

# Approaches to Collaborative Conservation at the Field Museum During the Age of Covid-19

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## Overview

The deinstallation phase of the Field Museum's renovation of its permanent Native North American Hall, was just finishing in March 2020 when the Covid-19 pandemic hit. The pandemic presented unanticipated opportunities to further refine and develop our community outreach practices. A core aim of this renovation project was to collaborate across departments and with community members; this outreach and communication became more accessible and efficient with the technology necessitated by the pandemic. Department schedules were adapted to accommodate the community collaborator's schedule, essentially bringing the museum to the communities. It also became possible to include many more virtual participants in video conferences than could be squeezed into an in person meeting. Further, facilitating and directing meetings via computer technology helped keep all meeting participants focused on what needed to be discussed. Finally, recordings and transcripts of meetings were easy to obtain and Conservation documentation was more readily shared with participants.

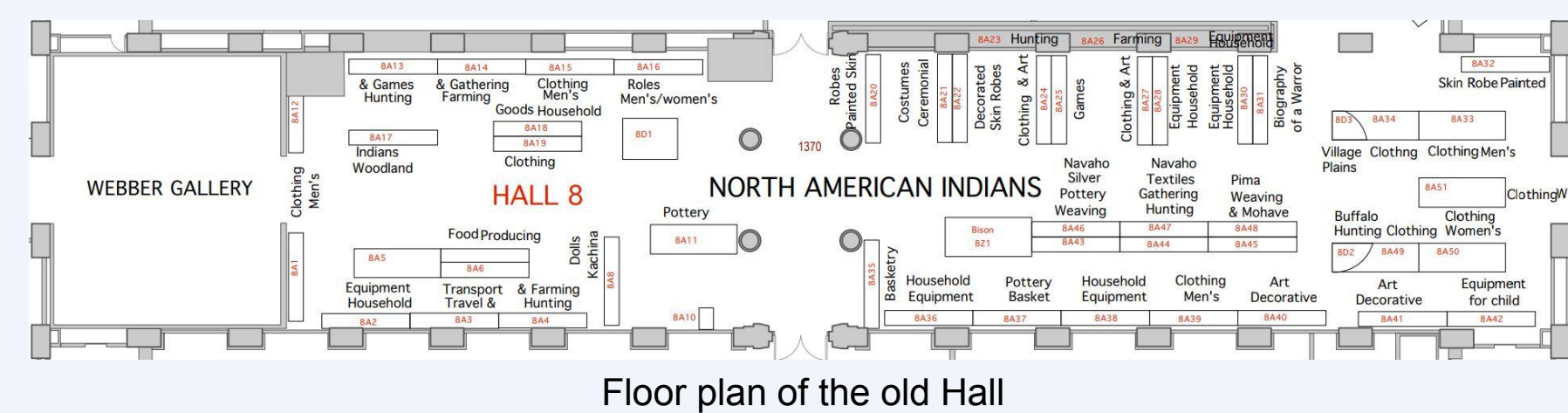


The Field Museum of Natural History

## The Project

### About the Field Museum of Natural History

Founded in 1893, just after Chicago's World Fair, the Field Museum is the world's fourth largest natural history museum with its collection of 30 million items divided into four sections: Anthropology, Botany, Geology, and Zoology. The Anthropology collection comprises 2 million objects - which include archaeological, ethnographic, historic, and artistic material culture from six continents and across time. The Native North American collection of 770,000 items, embedded in the Anthropology collection, is significant and in depth. The Northwest Coast and Plains items are among the most comprehensive collections at any museum.



Floor plan of the old Hall

### About the Renovation

The Conservation Department is participating in a multi-year (2018-22) project to renovate the permanent Native North American Hall (NNAH). The hall is 70 years old and reflects outdated, problematic attitudes towards the procurement and display of Native American cultures and items. The conservation aspect of the project is divided into deinstallation and preparation for installation phases, both of which provide opportunities to challenge these attitudes while updating museum practices for the care of North American items.

The new NNAH exhibition development, designed to change the historical lack of agency suffered by Native Americans in how they are portrayed in museums, will also challenge the narrative that Native Americans are part of the past. An Advisory Committee of Native American tribal leaders, museum professionals, and academics is guiding the project. Collaborators include culture keepers from across North America; a committee of members of Chicago's Native American community; and co-curators from communities whose stories are being told in the exhibition. Several tribal communities will be represented with loans and commissioned items interspersed with museum collection items selected by our collaborators.



