THE ALEXANDRIA ORAL HISTORY CENTER
OFFICE OF HISTORIC ALEXANDRIA
CITY OF ALEXANDRIA

Oral History Interview

with

Laura Macaluso

Interviewer: *Francesco De Salvatore*

Narrator: *Laura Macaluso*

Location of Interview:
Lloyd House, 220 N Washington St, Alexandria, VA 22314

Date of Interview: *02/06/2023*

Transcriber: *Paul Birdsall*

Summary:
Laura Macaluso, Ph.D., lived in Alexandria for two years of the pandemic (2021-2022). As a public historian, Laura reflects on her perspective as an outsider, an introvert, and an ACRP pilgrimage member.

Table of Contents and Keywords

General	ACRP; Pilgrimage; Monuments; Public History; Historical Markers; Museums; Public Art
People	Mary Brice; Jeff Nichols, Leslie King
Places	Lynchburg, VA; Point of Honor; New Haven, CT; Poplar Forest; Alexandria, VA

Laura Macaluso [00:00:00] My name is Laura Macaluso. I'm 50 years old and we are in the Lloyd House. It is February 6, 2023.

Francesco De Salvatore [00:00:16] My name is Francesco. Today is February.

Laura Macaluso [00:00:20] Sixth.

Francesco De Salvatore [00:00:21] Sixth, 2023, and we're at Lloyd House. So, Laura, maybe tell me a little bit about what led you to go on the pilgrimage.

INTRODUCTION TO THE PILGRIMAGE

Laura Macaluso [00:00:30] So, I think I have a different perspective, probably from most folks in Alexandria or the Alexandria DMV [District of Columbia, Maryland, Virginia] area, because I'm not from here. I wasn't born here. I didn't grow up here. I did not go to school here. But two years ago, in 2020, my husband took a job in the DMV [District of Columbia, Maryland, Virginia] and we moved here from a place called Lynchburg, Virginia, which is near the Blue Ridge Mountains. And so I, we lived in Alexandria, in the county, but it was an attraction to move to this place that everyone knows. Everyone knows Old Town. It's famous for its tourism and its history. And we're, you know, kind of history people. My husband works in a History Museum and I work in the field too. So we were, we really felt grateful that we had this opportunity, even though it was a strange moment in time, because we moved during a pandemic, the first of our lives really. It was a totally new experience. And to move from the country, which is kind of where we were, back to an urban area, but like hyper-urban in a way, also was kind of a little bit, 'Okay, wow, we have to get used to this again.' We came from Connecticut originally. We were both born and grew up and went to school in Connecticut. So, I was attracted to Alexandria because of the things that this city was doing, that I began to learn about. And when I go and move somewhere, to me, the one way to learn local history is to actually do it, which means research and writing. It's kind of what I do, and it's not a good way to be because I'm not really getting paid for this. But it's like, it's just a pattern that I've fallen into. So, I did it when I moved to Lynchburg, and then I did it again when we moved to Alexandria, which is that I decided, you know, I was going to become involved and however I could, whether it was as a volunteer, whether I was going to research, write and publish something, whatever, or just do something as simple as visiting all the sites in a short period of time, even though, again, it was a pandemic and everything was kind of closing or transitioning to virtual. So, I learned very quickly that Alexandria, as a place, was engaged in this effort to recognize the deep-seated problems that the city has had with race. And then, you know, I've heard about and kind of watched through email, web and chains, you know, coming through about the committees. And, you know, the committee work to plan something called a pilgrimage. And pilgrimage is such a sacred word that I have heard because of, you know, studying art history for so long. Art history was my background, and it was the subject that kind of opened to me. It felt at the time when I was younger that it opened the world to me. You know, you could open an art history book and learn something about any corner of the world through beautiful things like buildings, paintings or objects. And I love art. So it was, you know, it was just a natural fit for me. So, pilgrimage, of course, being a big word used when you study medieval art, you know, and I had done it a little bit, you know, as an undergrad because in fact, my mentor was a medievalist, even though I

wasn't. So, I got exposed to it. And so, when I heard that the city was thinking about doing this, and I understood the reasons behind it, the lynching history that the city was documenting and was going to put into the public sphere through interpretation, through historical markers. Markers are something that to me are in the monument and public art category and that's part of my background, is writing about those things, writing those things, actually writing my dissertation out of those things, you know, and these are objects that historians traditionally have not thought of as kind of being serious material to work with. It's not the archives, it's not 18th century archives or something, but it's stuff in the public. So, I just kept my eye on things. And when the opportunity arose, and the truth is I would not have been able to go if I had not gotten financial support from the committee. So, I was one of the people that received, you know, the, we didn't get money. What we got was the hotel stay and the bus, you know, pass, basically. And so, I work, I'm a grant writer, to earn money. But, you know, it's not a full-time gig. And in fact, I'm here in Alexandria today, because I'm going to go to my gig in the afternoon, you know, and it's actually a new gig for me. So, yeah, that's how I heard about the pilgrimage, because it's part of the bigger picture in Alexandria of what they were doing to begin to come to terms, if that's even possible, with this unique history.

