

## Disability History Association Podcast

Interview with Nicole Belolan

January 2021

**[Intro music:** Easygoing by Nicolai Heidlas Music | <https://www.hooksounds.com> | Creative Commons – Attribution 4.0 International]

**Caroline Lieffers:** Hello and welcome to another episode of the Disability History Association Podcast. I'm Caroline Lieffers,

**Kelsey Henry:** And I'm Kelsey Henry

**Caroline:** And today it's our pleasure to be talking to Nicole Belolan, Public Historian in residence at the Mid-Atlantic Regional Center for the Humanities, aka MARCH, at Rutgers University Camden. Nicole, thank you so much for joining us today.

**Nicole Belolan:** Thanks for having me.

**Kelsey:** So Nicole, on your website, you describe yourself as a historian of the material culture of disability in early America. We'd love to hear you talk about what was your path, your journey, to becoming a specialist in this field.

**Nicole:** Thanks so much for that question, Kelsey. I think it started when I started grad school in 2007 at the Winterthur Program for American Material Culture at the University of Delaware. Which, for those who aren't familiar with the program, is a very object-based program, interdisciplinary program, that terminates in a Master's degree. And people who graduate from there, many become curators, some go into the auction field, some go on to get PhDs in History, Art History, other disciplines, so the path afterward varies. And, but the defining thread is the study of material culture, the study of history and other fields through material culture. And there are two projects there that I think really got me interested in disability history. When I started them, I had never heard of disability history. I was not writing the word disability, but that's, I think, what I was writing about. So the first project was a series of papers I had to write when I first started the program. When you get to the program we got this list of artifacts—everybody had to choose one. It was very dramatic who would choose what (laughs). And then you had to write a series of papers about them. You would write about their— you would describe them—you would write about their practical function, you would write about their social meaning. You would write about when these objects came into being in the first place, when people first started making them and using them, but then also when people stopped making them and using them. The object I chose was a close stool. Are you guys familiar with what a close stool is?

**Kelsey:** I'm not.

**Caroline:** Yeah, you'd better explain.

**Nicole:** Absolutely, so they can take many different forms, but the one I was looking at looks like a wooden chest of drawers, and it's made of mahogany. It was made around 1800. And on the top, it has this cabinet you can open, so there are two sides and they have—I think it actually had a key. And on the bottom there were three false drawers. And if you opened up the cabinet and then flipped the lid up, you would see a hole. And below that hole, you would have a chamber pot. So it's a toilet. A very fancy toilet, looked great in a fancy, rich person's bedroom. And so as I started researching this artifact, my professor and later, who became my dissertation advisor, Kasey Grier said, "You should really look at

Elizabeth Drinker's diary." And for those who aren't familiar with Elizabeth Drinker, she lived in Philadelphia, mid to late 18th century and early 19th century. She wrote almost every day for many years of her life, and her diary is published as a giant three volume tome that you can get if you want the hard copy. It's also available through a proprietary service and available for keyword searching, which is helpful (laughs). Although it's always best to read the whole thing, if you can.

And there was one section where she, very poignantly, wrote about the illness of one of her family members and how she helped that person up to the stool, up to the close stool. And so I started thinking a little bit about chronic illness and objects. And then fast forward to my thesis—you have to write a thesis for this particular program—I left the land of close stools, but I started researching this woman named Ann Warder, who lived in Philadelphia from 1824 to 1866. And I was researching these little needlework patterns that she had, that she kept, and wrote her name on the back of many of them. She sent them to people and she made needlework objects, like shoes and suspenders. And this type of needlework was called Berlin work. For those who aren't familiar with Berlin work, it's this pictorial form of embroidery. People publish patterns and you could make things out of them, like shoes and suspenders, as I just mentioned. And lots of people today, lots of collectors, don't like it, they think it's ugly, and people in the period didn't like it either. They—sometimes people also thought it was ugly. But to me, it seemed like, "Wow, this seems really important, though, because this woman saved all of these patterns and she was sending them to friends and family." And it turned out that Ann Warder was chronically ill most of her life, and one of the reasons she was doing this is because it helped her stay in touch with friends of family when she was stuck at home. I wrote about this in my thesis and then had that published into an article for *Winterthur Portfolio*, if you want to check it out. Both these projects were about chronic illness and disability, but those weren't necessarily the words I was using. And so because of the Ann Warder project and the close stool project, I started thinking more along those lines, and then learned about disability studies and disability history and wanted to learn more about objects people used to live with and manage disability. And here we are.

**Caroline:** That's incredible, thank you so much, Nicole. What a wonderful sort of journey to get to this point. We'd also love to talk about one of your more recent publications, "The Material Culture of Gout in Early America." And this recently appeared in the collection *Making Disability Modern*. And I guess for full disclosure, I should say I also have a chapter in the collection, but Nicole's is the one that you should all be reading. So, nowadays we understand gout as an accumulation of uric acid crystals in the joints, which can cause very painful swelling, but how did people in early America understand gout?

**Nicole:** In early America, people understood gout as something that was super painful. They thought of it as a condition perhaps brought on by diet, perhaps brought on by other factors. It was a little mysterious. The hallmarks were excruciating pain and swollen joints, especially in the extremities. And this was also an era when people thought of the body as a system with a bunch of humors in it that needed to be balanced in some way, and some people thought that maybe if you got gout that was your body's way of trying to flush out bad stuff. I think the bottom line is that people thought of it as extremely painful and disruptive.

