four books and ten articles and all of a sudden you've amassed the small body of literature on slavery in Vermont.

In that sort of historian's eye, you're sort of like, “well, obviously, there's a lot more room for scholarship here.” Historians often will leave off a journal article or a book by citing avenues for future research. And that's code for, “if I had more time or more grant money, this is what I'd like to do.” It's wide open; there's so much stuff, so much research to be done up here. I'd love the time to do more. There are some days where I kick myself, where I say, I should have done a topic like that that's not so contemporary or gruesome, like, say, genocide in the '80's.

**Did you have a grant for doing this research?**

No; it was in my master's program. I took a class on the institution of slavery, and we covered everything from slavery to the various forms of “unfree” labor. I found that fascinating. So I started my term paper for that course on the subject, and I kept working on it for a while after that, for another two years, I think.

**Why did you focus on the northeast?**

What fascinated me most about it was that this was the northern periphery of the British Empire for a stretch. That's an interesting concept in terms of frontiers and borderlands. A lot of things happen

*Continued on p.3*

*“Local Historian” continued*

against the rules on the periphery of empires.

That was one of the reasons I chose this topic. Another was that we had just moved here and I wanted to get the lay of the land geographically and historically and I figured this was a good way to do it.

I really caught the bug when the project started to unfold, and I was getting the opportunity to go to more archives, and it was fall. The air was crisp, the leaves were falling. There’s an historic aesthetic to this area—the architecture, just the rawness of the environment. And so, when you’re driving around this area, if you block out a few telephone poles and a paved driveway, you could be in the 19th century. If you’re sensitive to that, it’s real easy to catch the bug.

So, I hit the town archives. But, it turns out, the devil is in the details. There’s stuff in town archives that didn’t make its way to the state archive because it was miscatalogued. I found town warnings of certain families in the Thetford archives that were mislabeled. Alden Rollins documented all the warnings out in the state of Vermont that made their way to the state archives. I found one for a person of color that was just in the wrong section. In the fall, I really dug in and committed to the project.

**How long ago was that? Your article was published in 2022.**

Most of the physical research was done 2019-2020, and then right after the pandemic, I kind of tied up loose ends. At the very end—it’s like all project work—I got it close and then I put it at the back burner and chipped away at it a little at a time and then I submitted it for publication with VHS and I got it kicked back with feedback. I sat on it for a year and just nibbled at it bit by bit.

Some of the feedback was to include more New England historical context, just tip your hat to a few of the regional scholars. It’s what you do when you present a historiography; you sort of circle the drain to get where you are. It was a few books and maybe five sentences I added. Maybe even a footnote, I think. Then just a few corrections and it went to press.

**There are, as you mentioned, maybe five people working on this topic. Do you talk to each other?**

I talked to Harvey Amani Whitfield at the very, very beginning because he had published a book through the Vermont Historical Society that actually presented a lot of the primary documents. It was sort of like annotated primary evidence of slavery in Vermont. It’s a brilliant book.

And then there was another scholar,



**More than 100 people, many from the surrounding towns of Peacham, Ryegate, Newbury and Bradford, crowded into the garage at the Peter Paul House to listen to historian Richard Balzano. Questions and comments followed the talk.**

Elise A. Guyette; she’s out of Burlington, and she wrote her masters on communities of color in the Chittenden County area, northwestern Vermont. She was very helpful.

**What was your initial question? Do you start with a question? Is it like a hypothesis?**

There are two ways to answer that question, and they’re both interesting. When you are a graduate student, and you have forgiving mentors, you can start with a hunch, or you can change your thesis.

I am very liberal with my students when it comes to selecting topics, because to me, it seems you’re setting yourself up for some sense of disingenuous research if you have to come up with a thesis before you get to the materials. Unfortunately, a lot of the time that’s how you have to pursue funding. You have to say, “this is what I want to research; these are my materials; this is objective; this is what I’m going to find.” How do you know what you’re going to find? Unless you’re a specialist and you’re already onto something.