INTEREST IN MONUMENT MARKERS

Francesco De Salvatore [00:06:00] Yeah. So, what led you to take interest in monument markers?

Laura Macaluso [00:06:05] So, I do think it's because I think of myself now or I recognize myself as being an outsider in that, you know, I did not go to an elite college. I went to a state university in a place called New Haven, Connecticut. And New Haven is where Yale University is. And so going to the state university in New Haven, in the same city where this world renowned, powerful and academic entity was located, showed me the differences, you know, very clearly between who had power through money and influence and who didn't. And maybe I was never going to get into those special places. I mean, I could go visit them, which I did regularly, because Yale has wonderful museums and they're free, basically. And so, I made use of them, but I wasn't ever going to probably be in them or be producing, you know, from that special place. But New Haven streets are a different matter because they could belong to me, right? Because I could walk the streets. And what if you're an art person? What do you find on the streets? Well, you find public art, monuments and memorials. And so, I began working, when I was doing not-for-profit work, which I continue to do, it's usually for organizations like park organizations, historic sites, you know, etc., and monuments and memorials and public art very often falls underneath their purview. And, you know, so I found that in New Haven there was so much material. There are so many stories about local people and events and some national stuff too, that I felt that people hadn't made use of. And so eventually I started doing things like documenting. And so like the work, it happened at the same time, you know, I come from the world, from an analog world, but it was transitioning 20 years ago or so to a web, you know, website world and entities were coming online, things like the Public Art Archive, which is a national website that collects all information about markers, monuments and historical marker database. Another one that came online. And so, I was documenting for those platforms and then realizing that I actually could write history. I could write history out of that stuff. And I and I did. And I continue to do that.

LIFE IN CONNECTICUT

Francesco De Salvatore [00:08:53] That's great. That's great. So, did you grow up in New Haven?

Laura Macaluso [00:08:57] I didn't grow up in New Haven. 30 minutes away is a small, post-industrial, small town called Naugatuck. It's in the Naugatuck Valley. It's near an old city called Waterbury, famous for producing, like Naugatuck, produced rubber, uniroyal, oil, things for the Civil War, you know, kind of, those were the heights of those cities. I mean, when people, when I say, anywhere I go, when you say you're from Connecticut, people automatically think you're from Greenwich or Fairfield County. You're in New York City. And that you come from money. They don't, you know, remember that Connecticut has the same kind of disparity, right? It's got everybody. It's got the super, super wealthy. It's got the middle class and it's got a lot of poverty, too. And so, I'm, I'm kind of in the group in between that. But New Haven was so important to us in Naugatuck because it was close enough to drive to once you got your driver's license and it had the culture that we did not have in Naugatuck. It had where you could go listen to live music. It had great restaurants, right? And it just had like this nightlife that you could never find, you know, out there.

Francesco De Salvatore [00:10:18] And pizza. Makes good pizza.

Laura Macaluso [00:10:21] You're right. Best pizza.

WORK WITH CONNECTICUT MONUMENTS

Francesco De Salvatore [00:10:23] That's great. And so, what specific monuments or what was the specific history that the monuments told? What were you more drawn to? Right? Because monuments can be, you know…….

Laura Macaluso [00:10:34] Anything. It's really true.

Francesco De Salvatore [00:10:36] Yeah. What were some of the specifics?

Laura Macaluso [00:10:38] Well, you know, what I ended up doing was, you know, the first documentation I ever did was actually the city's park system. So, the monuments that were in parks. And so, monuments that are in parks tend to be, you know, traditional World War One and Two monuments, you know? People and events that are big for the city. And so, in fact, it's still important for me to reflect on that because a World War One monument that I did and documented was also the first one I ended up writing a grant to conserve it. So, park monuments, you know, in the 1980s had been treated so badly. Totally. Right? I mean, whenever a plaque, you know, a small piece of metal on a monument could be ripped off and sold at the, you know, at the scrapyard for money, that's what happened. I mean, New Haven lost all of its plaques on monuments. So, half the time we didn't even know what we're looking at anymore because all the names are gone, the dates were gone. And it was really common, at least in the Northeast, for that to have happened because money is, you know, weren't given to park systems. And when they were given to park systems, they weren't put into their public art monuments, right? So, I started working at, so World War One happens to be,

