

Disability History Association Podcast
Interview with Laurel Daen
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Caroline: Hello and welcome to another episode of the Disability History Association Podcast. My name is Caroline Lieffers and it's my pleasure today to be chatting with Laurel Daen. Laurel earned her PhD in History from William and Mary and she's now working as a National Endowment for the Humanities Postdoctoral Fellow at the Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture. Her article, which is entitled "Martha Ann Honeywell: Art, Performance, and Disability in the Early Republic" was recently published in the *Journal of the Early Republic*, and it also won the Disability History Association's article prize. Laurel, congratulations on your award, and thank you so much for making time for me today.

Laurel: I'm so happy to be here.

Caroline: Great! So tell me a little bit about your research interests and how you got involved in disability history.

Laurel: So, I'm a historian of early America and I tend to focus on the revolutionary and early national periods, so from about 1775 to 1840. When I began graduate school I was planning to focus on the history of women and gender and the history of art and material culture. These are still really important themes in my work, but my first research project—which I discovered just days after beginning graduate school—was about Martha Ann Honeywell, who we're talking about today. And it was actually through researching Honeywell and thinking about her experiences and the world that she lived in that I began to focus on disability. I started reading extensively in disability studies, disability history, and I found myself really compelled, you know, intellectually conceptually, personally, professionally—on all these different levels—about the subject matter. And it sort of went from there. I guess the, the thread in my work so far has been a commitment to bringing disability studies and disability history to an audience of early Americanists—so historians of early America more generally—and also bringing the study of early America to disability scholars and historians, many of whom focus on later periods.

Caroline: Those are really important goals. So, I mean, the question everybody is asking: who is this Martha Ann Honeywell person?

Laurel: Yeah, so Martha Ann Honeywell was born in 1786 to Gilbert and Martha Honeywell of Westchester, New York. She was one of six children. Shortly after her birth her parents moved the family from Westchester to New York City and they opened a fruit store. From birth, Martha Ann had a really unusual body. She was born with short arms that extended just halfway between her shoulders and would-be elbows, and she had no fingers or hands. She was also born with short legs, only one of which had a small foot with three toes. According to a nineteenth-century reviewer, when Martha Ann was a child her body attracted a lot of attention. So apparently hundreds of people—particularly young people—were going to her parents' fruit store under the pretenses of purchasing fruit, but actually for the purposes of seeing her body. And it was because of this attention that her parents first got the idea that this type of exhibition would, could be a way for her to support herself after they passed away.

And so in 1798 at the age of twelve, Martha Ann began to perform her unique disabilities and abilities at the American Museum in downtown Manhattan. This first exhibition launched a lifelong

career in art and performance for Honeywell. Soon she transformed her shows to focus primarily on her visual art. So she developed incredible skills in diverse media—papercutting, waxwork, miniature writing, needlework, and cut-and-paste silhouettes. Just to give one example of her work: one of her most famous types of pieces was writing the Lord's Prayer in the size of a dime and then encasing it in intricate cutwork.

Caroline: That's amazing.

Laurel: I know! So soon after this, kind of, these early performances, Honeywell also began to travel, to sell her artwork. And she conducted shows in other cities and countries. By the time of her death in 1856 at the—you know, she'd been traveling nearly continuously for 58 years, and she had exhibited in five countries and over thirty-two American cities.

Caroline: Wow.

Laurel: Yeah, and you know, perhaps most importantly, you know, after those early shows, Honeywell also soon took full ownership and directorship of her shows. Until about 1810 her mother traveled with her and seemed to be the one who was managing her performances and finances. After that date, when Honeywell went to England, she managed her artwork and her exhibitions independently. So really for the majority of her life she retained exclusive control over her artistic style, her shows, her, her, you know, artwork, her travel, and her, her profits.

Caroline: She sounds like an incredible person. So talk me through what it might have been like to visit one of Martha's exhibits. So how did she set them up, and then what was the visitor experience like?

Laurel: Yeah, absolutely. So she did a couple things. So sometimes she worked with existing museums, so she partnered with museums—you know, perhaps most famously the Peale museums in Philadelphia and Baltimore and New York, the Columbian Museum in Boston, but she also and perhaps more frequently set up her own shows which she called "Splendid Galleries of Cutting and Needlework."

Caroline: Oh wow!