**Caroline:** And what were some of the treatments for gout in early America?

**Nicole:** If you look in textual evidence from the period relating to treatments for gout, it really ran the gamut. People were suggesting all sorts of things, everything from milk diets to opium. I mean, it just, it really varied. And I think you could go to any five sources and

probably get five different suggestions as to what to do about it. Because you couldn't cure it, because it didn't seem to be killing a bunch of people per se, it was something that had to be lived with and managed in some way, and that's where the objects came in, and therefore my special interest and expertise.

**Kelsey:** Yeah, it's so fascinating to think about these objects themselves as being therapeutic—therapeutic tools. I wanted to go back to something that you were saying about how people in early America understood gout. And you said that some people thought it was brought on by diet, so perhaps there were lifestyle factors, which of course brings me to this question about causation and stigma. So it must have been common, but was it also stigmatized?

**Nicole:** It was absolutely stigmatized. I think one of the richest sources we have related to that would be the satires of the period. And so for people out there who are teaching, for example, and want to use this in the classroom, I think satires are a great source for that, Yale in particular. The Walpole Library has a great—as many of you might know—selection of digitized satires from the 18th and 19th century. One of my favorite quotations in the article about gout I have is from Benjamin Rush. And Benjamin Rush was a famous doctor in the period, white guy who wrote a lot about his expertise, and he wrote something to the effect of, and I'm paraphrasing here, that, "Alright, everyone, guys, we need to get it together, please stop drinking too much and please stop eating too much, because if you're stuck at home, we cannot make this new country." So it was very much a topic of conversation. I think the two most famous people in the period who had gout would have been William Pitt, who supported the colonists a lot, from Britain. And then Benjamin Franklin, who David Waldstreicher writes about his gout experience in—Benjamin Franklin's gout experience—in *Artificial Parts, Practical Lives*, that great volume many of us are familiar with.

Another note I wanted to say about stigma. Lukens was actually asked to leave the Quaker community because of "an intemperance of drinking," and I would bet money on the fact that that was related to his gout in some way. So it's one of those—to go back to the stigma, but also what caused gout historically and today—it's like a lot of diseases where sometimes it's part genetics, I think, sometimes it's part behavior. It really varies. But because it seemed to be related to behavior in the period, rich people who got it were particularly stigmatized. Today, *The New York Times* writes an article every few years about gout. And they usually write about how, "Wow, it's so common, we thought this was only this disease of the past and only kings got it." But in fact, women got it, too, and so did poor people, which is a really interesting component to that story.

**Caroline:** That's really interesting. Yeah, I think to some extent it's still kind of stigmatized today for those same associations with over-indulgence and so forth. So it's really interesting to sort of trace the history of that thread, right. I want to hear more about the material culture of gout. This is in many ways what a lot of your article is about, and you're also an expert in objects, so I just can't wait to talk to you about this. What are some of the objects that you were able to discover that people had in their homes related to gout? Or in their lives, I suppose I should say.

**Nicole:** So people had specialized stuff related to gout, they had personalized, specialized stuff related to gout. And then they had stuff used by other people, too, not necessarily a gout only artifact. I like to use the word "stuff" for objects and material culture, 'cause why not? The personalized, specialized stuff is actually what got me down the gout path. I was in a research seminar as a grad student, and I knew I wanted to write about disability, I knew I wanted to write about material culture. And I was doing keyword searching in early

American newspapers, I was using the term "invalid," which I learned later on in the research process was not the best term to be using for 18<sup>th</sup> century stuff. But it did actually bring up an advertisement for an auction, and one of the artifacts—this was 1789 in Philadelphia—one of the artifacts featured in that auction was a carriage made especially for an invalid. It turned out that that carriage was John Lukens'. John Lukens is the focus of this chapter on gout, because of this carriage. John Lukens was the Surveyor General of Pennsylvania. He lived in Philadelphia, died there in 1789. So this was an ad for his estate. And I learned about this carriage and learned that about six months before he died, he ordered this specially designed roomy and low-slung carriage, which I then learned later was related to the—probably the fact that he had gout and perhaps other infirmities.

The reason I was able to find the carriage in the carriage maker's account book is because—I mean I might have gotten there eventually if I had started looking at extant account books for carriage makers in Philadelphia. But there's a really good article about carriage making in Philadelphia that was published in *Winterthur Portfolio* in the nineties (1990s), I think, and they happened to pull out Lukens' carriage. So I was very fortunate in that sense. So the carriage is a really good example of one of those personalized, specialized artifacts that people used who had gout. Another good example is Benjamin Franklin's long arm, which again Waldstreicher writes about. People who had gout also used specialized artifacts that were labeled "gout stool," "gout crane." And you can see the designs in high-end design books from Britain, from the time period, stools and cranes. There's a crane that was designed and that is pictured in the book chapter I wrote about, and it's in the collection at Old Sturbridge Village. And stools and cranes were meant to help you elevate your foot. Gout often manifested itself in extremities, and this would have helped with comfort.