even today, so all of these years later, I mean, it's kind of sad in some ways when I think about it. How many years later is it, you know, 25 years later? Literally, I'm actually writing my first narrative history or creative. I'm in a creative writing program right now, an MFA program, and I'm writing my first book. And it has to do with World War One. And it's because I kind of discovered, you know, the importance of that, um, you know, it wasn't to me, I'm not a history person, I'm art history. So, I didn't do Military. It is a whole new world. Like, what are you talking about? All these battles, all these names in France and Belgium. I didn't know anything. It is like a a window in, you know, to a new world, whatever that world might be. So, you can look at specific things. But my dissertation, which did become, you know, a book, is about how a city can read its own identity through all of the monuments. And so, I have a very, like, very expansive, inclusive views and always have, which has gone against the grain because monuments are categorized. These are yours over here, belongs to the city. These are mine over here. They belong to Yale. These are over here. They belong to you. But I said no. All of you. All of you are one. All of you are New Haven. And so, I'm looking across 200 years and seeing the development. Now, of course, what has happened since 2015 or so is that when my, when I finished my work is that American society has really blown up, has taken a huge turn. And so now my work is very out of date, and I know it. You know, I'm like, if I could go back and insert, you know, another chapter, I'd really like to do that. But that's not how it goes. It's going to be like the next generation of story. And who says, 'Well, she said this, but look what she did not remember to do'.

Francesco De Salvatore [00:14:09] Yeah. Yeah.

Laura Macaluso [00:14:11] So it's.....

Francesco De Salvatore [00:14:11] Interesting. Yeah, I will. Yeah. I have some questions later about me related to that. I mean, so maybe walk us through. So, you're a Connecticutian and....

Laura Macaluso [00:14:25] We don't even have that down.

Francesco De Salvatore [00:14:26] You're from Connecticut. The Northeast.

Laura Macaluso [00:14:28] Yeah.

Francesco De Salvatore [00:14:29] And you moved to Lynchburg. So, when did you move to Lynchburg?

Laura Macaluso [00:14:32] 2012.

MOVE TO LYNCHBURG, VIRGINIA

Francesco De Salvatore [00:14:33] Okay. And so, tell us, yeah, maybe tell a little bit about what it was like for you coming to Lynchburg and, um, yeah, dealing with Southern history and.

Laura Macaluso [00:14:44] Yeah.

Francesco De Salvatore [00:14:45] Virginia History.

Laura Macaluso [00:14:45] Yeah. Yeah. So, one of the stories that....my husband, Jeff Nichols, is a museum director, and he was working for a long time at the Mark Twain house in Hartford, Connecticut. And he had kind of done his time there. And we kind of said, we were, you know, we were old, right? We were 40 almost. I was almost 40. He was 40. And it was like, we need to kind of get out and experience life a little bit. Get out, because we had both gone to this local state university. You know, our parents were still in Connecticut at the time. And so, Jeff became the the president of Thomas Jefferson's house called Poplar Forest, which is in Forest, Virginia, outside of Lynchburg. And so the newspapers at the time, when they announced that Jeff was coming down, the Virginia local newspaper literally had a headline that said 'Yankee to take over Poplar Forest.' And Jeff thought it was really funny, you know, because we'd always heard of those, you kind of make that joke when you're in the Northeast, you know, we're so righteous, we won the war and all this kind of stuff that we recognize now is not really built on much of anything at all but propaganda. But it was kind of like an opening to the things that he would go through, that I would watch and witness and sometimes, you know, participate in. And the things we heard, which, you know, I said this the other day to a friend that, who actually works at Hampden-Sydney College, which is in Farmville, Virginia, in central Virginia as well, that we did hear things that we, that no one would ever have put words to. At least people that we knew in Connecticut. But they probably thought that in Connecticut, you know? And so, it was just in a way more honest because it wasn't hidden maybe the way it was in the places that we grew up. But at the same time, it's also really off putting because you don't know what to do with yourself or what to say, because these are people who are your bosses. These, you know, this is the person that's going to sign your paycheck, literally, you know? And so, I think Jeff came across that kind of stuff quite a bit. And we still have the exact words and he still ruminates on them because, in fact, in eight years, he was there for seven years, I left after eight, Lynchburg, it hasn't changed that much. And we worked, he worked so hard, you know, to change things. Change, you know, what does that mean? But to make it more equitable, to tell the stories that weren't being told, you know, on the landscape and in the house. It was a plantation site, so the stories were ripe for telling. But now that we have stepped away and have moved back over the Mason-Dixon line, last year, it was kind of freaky because we'd gotten used to it and we'd gotten used to Virginia. In fact, we love Virginia and there's a lot to love about it. Coming back over the Mason-Dixon line, we thought, 'Oh, well, we're going to be amongst our people again.' Well, no, not really. You know? They're, they're just, they don't think in the Northeast, at least in certain places, we don't think about these things. In Virginia, you are forced to now. Righteously so. You have to think about, if you work in the history field, it is demanded that you think about and not only think, but work on and work towards these issues. And I worked last year in York, Pennsylvania, which had terrible race riots in which people were killed in the late sixties. No one talks about it. You know? You don't, you don't bring it up because you know that you're basically, you're white donors don't want to hear about that stuff because it's ugly. It's an ugly part of the city history. And the city has so many problems. They're trying to, you know, move forward. But they don't, they don't think that engaging with all of the history, maybe, is the way to do that. They just want kind of the, you know, and I think that's probably true. I think it's true in a lot of places in Connecticut. Connecticut, which has a history of slavery too, and racism. But you never think about that really, when you're there.