Floor plan of the new Hall as of May 6, 2021

The new hall is divided into two transition spaces ("You are on Native Land" and "We Speak for Ourselves"), five story-galleries that will rotate over time (Baskets, Seeds, Flutes, Chaco, and Chicago will be the first stories), five Native Truths sections that will be on display long-term, and the permanent to-scale Pawnee Earth Lodge replica. The five Native Truth sections include: Ancestors, Native People are Everywhere, Connected to Land, Nations, and Native perspectives on the role of the Field Museum.

### Field Museum Pandemic Closures

In early March 2020, the Field Museum began to enact protocols in alignment with the most current recommendations from the CDC, the State of Illinois, and the City of Chicago. On March 13, the Field Museum, along with several other museums in Chicago, announced that it would close on March 14 until March 29 (Johnson 2020). Events and non-essential travel were canceled. All non-essential staff were required to work from home to reduce the amount of people in the building and to make safer working conditions for essential staff. All staff were strongly encouraged to follow CDC protocols: to stay at home if not feeling well, to wear face masks, to wash hands for 20 seconds, and to maintain-social distancing (approximately 6 feet or 2 meters) from others as much as possible. A limited number of staff were allowed to go on site. In the Anthropology Department, one staff member came on site to check on the collections weekly.

After Illinois Governor JB Pritzker enacted a stay-at-home order on March 20 and several following extensions (Wikipedia 2021), the museum remained closed to visitors until mid-July and closed again in December and January. Some staff began coming back on site at 25% maximum building capacity prior to the public reopenings, with mandatory temperature checks and the above safety protocols in place. Staff were required to select on site days in advance, while volunteers, docents, and visitors to collections were still not allowed to return to the Museum.

## Adaptations

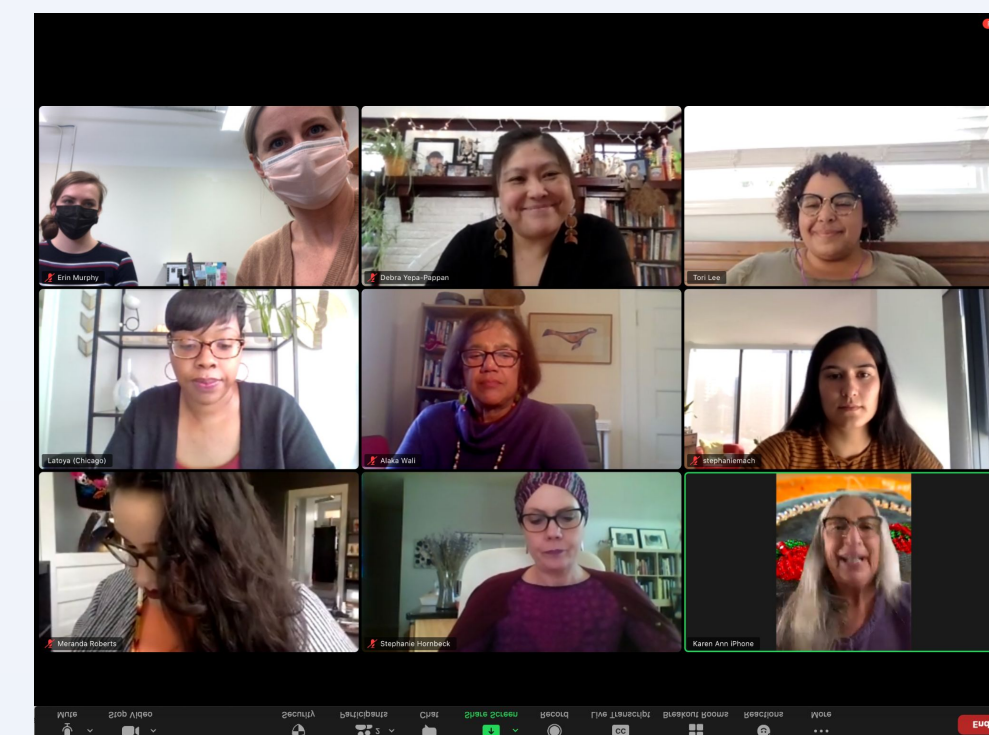
### Developing Virtual Collaborative Meeting & Documentation