Then people also had artifacts that they used to live with and manage gout, that were also used by people who had chronic illness or other physical disabilities. And so I think that this chapter that we're talking about, "The Material Culture of Gout," to some extent applicable to other people. So some examples of that are found in John Lukens' inventory, and they include things like bed chairs, which look like upper portions of easy chairs that you would have used in bed. Today, I think sometimes—at least a couple of years ago—they were marketed as "husbands," which is a really interesting term (laughs). We're not going to go there today. But people also, who had gout, used crutches a lot. And of course since they were in so much pain, they spent a lot of time in bed, so they used bedsteads. And so bed chairs, crutches, and bedsteads are all things that were used by all sorts of people who had chronic and acute disabilities. I would also add that people who had gout used nothing sometimes, especially poor people.

Another thing I want to mention that I forgot to mention, a really important part of gout is that—and it's one of the things that made it so visible—because people had swollen extremities, especially in the feet, they often covered their feet or their legs in flannel. And this had a couple of functions. One thing was it covered up your swollen body, which might have been considered unrefined. But it could also absorb any material that might have been expelled by the body, and it made putting your foot down on a hard surface softer. So flannels are also a specialized thing related to gout, but they were used for other health purposes also. A final thing I want to talk a little bit about is that people living with physical disability, managing physical disability, used these objects that we're talking about, specialized things, but also things that other people who had physical disability used. But they also used the entire built environment, which sometimes I think we can forget about when we're getting fixated on a single artifact. And maybe most importantly, part of this living with and managing disability was also about human labor. So that involved stuff that enslaved people helped you with. Lukens, for example, when he died, had a woman listed on his inventory valued at, I think it was maybe 25 pounds. It's unclear if she was enslaved

or not, but obviously people who had a disability would have used enslaved labor, indentured labor, family, to help move them, to help maintain the objects that they were using. And so living with and managing gout, especially among elites, was about comfort, both physical and social.

**Kelsey:** That was such a multidimensional answer and there's so many different directions we could go in. But I wanted to go back to what you said at the very beginning about how you are really interested in personalized, specialized stuff, which I can imagine, thinking about your research process, can be hard to find at times. And I'm wondering, did you find it difficult to locate information about or find objects relating to gout in this era? And do you suspect that a lot of the material culture of gout—and you allude to this—was improvised within people's homes, within communities, their built environment, and maybe went unrecorded?

**Nicole:** Absolutely. I mean, all historical research is difficult. It's definitely difficult to find the more personalized stuff, like the carriage, even though that was my jumping off point. Some things I learned about because people knew about my research, or pure happenstance. For example, somebody sent me these archeological reports associated with the site in London, and I happened to be looking through it and I happened to notice that they published a photograph of what we think were fabric gout boots. And they're footnoted in the chapter, they were not pictured 'cause we could only include a couple of images. So that was pure luck. You can use satires to get a sense of the material culture of gout, even though it's making fun of people. And you can see in those satires that people had shoes, often on one foot, that looked like they were pieced together in a different way, or maybe bulging a bit. In terms of improvisation, I think in early America all of disability was about improvisation. And I think that's also one of the things that continues today. Disabled people continue to improvise. There's so many great examples of that. You've interviewed many people who have talked about that, so I think it's one of the threads that continues today.

**Kelsey:** I'd love to zoom out a little bit. We've gotten to hear about some of the incredibly rich source material that you use to think about the early American material culture of gout, but I know that your PhD dissertation took an even broader approach to material culture of disability, especially mobility impairments in colonial and antebellum America. We'd love to hear more about that project. Are there some other interesting examples? Some particularly peculiar stuff that you found in your research that you'd like to share with our audience?

**Nicole:** One thing I wrote about in my dissertation and will be addressing more thoroughly at an upcoming conference called The Dublin Seminar for New England Folk Life at Historic Deerfield. It was planned for last year, due to the pandemic was postponed, like so many things, of course. I believe we're planning on actually doing it this year online and I'm giving a talk about adult cradles, which is a really interesting topic. And I think there should be a publication that's coming out of that also. And adult cradles, for those who are not familiar, were cradles that looked like a child's cradle, but they're bigger, for adults. They were used along the East Coast. I found, I think, over twenty extant examples at museums and historic sites where I did a lot of my research. They were used in Shaker communities, but they were also used in private residences. And people usually look at them and think, "Oh, these are really weird, and, what's this all about?" And what I found was that adult cradles are another form of the bedstead. People who were chronically ill or disabled could use them to rest, and one of the great things about them is that they're easily portable throughout the household. A lot of the ones that survive have handles on them so you can carry them from place to place. Bedsteads in the period, many bedsteads in the period, took some work to—and even today, it takes some work to put your bed together and to take it

apart. So it's a lot easier to move a cradle around the house. And that meant that that person wasn't necessarily stuck in the bedroom all day, they could be with friends and family. So they facilitated sociability in the household. They were most popular between, I would say, the 1780s to the 1820s, 30s or so. And I like using them to talk about disability history because again, when people hear about them or look at them, they think they're really weird. I think this often makes disability history more approachable, for some people to understand them as just like another ordinary object that would have been a part of the household.

One thing that actually I don't think made it into the dissertation—if I may. Toward the end of my research, somebody told me about—I think it was Ryan Smith at Virginia Commonwealth University—told me that a couple of years ago, let's say within the last 10 to 15 years when I say a couple years. I think it was VCU that was doing archaeology because they were building a new building and they discovered human remains, some of which included artifacts that survived alongside the remains, like shoes. And it's based on the research by the archaeologist and other that were involved, these shoes—which I studied in person at the Virginia Department of Historic Resources—these shoes were probably, in some cases, used by African Americans or people of African American descent in the early 19th century. And these people were likely enslaved or imprisoned or otherwise institutionalized at their time of death. Possibly taken advantage of for medical use.