UNTOLD STORIES FROM LYNCHBURG HISTORY

Francesco De Salvatore [00:19:27] Yeah. What, I mean, what stories weren't being told in, you don't have to go super in detail, but like what? When you were at Lynchburg, you know.

Laura Macaluso [00:19:38] I got a great story.

Francesco De Salvatore [00:19:39] What were the stories that weren't being told or.....

Laura Macaluso [00:19:40] I got a great example.

Francesco De Salvatore [00:19:41] That you saw.

Laura Macaluso [00:19:42] I have a great example. In fact, the Virginia forum is coming up in late March, and I'm going to be presenting at it, which I've done multiple times before with my friend, Leslie King, who is a Lynchburger born and bred. And I met Leslie, our paths crossed in Lynchburg, and she has since become one of Poplar Forest's African-American committee members. And so she helps with the interpretation there. So, at the Virginia forum, we're going to be talking about imagery, like we're both interested in images, that give identity to the city. And so here's an example. In 2019, I went to work for the Lynchburg Museum, which is the city's Public History Museum. So, it's run, it's a municipality, it's run by the city. But they also own a historical house called Point of Honor, which overlooks the James River. It's an 18th century house? I can't remember right now. Or a late or early 19th century, maybe? Actually. It's a brick house. It's not very attractive. But for Lynchburg, they, you know, it was their kind of, like every city has a historic house that's kind of like their, you know, Alexandria maybe has like multiple, you've got Carlyle House, you've got multiple houses that you can point to as your, you know, famous historic house. But Lynchburg is, small cities usually just have like the one special one. So Point of Honor is one special one. So, when I started working there, which happened to be, I was, I was hired to work on a, I can't even believe I'm saying this because it's its own issue that, you know, to talk about another time, but a Confederate flag exhibit. I went to the museum early days and they had a pop up exhibit on a table in the main hallway of the museum. And on the table were images of African-Americans that they had in the collection. So, they pulled out portraits and daguerreotypes and photographs and photograph albums. Okay. That's very nice. So, I'm looking you know, I was like, 'Oh, I'm going to go over here and look at this table and see what they got on it', because I'm kind of learning Lynchburg history still. And on this table is this photograph of a black woman wearing a head wrap. And there's a fan by her side and it's a daguerreotype and it's about eight and a half by eleven. It's just a print. It's a print of a daguerreotype. And I was like, to my new colleagues, the full-time museum staff, I was just there like a consultant at the time, I was like, 'Who is this woman?' It's this amazing photograph. And they're like, 'Oh, well that's Mary Brice.' And I was like, 'Who's Mary Brice?' Just by finding this thing that they just had put out there as one of many, it turns out that this daguerreotype of Mary Brice is the only named woman. Her name is on the daguerreotype. The place that she's from, Lynchburg, Virginia, is on a, you know, stamped into the daguerreotype and the photographer's name. And it's in the collections of the Smithsonian. They had gotten it out of a private collection. Out of a house in Lynchburg. The museum at one time had tried to get it. Couldn't afford it. So it went, eventually, went to a private collector.

Then the private collector sold the collections to the Smithsonian. So, she is from Point of Honor, the house. She was an enslaved person at Point of Honor. Her story was not at Point of Honor at all. Not in the house, not in interpretation, not in any verbal guided interpretation that they did. She was not there. And I couldn't believe it. I mean, I just was like, I don't understand how you can, how you know that there is this amazing photograph, the only photograph of any enslaved person that we have, I think, from Lynchburg, Virginia. And you don't have like this photograph blown up, you know, sitting in a corner, painted on a wall? You know, it should be everything. So, it kind of came to me over a little bit of time that the house meant nothing. Which is completely the opposite story from what any historic house-person, right, of the 20th century would say. The 20th century was so invested in their historic houses and getting the right furniture and getting the wallpaper perfect. Let me buy the candelabra. Let me get the right dishes. They spent all their time, all their money, so much money doing that, right? And it didn't, I think the house could just burn down and it wouldn't matter a thing. What matters is that portrait of Mary Bryce and finding out what you can about her. Which is probably, you know, not going to be a heck of a lot. But the fact that nobody was doing it, nobody did it, the fact that she wasn't there bothered me just so, so much. I became just so vocal about it and I kind of worked on the project, if you will, for no pay, you know, just because I'm just, it needs to be done, ever since. So, she's going to be coming around again at Virginia Forum next month. And we're talking about plantation images out of Virginia. So, she's like front and center. So is that like a good.....