The deinstallation phase was winding down in late February/early March 2020 as the project team was transitioning into the re-installation phase. Only a handful of on site visits with collaborators had occurred and the conservation team was in the process of moving out of a temporary workspace in the NNAH gallery that was used as part of the deinstallation process, as the Hall remained open during that phase. The decision to close for two weeks came up quickly and staff had to make preparations for the museum's closure days before it was announced. There was a rush to get things wrapped up before the museum closed and little time to prepare for what would extend to several months of working from home. Zoom, Slack, Google Suite, and VPN access to KE EMU became the de facto methods for connecting while working remotely.

The most obvious change during the pandemic is that there were no more meetings on the Field Museum campus. Clearly this meant that meeting participants could not meet in person, but it also meant that the dynamic changed in subtler ways. When meeting at the Field, collaborators are brought into a large institution where the conversation takes place in our space, as our guests. With Zoom, we are suddenly in each other's homes, and this tends to level our interactions. We are also able to meet more frequently, which makes it easier to develop a true relationship.

The conservation staff had been working since the beginning of this project to be included in all collaborative community outreach aspects of the development of the new NNAH. Due to the organizational structure of the museum, new exhibits are developed in large part by the Exhibitions Department, which reported to the Chief Marketing Officer at the time. Conservation, Collections, and Anthropology Curation are in the Science and Education section. The two sections are parallel, not hierarchical. Consequently, the importance of our collaborative conservation contribution was not necessarily understood by Exhibitions. The Field Museum, like many large institutions, suffered from a traditional siloed bureaucracy. We needed to expand outreach not only to outside collaborators, but to strengthen communication between museum departments.

Prior to the work-from-home directives, we were making steady if incremental headway with our internal communication objectives. However, with the advent of the new protocols and Zoom meetings, inclusion happened much more easily because virtual meetings could accommodate numerous participants. It is possible that some communication enhancements would have happened eventually since our use of Zoom and virtual meeting technology was already beginning to increase before the pandemic. However, when the conditions changed so abruptly out of necessity, all contributors had to adapt quickly and communication was radically enhanced with remote consultants.