And so, just handling these artifacts was very—I don't really know what word to use. It was just very powerful. At any rate, Al Saguto, who was a shoemaker at Colonial Williamsburg—maybe he's the one who told me about this. I'm not sure. So many people give me such wonderful leads, it's hard to keep track of them all. But Al consulted on this project, since he knows a lot about shoes, and was able to tell, "This shoe indicates that someone had corns, or this shoe indicates that somebody walked on the side of their foot, that kind of thing." And so, in future work, I want to use artifacts like this, or I would say artifacts like this inspired me to think more about physical disability and impairment and the subtle ways that it manifests itself through material culture. Obviously, we look at dramatic things like amputation and gout, which are all important topics. But I don't think we think enough about everyday aches and pains, and like I said, these more subtle examples of disability and impairment.

**Caroline:** Really interesting, thank you so much for sharing that, Nicole. I'm really starting to think about how early America is very different from what we start to see in around the late 19th and early 20th century, where clothing begins to be, and other items, begin to be mass produced for a kind of standardized, normalized body. And I'm thinking that what you said about corns and someone walking on the side of their foot, for example, kind of made me reorient myself and think, in early America, I assume many items of clothing and so forth, and furniture even, would have been custom-made for the individual. And is this something that you think about as you're working with early American artifacts, is that the whole framework around disability might have been different because there wasn't such an emphasis on a standardized or normalized body?

**Nicole:** I do think about that a lot and I think Luken's invalid carriage is a prime example of how that can work when you have a ton of money. But also poor people had similar experiences, because in many cases, shoes were made, or almost all cases, shoes were made for you. There were readymade things and enslaved people and others got hand-me-downs and that kind of thing, but I think the material world then was a little more flexible, shall we say? Just to take a wooden crutch as an example. If I'm using this crutch in early America, and I'm, suddenly I'm done with it, and then someone else in my family needs the crutch, but they're much shorter say, than I am, it's a lot easier to shorten a wooden crutch

with something you have around the house, like a saw, or a hatchet, or a knife. It's a lot easier to shorten this crutch than it is to shorten a standard crutch that you might get at a chain drug store today. In that sense, like I said, I think it was a more flexible time period. But at the same time, as I mentioned earlier, you still see people continuing to improvise and take advantage of what flexibility remains up until today. But it's a great question, and it also gets me and gets us to think more about the periodization of disability, which I think goes against the grain of more traditional periodizations, at least in terms of American history.

**Caroline:** Can you actually say more about that? [Laughs] You can't just leave us there, Nicole!

**Nicole:** Well, I mean, I started my project saying, I'm studying the material culture of physical disability in early America. Okay, what do you mean by early America? Well, I mean before about 1840, you know, when we always say industrialization started. We know that's not the case because, as one of my mentors said, Arwen Mohun, industrialization, and others have said, happens over and over again. Its process happens differently in different places. What I mean is, I think I study things that are not mass-produced or part of a formalized assistive technology industry. But that continues well beyond when industrialization starts, quote-unquote, whenever that is. It's something I'm still trying to figure out - the periodization question.

**Caroline:** That's a really provocative way of thinking about it, right, and it will vary depending on, as you said, geography, class, personal tastes and interests, some people still knit all their own sweaters or whatever. You're really messing around with the conventional frameworks here, and I so appreciate that. That's really interesting.

**Kelsey:** I'm still thinking about the wooden crutch and what you were saying—it hadn't occurred to me—because I know more about user-based histories of prosthetics in the 20th century. But I haven't given much thought to this pre-1840, highly customized era of personalized prosthetics and objects. And it occurred to me as you were talking about how it was easier to modify a wooden crutch with something around the home, it made me think about the ways that objects that were made at home, were probably more easily modified within the home, within domestic spaces. So that was something that just clicked into place for me as you were talking. It's really fascinating.

**Nicole:** Absolutely, and as we're all talking, I'm getting really inspired by this idea that in early America, customized artifacts for living with and managing physical disability was for everyone, virtually. Why can't it be like that today? I don't consider myself to be disabled, but I consider myself to be an advocate, and so access to this stuff should be a lot easier.

**Caroline:** That's really interesting. Yeah, thanks for taking us there, Nicole. I want to pivot to some of your other incredible work. I know you're too humble to talk about this, but looking at the list of things that you do, it's really impressive. You're involved in so many different projects. You do, of course, work through the National Council on Public History, you co-edit the journal *The Public Historian*, which I very much enjoy skimming through from time to time, and you manage the blog *History at Work*, just among the many things that you do! I'm curious about the evolution of disability history's presence in the public history world. So, you know, where are we now? How did we get here? And where do you think you'd like to see disability history in the public history world go next?