Laurel: Oh yeah, I know. It's awesome. So when, when she would arrive in a town she'd usually rent out a room or maybe two at a boarding house or an inn, and then she would advertise really prolifically that her gallery was open for business. So customers would come and she usually had arranged the space so that they would first walk into an area where her artwork was displayed for sale, and then they would walk into a second area or a second room where they could see her create her artwork, and then also sit for their own customized silhouettes. Patrons describe that within seconds she would cut their profile out of black paper, paste it onto a white backdrop, sometimes adorn it with gold or silver ink, and then she would add her signature—usually something like, you know, "done without hands by Martha Ann Honeywell." And sometimes customers' price of admission would include these customized silhouettes, other times they paid for them separately, as they did her other artwork that was for sale.

Caroline: So interesting. How did you personally find out about her?

Laurel: Yeah. So I found out about her, you know, within the first couple days of graduate school. I was working as an apprentice in the Prints, Maps, and Paintings Collection and Department at Colonial Williamsburg. I had been assigned a list of itinerant artists to research, and I remember when I put Honeywell's name in search engines like "America's Historical Newspapers" I got

hundreds and hundreds of hits of her, you know, advertising her shows and also people, people writing about their experiences. For the other artists that I was researching, you know, I would only get a couple of hits, maybe even no hits. **[Caroline: Yeah]** So I was immediately, like, totally fascinated by Honeywell's story and then I, I remember being, I was really taken a couple of weeks later when I had the opportunity to see her artwork. And there's a piece that Colonial Williamsburg holds, and it's, it's really incredible. Honeywell had cut the words and letters of the Lord's Prayer out—in script—out of paper in about a four-inch diameter and then she encased that in really ornamental cutwork of trees and flowers and it's this really amazing piece. And after that I was really hooked and wanted to learn a lot more about her.

Caroline: Oh my gosh. So that piece is at Colonial Williamsburg. How much of her other artwork survives? Are there things in other collections?

Laurel: Yeah, so actually quite a lot survives. Surprisingly, you know, miniature artwork—it's small, it's tiny. **[Caroline: Yeah]** It tends to get lost. A lot of Honeywell's pieces are really, you know, one inch by one inch, or two inches by two inches, so it's just amazing that any of it survives. And I think it's—the fact that a lot of it does actually is a real testament to how much people [coughs] excuse me valued and saved her work. So, so far I've tracked down about a hundred and thirty of her artworks in museums, archives across the United States and in England. Really, more pieces pop up every day, or you know every few days in online archives or auction sites, museum catalogs. And I think there really are a lot more pieces out there that have not been identified yet. You know, when I was researching for this project I'd go into these small historical societies and museums. I thought that they just had one or two of Honeywell's works. And, you know, when I would get in there and start asking around, I would find that there was five or six or eight more of her pieces that hadn't yet been identified or cataloged. So there's a lot out there.

Caroline: Wow, it's kind of an unfolding story. Let's talk a little bit about some of the gender aspects of Martha's work. And you have this lovely turn of phrase when you say that Honeywell mastered quote “dual strategies of the spectacular and the conventional.” Tell us what that means.

Laurel: Yeah, so in the article I thought a lot about how Honeywell could have sustained her artistic career for nearly 60 years. So how did this very atypically-bodied woman from a relatively poor family and early nineteenth-century New York, you know, how did she attract customers, manage their expectations of disability and femininity, and ultimately obtain their personal and financial support? I mean, remember this was a time when the vast majority of women and all married women couldn't own property or retain the earnings of their labors. It was a time when it was inappropriate and disrespectful for a woman to exhibit herself in public. And it was a time when there were really major restrictions being imposed on people with disabilities, so people with cognitive impairments were increasingly being sent to asylums, people with physical impairments were increasingly subjected to, to fixing or to trying to cure their bodies through medicine administered by physicians.

So, you know, in the article when I talked about those dual strategies of the spectacular and the conventional I was suggesting that Honeywell sustained her career in, in this environment in two primary ways. First she highlighted her uniqueness, her atypical body, her position as a woman artist, her incredible artistic skills. And highlighting her uniqueness was a way for her to attract customers and pique their interest. Second, a second strategy at the same time, was that Honeywell facilitated her career by highlighting aspects of her body and self that aligned with her patrons' expectations for gender and the body. And this second strategy was a way for Honeywell to alleviate her customers' fears and make them feel comfortable attending her shows. So actually a lot of customers expressed a lot of fear about visiting Honeywell, and so she would do things like hang her own silhouette at the door to her exhibitions as a way to convince them, you know, that there

wasn't anything disagreeable about her presence. And so in the end, I felt like it was Honeywell's ability both to stimulate her customers' curiosity and then also assuage their anxieties and alleviate their fears that sustained her very successful career.

Caroline: So interesting. So this sort of miniature artwork was really trendy at the time, right? So she's kind of tapping into like an existing feminine craft culture. Is that part of what's happening?