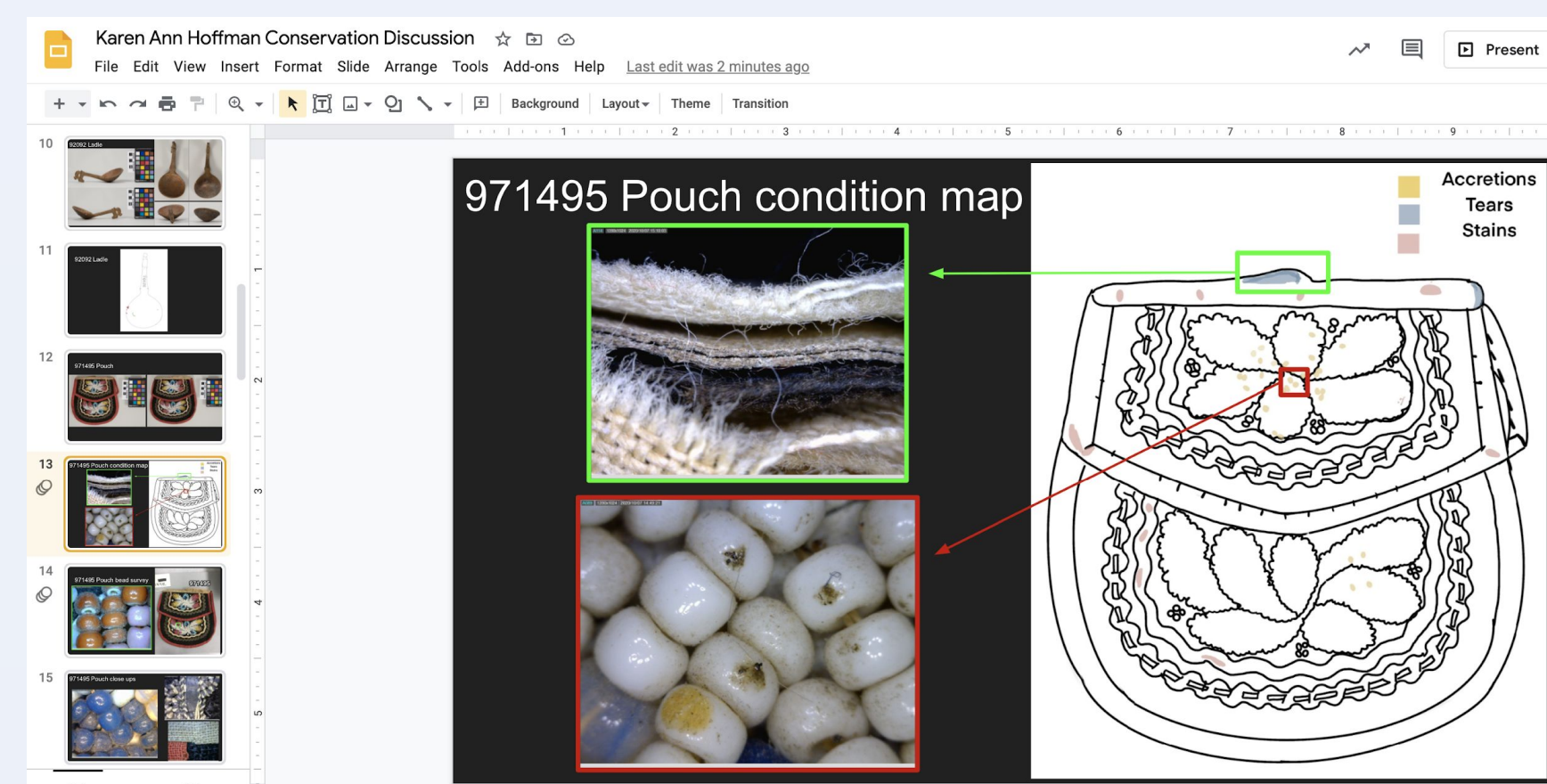


Screen shot from virtual meeting with Co-curator Karen Ann Hoffman and many different museum departments

In general, collaborative multi-department meetings are scheduled every two weeks, with Conservation occasionally leading the meeting. We found it helpful to start with a statement about Conservation's philosophy of reversibility so that the co-curator/collaborator knew we will not damage the items while we treat them. We then share a prepared slideshow with detailed high resolution conservation photographs of the pieces under discussion, as well as condition maps and macro photographs to help participants understand the condition and any specific treatment challenges. Photographs of significant details and information about specific treatment plans (such as pictures of previously treated pieces) can easily be shared. Since most of the pieces for display were chosen remotely, often our photographs give participants their first good look at the items being discussed. This detailed slideshow forms the basis of conservation's collaborative document.

At the beginning of these meetings, we always ask for permission to record the session and attach the recordings into KE EMU. This Zoom feature allows us to add a meeting transcript to the conservation document. Our collaborators are invited to share their ideas, concerns and suggestions at any time. When the meeting is over we share this conservation document with collaborators, so they also have a record of what was discussed. They can also amend their shared information in the future if desired.

A similar summary document is also sent to each Tribal Historic Preservation Officer (THPO), so that they have the opportunity to comment on the proposed treatment before it is undertaken.



Example of conservation's collaborative discussion slides

## Case Study: Karen Ann Hoffman Conservation Discussion

### Profile:

Karen Ann Hoffman is an Iroquois Raised Beadworker from the Oneida Nation of Wisconsin, part of the Iroquois (Haudenosaunee) Confederacy. Samuel Thomas and the late Lorna Hill were her teachers. She was awarded a National Endowment for the Arts National Heritage Fellowship, the nation's highest honor in folk and traditional arts. Several of her pieces are included in the Field Museum collection.