**Nicole:** First thing I have to do, if anyone out there would like to submit a manuscript to *The Public Historian* about disability history or the practice of access and inclusion in public

history, or submit a pitch to *History at Work*, please get in touch with me. One of my goals has been to get more disability history and access-related content into those publications since I started, and I think that has happened. We also publish on all sorts of topics; I'm learning so much by being a part of those publications. It has really broadened my understanding of public history. This all started for me with a close stool. You never know where your career is going to take you. But, I mean, first I have to acknowledge that I am building on work of incredible public historians too numerous to name. But the people I know, perhaps best, would be Katherine Ott at the Smithsonian, Susan Burch. I would say, generally speaking, disability history has been really slow to be mainstreamed, and that maybe that comes up a lot in your podcast, I'm not sure. Maybe in your own lives.

And it's a huge shame. But we're all working really hard to change that, which is the fun part. And so it's slow to be mainstreamed in the history profession more generally. Also in terms of bringing disability content to public history work, but this is all changing. It's all getting better. I think of public history and disability in terms of the content, but also the practice of access and inclusion, which are hard to separate sometimes. But that's also been kind of slow. I will say though, that *The Public Historian* actually published, I think in 2005, an issue on disability history. That was a while ago now. Which is awesome, I was not involved with that at all. And I would add that in recent years there seems to be an increase in the content, and I want to say, in recent years there's been an increase in interpreting disability history in a public history context, collecting that history and making it accessible. There's also been an increase in efforts to make any history, not just disability history, accessible to disabled people. And I think this is, I mean it happened before the ADA was passed, but it was more common to see after the ADA was passed. It's also more recently been helped by recent efforts to focus on diversity, equity, inclusion, and access in the field, sometimes referred to as DEIA. Sadly, maybe, or happily, this is also related to recent anti-racism efforts and how that's related to all of these things, interrelated, intersects with. I think it's more common to see formalized DEIA efforts at larger institutions and public history places, but it's not exclusive to big places. The IMLS, the Institute for Museum and Library Services, I think recently did a program that involved recruiting—I think historic sites and house museum type places—to think more about access and inclusion, and I'm really excited to see where that's going. I do a lot of workshops with small museums and historic sites about access and inclusion, and I know the NPS is working on some disability-related projects. To back up again to the history, I think in many ways, disability history has followed a different path in Britain, and some of you might be familiar with The Disability and Industrial Society Project, which I keep thinking happened yesterday, but apparently I looked it up earlier and it ended in 2016, and that was an amazing public history project.

As I said, I do a lot of outreach to small museums and historic sites myself to try to help with these efforts. I'm not an expert in this, I have only learned it along the way. As I got more involved in disability history, I met more people who are advocates for disability, access, and inclusion, so I'm definitely self-taught and taught by other people. I'm currently teaching a class called "Access and Inclusion in Public History and Public Life," and in that grad seminar, we're getting an overview of disability history in America, so we're historicizing the history of disabled people's access to the world and to culture. I guess you could say the practical part of that course—though everything of course is practical, reading is practical too—is that each week we talk about different practical tips, like creating accessible Word documents, and these are things that I also teach in these workshops that I mentioned for small museums and historic sites, really basic stuff. Insisting on using microphones at meetings, educating people about disability-related language, and what types of terms and words people like to use to refer to disability today, and how that can be very personal in many ways. And I also like to teach advocacy because it can be difficult to advocate for access and inclusion, especially when people just aren't familiar with it, even



though the ADA was passed 30 years ago, and all of us who care a lot about this say we need to go way beyond the ADA. Lots of people just aren't aware of this concept of making history accessible and inclusive in these ways—it's just not something they're thinking about. And that's okay, that's why we're all here to talk about it and to give people some foundational tools to get that work started wherever they live or work. The Disability History Association is also doing a lot to help with this. Caroline and I are on the board and a couple of years ago we started a Public History Award for disability history, which I chaired last year—a year and a half ago. Time is getting a little mixed up in my brain during the pandemic, unfortunately. I think we would be issuing a call for submissions again next fall, if I'm correct. And then, of course, we also have the Disability History Association blog called *All of Us*, which is run primarily by two other board members, Aparna and Jai, who do an amazing job with that, and I help out also, and Kristen.

So we've come a long way. I think we're really picking up some momentum that we might not have had before. It's an exciting time to be a part of it and to talk about these issues.

**Caroline:** Thank you so much for that, Nicole. One of the things that I really wanted to ask you about is, it relates to this thing you brought up about the history of accessibility in museums and other, similar spaces. And in 2015, you published a piece in *New York History*, and I'll read out the title, it's "An 'Effort to Bring this Little Handicapped Army in Personal Touch with Beauty': Democratizing Art for Crippled Children at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1919 to 1934." So folks out there, go find it, go read it, it's really interesting. I'd love to hear you talk more about this history, Nicole. So, a program to introduce disabled kids to art history, I mean, is this one of the earliest examples of a museum program specifically geared to disabled audiences? Tell us everything.