I kind of started very broad: I wanted to research slavery in Vermont. I’m going to keep it local: I’m looking at Ryegate, I’m looking at the town history. And I read the introduction to the town history. And there’s nothing. I’m reading the digital copy—let’s do some word searches. All of a sudden, there’s slavery. But it’s buried in the back of the book. Why is that? That’s my first hunch: why is it buried in the back of the book? Happens to belong to the prominent Witherspoon

family... I have some suspicion. Then I start poking around some of these other digital sources and doing the same thing. And that’s when the methodology sort of hit: I can canvass a large area. Let me stick to this frontier as it expands northward, this pocket of Vermont that’s not yet even Vermont—it’s not yet anything.

I did some reading into this genre [town history], about the genre, and how it treats people of color. I was fascinated by them. They’re primary sources now, but then they were commissioned works.

And so you look at a commissioned work—who are they protecting, what’s the motive. That’s sort of where the idea originated, that there might be some bias here. I don’t know if it’s integrity to bury it in the back of the book, if it’s purely circumstantial that they just found the information out later on—because they printed them in stages, and it’s sort of irreversible at that point.

You don’t make a correction on page 200 and say, “On page 30 we goofed up.” That explains some of it, but at the end of the day you have these people disclosing sensitive information buried in the book. So I want to believe that these people were altruistic and they were doing it with integrity.

Once I started reading about the genre, my idea is, how did Vermont—in particular, my little area of Vermont—how did we fare against the rest of the genre? It turns out, for the most part, kind of par. The omissions of people of color, of communities of color, set off some alarm bells.

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**“Local Historian”** *continued*

Okay, so there are people of color here. Where are they? Well, they’re not in the books. And if they’re of Indian descent, they’re not in the census record until the 1800’s; I want to say 1830’s, but I don’t remember off the top of my head. Where are they? They’re in the town warnings. So, this is my idea on how you find people of color. You have to look at the warnings.

So you go to Rollins’ catalogue of all the town warnings and you check them with the town and you cross-reference those with the census. They list their race on the census. They’re warning out Black families. When you look at other people who are warned out, who are not in the census, they’re either families of Indian descent or they were warned to another town. You have to scan the census.

When you immerse yourself in the census of this area in the 1700’s and early 1800’s you begin to know every family name—there’s not a lot of them.

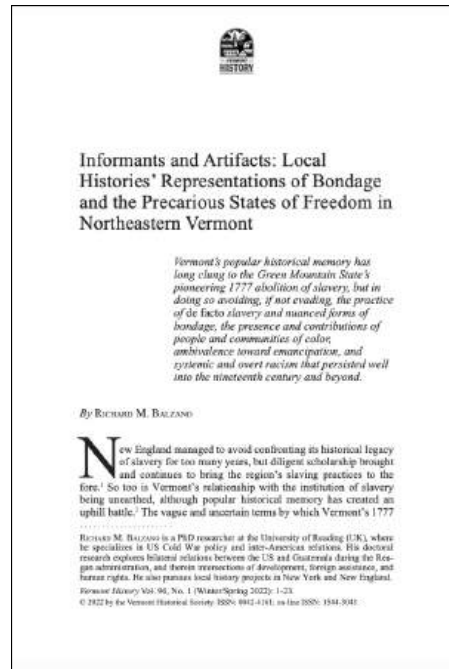
You get a feel for, “okay; this family gets warned out of Thetford or wherever, and there’s no record of where they’ve gone. They could have got to Portsmouth, New Hampshire, but I’m not going to look at Portsmouth. They also might be in a community of color. It’s a hint, it’s a lead; it’s something to pursue for future research, certainly. Give me five grad students and I’ll figure it out.

**What’s the fine line for drawing a conclusion? Because at the end of your work you write, “These examples are absent from the town’s narrative and obscured in later pages, prompting suspicions of evasiveness. Although the physical stages of the printing process are in play, the only concrete conclusion is the active obscuring of slavery in later pages is at the very least, systemic.” Is there a line for you between, “here’s all the evidence and I’m comfortable drawing a conclusion?” Or...?**

The only concrete conclusion at that point is reaching the end of my line and having further questions. It’s okay to reach that point, to hand off the baton. It’s okay to carry the torch and run out of gas. I don’t have a definitive answer.