Francesco De Salvatore [00:25:30] That's great.

Laura Macaluso [00:25:30] Representative story?

Francesco De Salvatore [00:25:31] That's great. That's great. No, thanks for sharing that. And it sounds really important. Like, really important.

Laura Macaluso [00:25:38] Yeah. I want to, I want to show you, I wish we could, like, you know, somehow get her through the airwaves, you know?

Francesco De Salvatore [00:25:45] Yeah, yeah. Maybe you can send the photo.

Laura Macaluso [00:25:48] I certainly will.

RELOCATION TO ALEXANDRIA, VIRGINIA

Francesco De Salvatore [00:25:49] After the recording. Yeah. So how did you end up in Alexandria then? Like, how did you.

Laura Macaluso [00:25:54] So here's the thing about, I'm not a museum director. But if you are a director of any sort who is running a not-for-profit, you know the grueling nature of that work, because you know that you're constantly begging for money to keep your organization running and to keep your staff going. Right? And to keep your historic building in good shape. To do your programing. And so, Jeff now has been doing this work. He first became a director when he was 35,

which is kind of young. And there are reasons that that happened. But he's now, you know, over 50. And so he's been doing it a long time. And so, he will get to the point where he's like, you know, I've done this, you know, I've done this here. I need, he needs to be recharged, too. He needs to try something new. And look at different material, too, you know? And so, it's a way, I guess you could say, that's a way that we have gotten to move and to experience different places and meet different people, which I think is really valuable. We're not stuck in Connecticut anymore, which is really valuable. But at the same time, you lose something every time you go too. You know? I have to start from scratch every time. And he's the one who is usually plugged in, right? He's plugged into a job or he's, you know, he's plugged into, people say, 'Well, do you want to serve on this? You want to join us?' Okay, nobody's saying that to me. Fine. So I, you know, have to make my own way. So, he decided after seven years of working at Poplar Forest, that he wanted something new. And so he went to work for a place that was in, is in Washington, DC.

Francesco De Salvatore [00:29:08] And that's how you became involved with, with the committee. The Pilgrimage.

INVOLVEMENT WITH THE PILGRIMAGE

Laura Macaluso [00:29:14] Well, yeah, because, well, I mean, you know, immediately when I got here, like I said, it was just very clear that Lynchburg, Virginia, was not doing the things, not.....Lynchburg, Virginia, was having a Confederate flag exhibit, you know, that would never happen in a place here. So, for me, it was like a refreshing change to be with people or, you know, and to watch, the developments. I mean, the fact that we're doing oral history about this, like I said earlier, a lot of small towns just aren't. I mean, Pennsylvania towns aren't doing oral history. Of course, they should be. They've got labor history. They've got race history too. They've got gender issues. My God, they've got economic, you know, poverty issues like you wouldn't believe, you know? And I know for a fact that Harrisburg, the capital city, is not doing this work. You know? They can barely keep the city together. So.

REFLECTING ON THE PILGRIMAGE EXPERIENCE

Francesco De Salvatore [00:30:15] Um, what were things that stood out to you from the pilgrimage?

Laura Macaluso [00:30:21] So the pilgrimage was intense because it's hard for someone like me who is basically, I'm basically like an introvert, to know that I was going to have to be surrounded by people and on and talking constantly. And so, I think about those things, you know, but it was just something that, an opportunity that I wouldn't have passed by or couldn't pass by. So I'm grateful to have seen these places that I have heard about, especially in the monuments world. I mean, we all followed the opening of the National Memorial for Peace and Justice. You know? We all watched that, and I read about it, and I even did probably a presentation about it, in Turkey, of all places, with a friend of mine who is using that as an example of what is so-called an 'American' monument versus, she's German, so how Europeans make monuments different than what we do. Right? So, I'm grateful to have seen all those things. But there were these, you know, kind of questions. And I don't know if, you know, we want to talk about them, but it's always good to see places because comparison, I know comparison