**Nicole:** Thanks so much for bringing this up. I think it's a story a lot of people don't know about, and if you can't get access, email me—I'll happily send it to anyone. As far as I could tell, so this was a research seminar paper that I turned into an article, as far as I could tell, it was one of the earliest examples of this sort of programming at museums. I recall reading material related to the now American Alliance of Museums that was published even before this programming started where they were talking about disability. I couldn't find it in my notes, so I want to go back and search for that more. But I would say late 19th, early 20th century is when this started to become something people were thinking about, and the Met's program is one of, from what I could tell, one of the earliest examples. They had a couple of different programs, I focused on the one, to use the period term "crippled children," and they also had programming for kids with sensory disabilities—also could be a really great thing to study. I remember coming across a document at the Met Museum's archives that Helen Keller signed. So for those of you who are familiar with the recent debate about whether or not Helen Keller existed, I saw her signature. Anyway, I think she might have been, if I remember correctly, she might have been commenting on, or maybe her advice was solicited, about the programming for sensory disabilities. At any rate, I focused on the programming for the homebound crippled children as they refer to the period. The photographs that go along with this article are great because they show the kids—some kids are standing, some kids are sitting, some kids are sitting with crutches next to them, some kids are using wheelchairs, and I think it really is a good example to use to talk about how varied disability is. We use single terms like "disabled" or "crippled," but it could mean all sorts of things in the period and today. Even though today, to put a program like that for, let's say, kids with physical disabilities, would be considered setting them apart from other programming. Today, ideally, we would like to have that a part of regular programming, integrate everybody together.

But this was still, I think, a landmark program at the time. It was headed up by a woman

named Anna Curtis Chandler, and she collaborated with another woman named Adela J. Smith, and Adela Smith was working for the New York Board of Education in—I guess you would call it the health and physical education realm. A lot of the kids, I think, had disabilities related to polio in the period, though I'm sure there were other reasons for their disabilities also. This program only happened a couple of times a year, they brought the kids in, they had to improvise by getting funding to hire special vehicles, they rented wheelchairs, they found volunteers to push the kids around the galleries that were accessible to them. And even though it happened only a couple of times a year, it seems like it was a really big deal for these kids, because they were at home all the time, there wasn't public infrastructure to get them around like there is today. The Met continues to be a leader in accessible programming, but I think that this story really expands our timeline for disability rights, not in the form of a law, but let's say in practice and access to culture. It was a really fascinating story. At the same time in New York City, the American Museum of Natural History was doing similar programming, and I do include some images from that museum also, but I did not dive into those archives.

**Kelsey:** Thank you, Nicole. I have so many different places where I could go next, you've given us just so much to think about. But one of the things that keeps on coming up for me, knowing that you're a public historian working with material culture, you mentioned that disability history has been slow to get mainstreamed, both into public history work and history as a discipline. But I'm wondering, it seems like one of the core tenants of public history as a subfield on some level is about accessibility, and that it's more outward-facing and engaging people outside of academic institutions. I was going to ask a question about developments in accessibility in more recent history, where to go next, but some of your comments were making me wonder more about, as you move between public history spaces and more academic history spaces, are you noticing perhaps a faster progression towards thinking about accessibility within a disability rights, disability justice framework in public history, because of perhaps like a prior, a foundational engagement with access on some level?

**Nicole:** I think, yes, I think one of the reasons you tend to talk more about accessibility in public history realms is because of that history of dedication to access. But it sort of, it remains difficult to advocate for this stuff, and so I do encourage people, especially in museum settings, which I'm most familiar with in the public history realm. Museums are all about preserving artifacts and providing access to them, so when I talk about access, teach about access, I try to get people to think about access broadly defined. Access can mean access to culture for people of lesser means, it could be language access, it could be physical access, all sorts of things. And so when it comes to people advocating to take steps to make where they're working in public history more accessible to people of disabilities, one way to frame that is to say we've always been interested in access, so this is just one more example of that. But I do think that the recent ramp-up in advocacy for disabled people is helping with that too. And it does seem that in academia, that's happening at a slower rate, and it might be related to that public component that you're talking about.

**Kelsey:** Yeah, that makes a lot of sense to me. And I'm also wondering, when you were talking about the Met program that you wrote about for *New York History*, you mentioned something about heterogeneity within the category of disability. So disability, you have sensorial disabilities, you have various kinds of physical disabilities, mental illness, and I've seen the way that this conversation around—"What do we mean when we talk about disability and access"—if disability means so many different things. Access needs are wide-ranging. I'm wondering what kinds of conversations you've seen when thinking about making history accessible and historical artifacts accessible. Has there been a conversation around thinking about multimodal, multisensorial ways of considering access for many

different kinds of disabled people?

**Nicole:** Absolutely, and this has helped in part in the museum field, because museums, when you have curators taking care of objects, you have educators communicating about those objects, usually curators and educators do both, and in many places, one person does both those things in addition to other things. But if we're going to talk about these careers separately, there's a history of museum education that embraces this multimodal engagement with the world that you're discussing. So that goes way back. There's an interest in living history, which means people recreating crafts and activities of the past using historic materials, there's a tradition of having what we call handling collections in museum settings, and that lends itself well to serving disabled people with a variety of disabilities. And I would say one of my colleagues at NCPH, or who's affiliated with NCPH, Katie Clary, has I think recently published a technical leaflet on this for AASLH, the American Association of State and Local History, which you might want to check out, and she I think used 3D printing in a class in order to work on some of this. But of course, you need to find a 3D printer, so that raises all sorts of other issues, but there are ways to partner with universities and that kind of thing if you don't necessarily have the budget for that. But I think that access doesn't necessarily have a big price tag on it, and that's easy to forget, and all you need is one artifact and a person to facilitate learning.

**Caroline:** Thank you so much, Nicole. Nicole, well, waved a crutch in front of the camera, and that is where I want to go next. So thank you for that transition, Nicole. Pedagogy in particular is something that we're trying to think a lot about here at the Disability History Association, on the podcast, just perhaps in our own lives, and in a blog that you wrote for *History at Work* you mentioned a cane, for example, that you used for helping students think about disability and the body. And I'd love for you to talk a little bit more about that or any other artifacts that you find useful when it comes to helping students think through some of these things.