I looked in Well’s notes in the Ryegate Historical Society and I couldn’t find anything, but... The skeptics will say you can’t draw those conclusions without evidence; the progressives will ask why are we giving people the benefit of the doubt? When you have two accounts say that people were servants and two accounts say they were slaves, why are we giving people the benefit of the doubt?

To me, the fact that half the community still thought they were servants and half



the community thought they were slaves? That to me says a lot about, at the very least, about Black labor. That you can’t tell the difference, that’s the real story, I think.

**That’s the interesting part: the “precarious state of freedom” if you were poor. And it didn’t take much to be poor—one accident away.**

Yeah; town warnings—what a cruel riddle. In a nation of immigrants, you can’t go to the parents of your birth, which is what British law demanded, so they devise whose responsibility it is—and they’re just sort of hot potato-ing social responsibility. It’s not very welcoming.

**What’s the general reaction been to your findings?**

It’s been interesting. The only people that read it seem to agree with it. You have either people that say “It doesn’t surprise me” or you have people that say “I have some information for you.” I would imagine the people that are not inclined to read it might not be so agreeable.

I’ll give you an example. In 2022, right around the time this came out. Right around the time when Vermont amended the constitution to remove the verbiage that allowed slavery to persist, which, on the one hand is a remorseful gesture; it’s well intended. On the other hand, if you really want to do something, let’s talk restitution. Let’s talk restorative justice. Let the descendants of former slaves in the state of Vermont, wherever they may be, go to UVM for free. Do something about it. That’s when the conversation gets quiet.

I read an op ed in the *New Haven Regi-*

*ster*. It was a former teacher from Vermont kind of grumbling about these new revisionists trying to change the law, when there had never been slavery in Vermont. And that people were just virtue signaling, trying to make a fuss.

It’s amazing how people can be presented with facts, with bodies of evidence, and just say ‘I like my belief better.’ It’s a very American tradition. It reminds me of the power of myth, of origin stories. We’re up against that in every field of history.

**Have you given your talk anywhere else?**

I’ve given a talk on the subject at Utica University in New York for Black History month last year. I did something similar in the U.K., a digital conference during Covid.

**What are you working on now?**

I have a lot of irons in the fire right now. I’m prepping my PhD dissertation to pitch it as a manuscript. I’ll nip at that for the next year. I’ll receive my doctorate from the University of Reading in the U.K....

I’m doing that, and I’ve got a paper on Reagan and human rights, which I’m going to shop with a couple of different journals, human rights journals; Latin American human rights journals in particular. Where it finds a home, where it’s valued, is going to determine where it’s published. It might be broad human rights; it might just be a Latin American one. The paper is written; it just needs to find a home.

I’ve taken one of my PhD chapters and I’m turning that into a paper. I’ve done two workshops for it—feedback workshops—one at the Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations, and then the other was an energy history group. This is the post-PhD rush where all of the research you’ve done that didn’t quite make it in, you can kind of unload on the journals and get your name out there if you’re not all burned out yet.

And then the folks in Peacham said that they’ve got some information. They’ve already done the research, which sounds great, so if there’s anything in there... They have good information; there might be a follow-up article in that. And I’m teaching four courses this term. So, that’s a lot.

***If you’d like to read Richard Balzano’s article in Vermont History, the journal of the Vermont Historical Society, you can find it at this link:***

[https://vermonthistory.org/journal/90/VH90\\_01\\_InformantsAndArtifacts.pdf](https://vermonthistory.org/journal/90/VH90_01_InformantsAndArtifacts.pdf)

## Groton Historical Society 2023-2024 Members

Members should have received the annual membership reminder in the mail in mid-November. If you're not a GHS member, please consider becoming one. Our events have been informative, interesting and well attended. Our membership is growing!

If you've renewed your annual membership already, thank you very much. Your commitment supports our activities for the following year. If you upgraded to a lifetime membership, many thanks. Your commitment helps to sustain our work of preserving our historical past and educating for the future. Please consider including us in your year-end giving.

To all of you, we appreciate your support!

With gratitude,  
Deborah Jurist

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\*Indicates lifetime membership



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178 members strong and growing!

**Groton Historical Society**  
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