really isn't, can be really unfair. You know? If you're comparing apples to oranges. But, at the same time, in art history, that's how you're taught to see, right, is through comparison. So, if you put two portraits next to each other and you compare them, you pull them apart piece by piece, then you kind of understand the similarities and the differences that make them what they are. Right? And so, I had never been to Alabama. I don't think. I've not really been to the Deep South. And in fact, my parents live in Florida, but it's a whole different case. You know, Jeff and I always say that, well, you know, we'll never move further south than Virginia. You can take Virginia, but then things get even harder and more intense and uglier, you know, the further you go. So that was like, my probably first experience in Alabama, was on the pilgrimage. And everybody on the bus was terrific. And having your own hotel room at night, for me, was like, really important so that I could kind of decompress and not talk. You know? Just constantly being on is so draining for me. I'm so grateful to have seen and I really enjoyed, I really liked going to the monument because we had a young man who was so good to talk to and so easy to talk to there. And he was one of their paid interpreters and he was from the city and he was really honest with us. And he's like, 'I'm really bored in the city. It's like I'm leaving.' So, we were like, 'Oh, you know, okay, he's like a youth, like everywhere, you know, they want the same things. They want to get out and experience the world.' So yeah, so the museum was like, you know, above and beyond anything that you can imagine. But then, to see the way the rest of the cities were treated in terms of the lack of money going towards preservation. That they were a lot of black run organizations. And so, I think, you know, it was just very clear, and I know we have those challenges here in Alexandria. Although, you know, you've made great strides because of the Freedom House and the monies that are, you know, the amazing grants that you've gotten in the past year or two that are going to transform that place. But, you know, the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, Alabama, you know, this icon that most Americans know through photography, the Edmund Pettus Bridge was just unbelievably under-interpreted. No markers, no interpretive panels. You know, how is anyone to make sense? Well, you had to do the work, I guess, on your own. But, aren't we there as public historians to help people, you know, with that work? And, no, it just wasn't being done. So, and it was really great to talk to, one of my favorite visits actually, was the Art Museum. So beautiful. And we had our last night dinner there, actually. And it was crazy, because here I am from Connecticut, sitting in this huge room. Everybody was so great. I mean, it was really great people on the trip and all of our tour leaders were good and we're surrounded by an exhibit of quilts. So, giant colorful quilts in this dinner hall. We're having dinner and I'm looking across the room and I'm like, 'What story, is that right there?' And the director of the Montgomery Art Museum did her intro and she was like, look, you know, you're sitting amongst this, and it happened to be stories from African-American history, modern quilts. And the story was a New Haven story, the most famous African-American New Haven story about the Amistad, which, you know, is a Steven Spielberg film and all this stuff. So there I was, you know, telling everyone at my table. I was like, that is a New Haven story staring at me in the face. And I'm sitting in Montgomery, Alabama, you know, and it proves, I'm actually doing a talk at the Biggs Museum of Art in Delaware for Juneteenth about the Amistad. It's, I wrote a little book on it, and it's just like, it's a good way to remember that local history is often so much more than that. You know? It belongs to bigger stories, bigger narratives. But it's hard to know that, unless you get out and see it working in other places, you know? So, and the I forgot your question whether I'm so far off track.

Francesco De Salvatore [00:36:44] No, you're good. You're good. You're good. Now you're talking about writing this image, is that right?

Laura Macaluso [00:36:50] Oh, so, yeah, your question was like about the pilgrimage and what I remembered and what is important to me that, you know, that was important to me watching kind of the inner core of people. And I'm not going to list their names, but the committee people and the people's names that I've been watching on the email, you know, and kind of seeing them for the, for me, it would be really the first time in person because the pandemic and all this kind of stuff. You know? It was really kind of nice to, they're very welcoming to, again, what I consider to be an outsider. You know? And then, you know, there were some weird like, I would just say like that that one dinner that you and I mentioned earlier, like that was just weird. And so, there weren't many weird experiences, but that was kind of weird and I'm not quite sure what to make of that. And I think that honing in on that, would be a really interesting way to try and pick apart kind of the issues of running, of trying to, if you will, artificially create this event. Right? A pilgrimage. Right? This kind of artificial creation, that is intended to be meaningful, significant, even spiritual, you know, for a lot of folks. And I think some of those issues kind of came out during that dinner because not everybody's on the, you know, on the same path there.

THE PILGRIMAGE DINNER

Francesco De Salvatore [00:38:25] Can you describe the dinner?

Laura Macaluso [00:38:26] So the dinner was run by a woman who was really, an African-American woman, who was very affected by attending a friend's Jewish Seder dinner. And I think I would be too. But I've never been invited to one, so I can't really say. So, I was curious and I wanted to attend that dinner because I've never been to a Jewish Seder. And so, I wanted to see how she integrated, that was her method, was to integrate African-American history and spirituality into the different foods and actions that you do during a Jewish Seder. And so, when we came into the dining hall, there were round tables and each table had a placemat. And on the placemat were the same things in front of everybody, like a mirror, a piece of cotton boll, I think some peanuts, the booklet that we would read through with her and follow. So, it was also like, a little bit of like call and response because she would talk and we maybe would also read or respond. And there was also singing. She had someone from the audience, you know, a special singer get up during certain things. So, it was very religious, it was very biblical, which makes sense because that's where a lot of spiritualism comes from. And then, you know, and then the thing touching on the Jewish side of things too, and that turned out to be, you know, one of the, I think, really sticky points for some of the folks that I just happened to be sitting at the table with. Like, I didn't know anyone on this trip. You know? I didn't know anyone. So I just felt like, okay, where can I sit? You know, when you're the lone person it's like, 'who's going to let me sit at their table with them?' You know? So, I ended up at this table that happened to have a majority of middle-aged or older white women like me. And then, his first name is, I'm forgetting, but his second name is Chapman, and he runs the Manumission Tours. He was sitting next to me and then an African-American woman was sitting at the table too. And we happened to be actually next to the student tables because the pilgrimage, right, had Alexandria High students with us. And that was also really weird because they were acting up during the dinner, which I wasn't expecting. And