Laurel: Absolutely, right. So she is choosing artwork specifically that is appropriate, well, one, that her customers want, right, because they certainly want this miniature artwork to put into scrapbooks and to hang on parlor walls. But she's also tapping into artwork that is specifically appropriate for women at the time, right. So women are doing this kind of needlework, these craft-like objects, they're doing miniature art, and Honeywell uses this as a way to make her artwork appealing and also sort of more respectable to her audiences, right? So, you know, men would be more likely to do sign painting or historical paintings, kind of other larger work, but she tended to, to move towards the miniature, miniature approach because it was one, appealing to customers and two, it helped fit her in this, in this feminine tradition of these types of crafts.

Caroline: She's so savvy. She knows exactly what she's doing. [Both laugh]

Laurel: Exactly.

Caroline: And on the topic of her being really savvy, you also talk about how she kind of manages her audiences' gazes. And for me this is one of the most interesting parts of your article. So tell us about how she would kind of control the audiences' experience and their impressions of her.

Laurel: Yeah, so in the article I argued that an example of those kind of dual strategies of the spectacular and the conventional that we talked about before, that this kind of approach can be seen in the actual practices of her visual art. So patrons went to her exhibitions primarily to look at her, right? They wanted to see her incredible ability to make this miniature artwork with what appeared to be her really significantly physically disabled body.

But I also think that Honeywell created moments during her shows in which she redirected her customers' gazes and gave herself the opportunity to look back at them. So when they turned to have their silhouettes done, she had the opportunity to stare at them and assert control over the visual dynamics of the room. In the article I also suggested that this staring back strategy went even a step further. I argued that following artistic conventions that, sort of, confined these silhouettes to bust-size, Honeywell, literally in paper and then maybe more figuratively, excised—she cut off the arms and the limbs of her patrons and in their profiles and made them look a bit more like her. So these strategies of manipulating her customers' gazes and then even maybe dismembering or disabling her customers in her creative work—I think this can help us understand how Honeywell built her career. She accommodated patrons by attracting their attention and alleviating their fears, but ultimately capitalized on their interest and their financial support to earn her living as a disabled woman artist.

Caroline: Let's talk a little bit more about this incredible ability that she had to kind of promote herself as well. What is this about her and John Quincy Adams? You hint at this in your article. It sounds like a great story. [Laughs]

Laurel: Yeah, totally. So she is—you're right she is this masterful promoter of her own work. So she would extensively advertise, you know, and actually I found probably over, almost 250 advertisements over the course of my searching, many of which were published multiple times, so she's advertising a ton. But another way that she publicized herself was by reaching out to and then

performing for famous people. So when she was in England in the eighteen-teens she performs for Queen Charlotte, Princess Elizabeth, and Prince William, and then a bunch of other nobility while she was in Bath. And then back in the United States in the late 1820s she reaches out to John Quincy Adams and she sends him a letter, and she encloses a piece of cutwork in it. The letter said something like “this cutwork is an acknowledgement of your preeminence in talent and virtue.” And then “a specimen of necessity, of what necessity and perseverance can effect.” So she’s kind of appealing, appealing to him through this letter. And then she also, you know, mentions in her advertisements afterwards that she is then patronized by all these famous people, and so this, kind of, helps promote her, promote her shows and suggests that, you know, her work is held in all these famous peoples’ collections.

Caroline: I feel like I should be calling her Martha instead of Honeywell, because I feel like I know her so intimately [Laurel laughs] you’re describing her so vividly—it’s really wonderful. Tell me about the public response to her. I, I can imagine any number of directions that the public might go in their kind of perceptions of Honeywell. So tell me more about this.

Laurel: Yeah, so, so overall it was really positive. Honeywell was visited by a wide variety of people, especially members of this new and emerging American middle class, right? So she’s mostly frequented by merchants and lawyers and artisans, wealthy farmers, and together with their wives and their children. She’s visited by ministers of all these different faiths. She’s visited by physicians who attempt to understand her body and her skills using contemporary medical theories. Most of Honeywell’s customers were white but she also—her advertisements and reviews were often published in African-American and Native American newspapers. So it suggests that she may have had some, some appeal among members of these communities too. And really, by and large, people loved her artwork and exhibitions. They wrote poems and acrostics to her. They collected her samples in their diaries, they published rave reviews in newspapers and magazines. Many people even went so far as to say that she was a model of femininity and American citizenship. So despite the ways that her body and career defied conventional, you know, conventions of femininity and respectability, many people argued that she was the perfect American woman and citizen. They commented on her beauty, her modesty, her accomplishments, and they especially praised her ability to transform herself from what they described as a helpless being into a productive citizen that was contributing to her community and to the nation. So actually for many people Honeywell sort of embodied the American dream.