**Nicole:** Great question. So I have a crutch that I really like to teach with, that I have here with me today. I have a pretty big collection of disability-related stuff. I have dozens at this point of tintypes, for example, mostly tintypes that include people with physical disability related artifacts, like crutches and canes and wheelchairs and that sort of thing. And I'm talking about this in order to say that anyone who teaches anything, not just disability history, can use the world around them to teach history. And that it's really easy, as many other of my colleagues have demonstrated, like Jai Viridi, for example, I think has a really big collection of hearing-related artifacts that she uses when she teaches. Anybody can start collecting stuff and using it for teaching purposes, and it doesn't have to be a lot of stuff, it doesn't have to be expensive stuff, you can get it at a yard sale or an antique mall or on eBay.

I really like this particular crutch. It's wooden, it has a couple of different sides to it, maybe eight or so. The armrest is tented at the top and there are two nails, and it tapers toward the bottom. And toward the bottom is the patina, the surface color is a little bit darker and the wood's starting to split. I'm about 5'2" and a quarter, and this crutch is a little too big for me, to give you a sense of scale. So it's probably 19th century, vaguely. It's hard to date some of these things. It's probably, to use one of our terms from earlier, pre-industrial (laughs). It does not have one of those handholds that you often see in the middle of crutches. I'm pretty sure they started to become more popular in the 1850s or so. Crutches are great to teach with because they are very common. Whenever I talk to a group and talk about crutches, I usually say if you feel comfortable, raise your hand if you have ever used a crutch or a pair of crutches in your life. Caroline has, I have, that's more than half of the three people sitting here right now, and usually that's the case with groups. So this is

something that people can relate to really easily, so you can talk about long-term disability versus short-term disability, you can talk about how crutches like this would have been made not by assistive technology companies but by chair makers, for example, or maybe somebody who lived in the house with you. You just needed some wood and a knife, maybe a hammer, and you could probably put one of these together. You can talk about the relationship between medicine, medical history, and disability history.

Today, you probably get crutches in a medical setting of some kind. Historically, you often did not. Sometimes doctors would get them for you. You would probably get them, as I said earlier, from someone who's making furniture or maybe someone in your house. They are also really interesting to me because I always thought of them as things you use to get from one place to another, it's about talking about mobility disabilities, it's about going places. But this one guy I studied and wrote about in a short article called "Confined to Crutches: James Logan," he was the secretary of William Penn. He died in 1751, he was born in the late 17th century. And in 1728, he slipped and fell on a piece of ice outside his house, he probably broke his hip and actually wrote about moving it in and out of its socket while he was lying in bed. And for the rest of his life, wrote to people and recounted this accident over and over and over again for the next almost 30 years, because it really affected the rest of his life. I also often use him as a way to talk about access to culture because he remained intellectually involved with people in his day. At any rate, Logan wrote again and again about being "confined to crutches," and I had always been thinking of them as this mobility thing, but he was thinking of them as this thing he used because he was stuck some place. So I like to talk about that and how complicated this simple object can be.

This particular crutch is really interesting and great for tactile learning because—I'm holding it up to Caroline and Kelsey and the camera—and you can see that there are some initials engraved in here, and they're on different parts of the crutch. And I don't know for sure why they're here, but there is a crutch in the collection at the Connecticut River Museum in Essex, Connecticut, that I studied in person that has a bunch of engravings on it with people's initials, the date, and in some cases, a short description of getting cut or something like that, and has a history of use among people on the docks who were making boats. And so I think this crutch might have been used, to use a contemporary term, as a sort of part of a first aid kit that was used in a workplace setting, and people just passed it around whenever they need it. "Oh, you hurt yourself. Here's the crutch, but make sure you write on there why you're using it." So it has that interesting history too, potentially in some cases. It's also something that you can read a lot about that, say, enslaved people were using, especially in the context of runaway advertisements you see in early American newspapers, and again, complicates that idea of being "disabled" or using an artifact used to live with a managed physical disability, but you were going someplace. So I love this particular crutch and all crutches because I think people can relate to them, they have all these things that you can talk about, a lot of big themes in disability history, like medicine versus disability, and improvisation and industrialization. But then also they relate to public history work and museum work in particular when it comes to using objects to learn about the past. And so yeah, I would just encourage people to collect stuff and use it in their teaching for whatever topic you study.

**Kelsey:** I think this came up a little bit earlier on in the interview, but we know that you wear many different hats as a public historian, as an educator, as a researcher, and a writer, and one of those roles that we wanted to hear more about was the fact that you lead your Center's continuing education program in historic preservation. We're really, really curious to hear more about this work. So for people who are working in the public history field right now, is there a place they can go to access continuing education-type information

about museum access or to learn more about disability history that can actually help improve their own practice?