so, again, like, being my age, being my color, I was like, 'Oh, my gosh, you know what's going on here?' Because there was a lot of discontent. We were towards the back and I was watching. The, about the only thing I can do as an art historian is watch and observe and, you know, critique. You know? And a lot of people are really into it. And we're like following along and doing the singing and doing the actions and whatnot. The kids were, most of them were not, and they were actively working against it. Like, when we were supposed to be standing all together, they would purposely sit. They were talking out loud when the speaker was talking. You know, it's like a lot of uncomfortable stuff was happening. And then afterward, we kind of had just a little conversation at our table, and I ended up fighting with the other white women. So, it's just a little weird, you know, about, some of them really felt aggrieved. They felt that they were being put upon. And my feeling wasn't that, you know, that you should just fucking relax and don't put that in, you know, and that it's, we weren't, it wasn't, you know, necessarily meant for us. It didn't have to be about us. It could just be for people that wanted it or needed it and just to let it go. And that's not how they felt. And then the student thing, I had heard later was that, you know, they were also felt very put upon. That they did not want to be exposed to some of that stuff and that they were texting their parents and calling their parents during it. And they became kind of this, you know, bigger thing. So, that made me think about, like, what it means to be, to grow up in the 20th century, like in school. Would you have ever done that? And, you know, I have a very different experience because I went to Catholic school and you would have been in deep trouble. You know, the priest would have come at you. You know, you'd never have done that stuff. And I think about, you know, students these days and monuments. I think about this all the time. It's the young people. It's everyone under the age of 40 who brought those monuments down. It wasn't any adults who took down any monuments in Richmond or anywhere else. You know? And it was really, and I admire them for that, for having the guts to go against the standards line that we have all been fed for decades and centuries. And my generation, Gen X, which has turned out to be a real disappointment to me, you know, because we were just caught, I think, one foot under the baby boomers, our parents, and then another foot, you know, in the 21st century. And we're just not anywhere, we're just in between the, we didn't do anything. We didn't change anything. You know, we just survived. But they're making changes. And it's hard to watch that, you know, because it goes against like how I was brought up. But I still admire it, if that makes any sense. So, yeah, so that's kind of how the dinner went.

CHALLENGES TO APPROACHING DISCUSSIONS ON RACIAL HISTORY

Francesco De Salvatore [00:44:19] You mentioned, you know, being an outsider, you mentioned at the table, a big argument with other people at the table. But I think you said, like, not for, like you use that word, not for our citizens, not for us. What do you mean? Like can you, maybe.....

Laura Macaluso [00:44:34] I.....

Francesco De Salvatore [00:44:35] Tell us a little bit more. Like, this awareness you clearly have about yourself and like, yeah. Maybe tell us a little bit more.

Laura Macaluso [00:44:42] I'd like that to be true. I mean, I would like that to be true. It showed me that, you know, number one liberal thinking is not all, you know, one block of thinking. Right? That

progressive people or liberal people, which there were probably a lot on that pilgrimage, so that maybe a lot of people voting blue or something like that, that we are still very different people coming at what we think is a just world from different perspectives. And, I was, I am someone who, I will pick fights. So that's not like it's something new for me. I do have kind of, even though I'm an introvert, I also have a big mouth and am not shy about speaking up. And maybe that is a form of not knowing myself enough to have said, 'Laura, just step back and let them say what they're going to say.' But, there I was doing my thing and, you know, very weird to be with people who looked like me, who I thought had the same politics as me, you know, have the same gender. They have vaginas and breasts like me. And here they were, you know, saying things that I just did not agree with. And, you know, I just couldn't stop myself. And they were, you know, and I respected them because I knew they were intelligent women and sensitive and, you know, and we're there for the same good reasons that I thought I was there, you know, participating, being supportive. But I don't think, like when I go to the Virginia forum and I present with Leslie King, my colleague, as the white person, I am always going to try to put myself after her. I'm going to let her always speak first. And that's kind of how I try to approach things when it comes to doing cultural heritage together. Because we've had the say all the time. We've always had the say and now it's my turn to step back and to let people of color and, you know, younger folks and, you know, folks with different, different things going on to let them have it. And so that's what happened.