Stepping back and thinking about, you know, questions of gender and disability in this period of American history, I think there are really important takeaways from these types of reviews. In one sense it’s really amazing to see audience members placing a significantly physically disabled, unmarried, itinerant, very accomplished woman artist and performer at the heart of their conceptions of American national identity, right? So these patrons are saying that Honeywell epitomized the values they believed to be most fundamental to the nation. At the same time I think we can see the limited and less accommodating natures, nature of this, of these claims. So, you know, in the end it was Honeywell’s capacity to overcome or to, to correct for her impairments that these customers were especially impressed by. And I think this type of thinking ultimately affirmed able-bodiedness as a prerequisite for American citizenship.

Caroline: Yeah. I will go back to some of those questions about, kind of, the Early Republic in a moment, but I do want to also ask, how does Honeywell’s experience compare to the nineteenth-century freak show experiences that many disability scholars have written about? How does Honeywell’s experience compare to that?

Laurel: Yeah, sure. So I think initially you know there were a lot of parallels between Honeywell’s experiences and those of, of quote “freaks” who worked later in the nineteenth century. When

Honeywell first started performing at the American Museum in downtown Manhattan, she showed customers how she could complete ordinary activities like eating or reading with her extraordinary body. She, you know, performed surrounded by wax figures, exotic artifacts. And her mother also had a big role in managing these early shows, somewhat in, in the manner of a showman. But yet, you know, very quickly in Honeywell's career her experiences transformed and ended up being quite different, I think, from people who worked as freaks. So, you know, rather than having her exhibitions managed by others, soon she gained complete control over her finances, her artistic style, her travel exhibition schedule. She started setting up her own "Splendid Galleries" rather than working in sideshow-type fairs or museums. And, you know, she really styled herself as a visual artist. So absolutely some of the attraction of her shows depended on the apparent juxtaposition between her artistic skills and her physical impairments, right? So, you know, patrons were going to see this—what was a kind of a surprising, surprising juxtaposition between ability and disability. But still, you know, for most of her career she wasn't performing typical activities with her atypical body. She was actually showing artistic techniques and works that would have been impressive regardless of, of her physical form. I really think first and foremost she was a visual artist who was super savvy. She capitalized on all her opportunities and options for commercial success.

Caroline: Let's dig into this world of the Early Republic a little bit more, too. So what does Honeywell's experience kind of tell us about what was going on in the social and economic and business world of the Early Republic?

Laurel: Yeah, great question. So her artistic career was really made possible by the particular commercial and social world of the early nineteenth century. Developments in transportation allowed her to travel, bring her artwork to new markets. Advancements in print culture allowed her advertise her shows when she arrived in a town. And, you know, it was really the emerging American middle class during this period who valued things like art, and they had cash to spend on leisure activities. These people formed her primary consumer base. So in many ways Honeywell was really a product of the early nineteenth century and she really couldn't have had the career that she did in an earlier period. I also think it's less likely that she could have had the same type of career in a later period. Towards the mid-nineteenth century the world of museums and freak shows that we talked about before, it became increasingly organized and institutionalized, right, so Barnum's museum starts in 1841. He hires a lot of individuals who look like Honeywell to perform at his establishments. This is a very different gig than what Honeywell is doing, you know, Barnum orchestrated the shows of people who performed as freaks. He emphasized performance over visual art. And he also took significant cuts of the profits, right? So Honeywell worked at a really unique time when she was both able to take advantage of new social and commercial opportunities in the early nineteenth century, and, you know, she could still exercise her autonomy.

Caroline: Fascinating. With regard to this autonomy—she was in control of her shows, but she didn't always work alone, right?

Laurel: Yeah, no, right. So she absolutely would partner with other artists and performers and did many times over the course of her career. So in 1807-1808, she exhibited with an artist named Sarah Rogers and who—Sarah Rogers painted and did these beautiful watercolor pictures of flowers and birds and she also lacked the use of her arms and hands. While in London, Honeywell exhibited with a woman named Sarah Biffin who was also born without arms and hands and was this incredible portrait painter. And then in 1820s while in Dublin, Honeywell exhibited with some, two giantesses in sort of a sideshow-type of arrangement, right. So she absolutely collaborated with other artists and performers both in sort of more museum and, you know, leaning towards a freak show context, but also other artists who were doing similar things—who were travelling around the United States and around Europe performing their abilities and disabilities and selling this really incredible artwork.