**Nicole:** So many resources out there, and they're growing all the time. Some of my favorite object-related resources online include the *Engineering at Home* online website, created in part by Sara Hendren who wrote the book *What Can a Body Do?* And of course, the Disability History Association blog. I also maintain this part of the website on public history resources that I need to update, so I will do that soon, especially since I got into the syllabus development for the grad seminar that I'm teaching, I found a lot of cool stuff I wasn't aware of. There are also lots of other super smart experienced people who are leading workshops all the time on this topic, conferences on this topic. In my region, ArtReach is a non-profit that does amazing workshops and conferences and training, which because of the pandemic, many of which are online right now, so that expands access to them. There's one coming up, I think next week, and I think it's free, I think there's just suggested donation. They do amazing work. And other continuing ed opportunities—I try to integrate it into the classes and workshops that I teach in the Continuing Ed program for Historic Preservation. Oh, I'm actually doing a Q&A with an organization called Preservation New Jersey on February 25th. So if anyone wants to check that out, please join us and ask me all the hard questions and I'll try to answer them.

I do a lot of, at conferences and stuff, I'll submit proposals to do workshops, especially for small museums and historic sites about little things that they can do to improve their access and inclusion in other small museums and historic sites. A lot of the places I work with and have worked with in the past are not necessarily professionalized because of the way that small museums and historic sites and house museums developed. Many are. And in both cases, lots of people there, just like in other parts of the field, don't necessarily know about best practices and access and inclusion. So I've done a lot of workshops for groups like these, which I really love doing, and I use history again to historicize access to culture for people. And I start with early American history and people like Luken and others who were disabled but were still involved in everyday life, and I use that to help people to get to think about how the same can and should be true for today, which is difficult for lots of people to think of because, as Alice Wong's Disability Visibility Project points out, disabled people are not as integrated into popular culture, like movies and advertisements, as they should be. And lots of people today didn't necessarily grow up with an integrated classroom with disabled and non-disabled kids, lots of people still lived in a time before deinstitutionalization. So there are a lot of things that have happened between early America and contemporary life that are reasons for why we need to be patient with folks who just might not be in tune with this stuff. So anyway, that's why I do these workshops and I learn so much from doing them myself. I talk about really basic things that I mentioned earlier, like making accessible Word documents, including both Word documents and PDFs when you email somebody or put something on a website, insisting on using microphones at public events. Just really simple, basic things like these are honestly things that people are just not thinking about, and once you tell them, boom. That's a cost-free thing or almost cost-free thing people can change right away. And I guess I'm thinking about then more complicated, not complicated, but more sophisticated, versions of access and inclusion.

Like I said, I learn so much from this stuff too. I spoke to a group, this local group—Camden County, New Jersey, which has a really well organized alliance of small museums and historic sites, and I spoke to them a couple of months ago, maybe it was over a year ago now, in person, and so it was probably over a year ago, and I was talking about how you should use microphones when your site does a lecture or something like that. This benefits people who are deaf or hard of hearing—benefits me too—and somebody came up to me

afterward and said, "using a microphone for a lecture also benefits older people like me." And I realized that I meant, yes, of course, it also benefits older people who might be hard of hearing, but as an older person, he was not identifying as disabled, which is totally fine, but that was something I learned--to refine how I'm talking about people's needs. So all of this is to say that I'm not the only person doing this work, there are lots of opportunities out there. I do think, generally speaking though, there is a bit of a hole in both informal and formal training when it comes to access and inclusion in public history.

**Caroline:** Yeah, I think you're right about that, for sure. And a lot of what I've been hearing from talking to various folks kind of working in this field is that feels like it's an ongoing conversation, just getting to know your local communities, talking with folks and yeah, sometimes also perspectives. Like I had someone remind me that it's also important not always just to think about spaces that need to sort of be made accessible, but actually how to create spaces from the beginning, from the foundation that are built by and for people with disabilities.

**Nicole:** Absolutely, thank you for adding that. Of course, as the saying goes, "Nothing About Us Without Us." Again, I don't identify as disabled, but we can't get this right unless we're consulting with disabled people themselves, and when we can integrating accessibility and inclusion in our projects from the ground up. One thing I wanted to add is that the course I'm teaching on access and inclusion was inspired in part by Cindy Falk at the Cooperstown program. I was talking to her a couple of years ago now, and she mentioned she was teaching a course on accessibility and I just wanted to give her credit for helping me to think of that as even an idea, and just to re-emphasize how it takes many of us to be doing this work in as many places as possible.

**Caroline:** For sure, thank you so much. We have only one more question. What are you working on now? That's a huge question for you, Nicole, because you have so many different projects on the go, but if there's anything in particular that you want to plug for our audience to learn about, now is the time.

**Nicole:** Sure. Well, I know some people are waiting on some emails from me with edits for the blog posts that they've written and stuff, and I will get to those as soon as I can. But if you're talking about scholarship-type things, I'm going to be writing a couple short pieces about disability and material culture that will be related to The Dublin Seminar on New England Folk Life at Historic Deerfield, which I'm excited about. And in terms of bigger projects, working on a book proposal that would be a longer treatment of the material culture of disability in early America with a focus on physical disability. And also eventually would like to get some more resources into the hands of classrooms and historic house people.

**Caroline:** Excellent. Nicole, it's just been amazing to have you. Thank you for your time, for this conversation, and we'll look forward to more conversations in the future.

**Nicole:** Thank you, this was a lot of fun.

**Kelsey:** Thanks, Nicole, I've learned so much. This has been phenomenal.

[**Outro music:** Easygoing by Nicolai Heidlas Music | <https://www.hooksounds.com> | Creative Commons — Attribution 4.0 International]

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