Francesco De Salvatore [00:47:10] Who's we?

Laura Macaluso [00:47:13] Meaning whites. That was. Yeah. So, I felt that as elite white women, elite meaning, you know, we don't worry about where our food comes from. Right? You know, we're solid, whatever middle class people that we didn't have to say anything or do anything that would impede other people's positive experience. And to just let them have, let whoever was having, you know, the time, let them have it in peace and not be a pain in the ass about it. That's what I thought. Like, I don't want to be like, I'm a pain in the ass. So that's the thing. So here I am. One pain in the ass telling the other pains in the asses. Yeah. Self-awareness, though.

NEXT STEPS FOR ALEXANDRIA

Francesco De Salvatore [00:48:03] That's great. I mean, this kind of carries over into, like, the question of, like, what next steps? Like, you went on this pilgrimage, you have a rich career in thinking about, like, public history and how we memorialize history or just think about history. Well, what should we do? What should Alexandria do?

Laura Macaluso [00:48:23] What should

Francesco De Salvatore [00:48:24] What should ACRP [Alexandria Community Remembrance Project] do?

Laura Macaluso [00:48:24] Well, see, that is the thing and the thing is you all, like, constantly are asking people for feedback. Right? It's not like you have a closed circuit. You're always kind of saying to, you're always putting emails out there, doing calls like, 'Please respond to this.' You know? 'Tell us

what you think.' I've seen that you've done that before. I don't know what your response rate is. I'm sure it's not great because, you know, no one's response rate is great unless it's a Tiktok video and, you know, something like this. So, I don't feel like I'm in a position to tell you what you should do because I don't know. You know? And I just, at the beginning of the conversation, before we turn this on, I told you I was going to be a Pollyanna about Alexandria's work, and I am going to be one because, you know, you are trying, for God's sakes. You know? And the thing is, Alexandria has these avenues through which you can travel if we can get people interested. And isn't that the key these days? I mean, the fight now is so elemental because I think technology and the digital world has taken so much of people's brain power and energy. It all goes to your phone now, you know, and that's really not what we do in historic spaces and historic landscapes. We've got these amazing places that are supposed to be evocative of time and place and people, and it's not really supposed to be experienced through a phone. I mean, the phone, the smartphone can help you, can be a tool. But now it's almost like a fight to get anyone to come, very often. I mean, museum visitorship is down, you know, donations are down generally, you know, across the country. It's a hard time. You know? But, I guess one thing I might bring up, and it just happens to be because I'm, you know, working on this in a different context, is this idea of 2026. You know? And this weird, you know, the anniversary coming up, the 250th and we're calling it, me and my friends, we use these words. Is it a celebration? Is it a commemoration or is it a condemnation? Right? Of our history. And we all kind of remember or we've heard the stories about the bicentennial, which was like, you know, big party in a lot of places. And we also know that our country is not in the right mood or our frame of mind to do that kind of thing again. It's a very different place than, you know, 2026 is very different than 1976, although some of us have been around long enough to, you know, we're going to get to experience it twice. So, what is that going to look like? And right now, it is a struggle on the ground. You know? And you all happened to be in Virginia, so you've kind of got this like one leg up because some states to have, you know, they're just like they're not even going to do it. They're not going to touch it. They don't want it. It doesn't mean anything. I don't know. I'm just thinking out loud that maybe, you know, thinking about ways to kind of do Alexandria's version of whatever that might be, whatever the city wants, whatever its people want out of that, you know, is something that you can leverage for, you know, the good of your program. So, I was saying that Alexandria does public history in so many different forms. That if you could just get people to, if you've got an interest in seafaring and maritime history, great. You know? If you've got an interest in Civil War history, great. You know? If you got an interest in French and Indian War history, I mean, you have so many different ways in. It's so rich that, you know, you're very fortunate. And I, you know, and I know you'll all make the best of it. You've got more than most people have. Really. Need to remember that.

CLOSING REMARKS

Francesco De Salvatore [00:52:33] That's great. No, I mean, that's refreshing. That's great. Is there anything, before we close out, is there anything I haven't asked you, that you feel like you want to make sure we get on tape?

Laura Macaluso [00:52:42] I don't think so. I really appreciate, Salvatore, that you took the time to ask me the questions and, you know, listen to my ramble.

Francesco De Salvatore [00:52:50] No, I.

Laura Macaluso [00:52:51] Which I knew it would be.

Francesco De Salvatore [00:52:51] No, I mean, I think. I mean, I think. Um. Yeah. No, thank you so much for sharing and in. Yeah. I mean, you have such like, you've done so much in your career with public history, and so I think you've probably have a lot of insight. Thank you.

Laura Macaluso [00:53:06] You're welcome. Thank you.

Francesco De Salvatore [00:53:08] Great.