Caroline: So regarding this—both this entrepreneurialism but also these other disabled performers who are kind of moving in Martha Honeywell’s circles—what kind of generalizations can we or, sort of, should we make about Martha Honeywell—you know, how does she compare to other women of the period? And also how does she compare to other disabled performers? It’s a big question but I hope you can answer it. [Both laugh]

Laurel: Yeah, in many ways Honeywell is just not typical, right? I mean she is an—she’s a celebrity. She’s an acclaimed artist. She spends almost all of her life on the road traveling from town to town, exhibiting across five countries. Also, you know, she never married. We talked about her—whether she’s typical for a woman. You know, she never married and she never had any children. I will say that there is this sort of—a news story, and I don’t really know whether to trust it—but there was a news story, while she was exhibiting in Dublin in the 1820s, that Honeywell was proposed to her by a customer who placed a ring on one of her toes. You know, I quickly, when I read this I quickly sort of dismissed it as perhaps a sensational story or a crude joke. But actually Honeywell did wear a gold and pearl ring on her toes for the remainder of her life. So there is, kind of, the slight possibility that she married for a brief period of time, but really, either way, whether she accepted that proposal or not, Honeywell sort of embraced this life of singlehood, I think largely to retain control of her earnings and protect her career as an artist. And so, you know, in that way and in many others Honeywell was pretty atypical. That said, as I mentioned before, there are these other artists and performers with significant physical disabilities who are traveling around the United States and around Europe and really even around the world during this period, making careers as visual artists and performers, and many of them are doing that before the, the increasing organization and institutionalization of freak shows, and so they’re doing that and maintaining control of their own finances and profits and travel schedules and artistic styles, et cetera. And so I think Honeywell is—can still be understood as part of this larger world of, of physically disabled but also incredibly abled artists who are making livings for themselves in the early nineteenth century.

Caroline: That’s interesting. I threw you a huge question—thank you so much. So if people want to learn more—like I do—about Martha Honeywell who I—I should call her Honeywell but I just want to call her Martha because I feel like I know her [Laurel laughs]—they should obviously read your article which is beautifully done, it’s an exquisite article. But where else can they find out about her?

Laurel: Yeah. Well, I would start by Googling her because there are so many of her pieces that have been digitized and are freely available online. And I think it’s really the best way to learn about her is just to see her work and get a sense of incredible artistic range. So I’m thinking of pieces right now—there’s, there’s one at the Smithsonian, and there’s another one at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. And I think just checking these pieces out is a great way to get started by—to learn about her life and her career. And, yeah, you can just Google it.

Caroline: That’s great. One last question if you don’t mind. Was your research on Honeywell part of a larger project? I mean, how does this fit into what you’re currently working on?

Laurel: Yeah. So I guess it’s most accurate to say that my research on Honeywell launched a number of other projects about disability in early America. So I’ve published other articles on Revolutionary War invalid pensioners. I, I worked on poor relief for homeless and disabled people in the eighteenth century, and I’ve also worked a bit on inventors who, you know, had physical impairments and then created products and marketed them towards, towards others with similar capabilities. So, yeah, and I actually have another forthcoming article that provides an overview of scholarship to date on early American disability. But I guess most importantly I’m writing a book

about disability in early North America. I found that concepts of ability and disability informed the earliest legal codes, the earliest administrative and social structures in the colonies. But the book focuses specifically on the early national period. This is a moment when disability becomes increasingly bureaucratized and medicalized. So in the book I look at, you know, things like how the federal government started to issue pensions to veterans, states providing scholarships for deaf and blind children to go to school, how Americans joined mutual aid societies which dispensed disability benefits in growing numbers, and also how courts started to enforce and more stringently enforce restrictions such as the inability to marry or the inability to vote on people with intellectual impairments. So in these various arenas I find that questions continually emerged about what counted as disability, who qualified for these pensions, who qualified for these restrictions. And so the book traces these heated debates, showing how governmental and community authorities worked to resolve them by reformulating disability as a medical category. And I argue that this development had really significant consequences not only for the construct of disability, but also for American state-building, medical professionalization, and the rights and opportunities of disabled people.

Caroline: Wow, that sounds like a really important project. And I can't wait to read it, if I'm not putting too much pressure on you. [Both laugh]

Laurel: Thanks!

Caroline: Well, thank you so much, Laurel, for your time, for your expertise. It was wonderful to talk to you today and to learn more about Martha Honeywell, so thank you.

Laurel: Oh no, you're welcome, I enjoyed it.

Caroline: Thanks to everyone out there for listening or reading the transcript. Please join us again next time! Bye bye!

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