Photo by Mike Hoffman

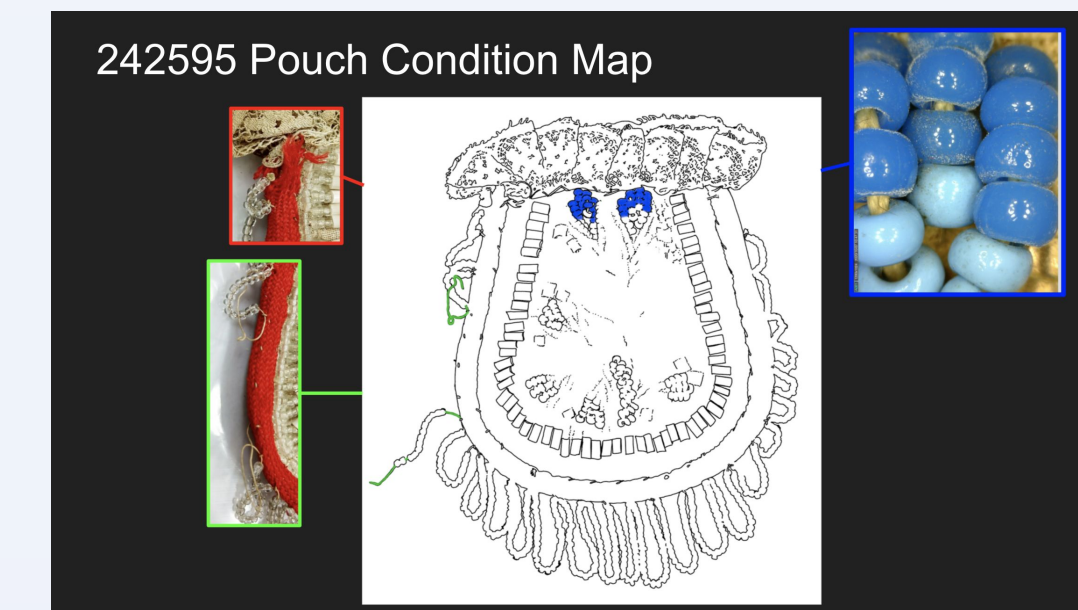
"Because you must always do your best work, you're free to be excellent. Because you may never take a stitch without it having a meaning, you're free to be thoughtful. Because what you do stands for the people, your ego is free from being part of the piece and lets you focus on what's really Iroquois and what's really important." - Karen Ann Hoffman

### Outreach Discussion:

#### Field Museum items

During the collegial virtual meetings we had with Karen Ann Hoffman, we shared detailed pictures of the pieces that had been chosen for the exhibit as well as condition maps highlighting the damaged areas. We outlined treatment possibilities for the pieces and our decision process that got us there. We also were able to discuss how she takes care of her items at home, details about the making process, and if she had any recommendations. She mentioned that one of the first things to break on a piece is always the dangles, so she tends to use double threads to reinforce them. She recommended that we use this method when securing the beads on this pouch in our collection.

The easy give-and-take facilitated by this type of discussion allows both Field Museum staff and our collaborators to exchange knowledge on pieces and materials in general. For instance, Karen Ann Hoffman also shared information on types of beads and common colors from the 1890s, stating that there was a time when white milk glass was painted over with gold paint. We also discussed glass disease which she called 'white powder disease', and we talked about the chemical deterioration that was happening during this process.



Pouch currently at the Field Museum under discussion. Photographs and condition map shared with Karen Ann Hoffman to facilitate discussion. Photos by Field Museum Conservation Dept

### Karen Ann Hoffman's artwork

We were able to discuss her work and addressed what level of intervention she would prefer as the pieces age. She confirmed that if still alive, she would like to fix any damage to her work herself. What does she see for the future? She asserted that her work should 'age gracefully', and undergo 'proper care' using 'simple remedies' and 'minor repairs'. Natural deterioration is fine. For example, on her piece *Sky Woman* she approved cleaning, dusting, fixing a fine thread here and there, lubing the joints, polishing the brass, but 'if the damage is irreversible 'just let her go'. It made us feel good that in the end she stated "*Sky Woman* couldn't get any better care than at The Field Museum."



Karen Ann Hoffman with her artwork *Sky Woman* on the left (https://news.continuingstudies.wisc.edu) and *Thunderbird Whimsey* and *Great Bear Hunt* shown on the right

## An Evolving Process

**Our collaborative outreach efforts are continually evolving.** However, the importance of several aspects have asserted themselves again and again:

- Flexibility is extremely important. We need to be available to discuss things both formally and informally according to our collaborator's schedule. Schedules will change, especially in the time of a pandemic.
- It is important to use multiple methods to relay information.
- Respect your collaborator's time. Many have multiple (and more important) commitments. Give support and space to our collaborators when they need it.
- We need to be ready to reevaluate our process.
- Transparency and sharing is key.
- Monetary compensation is very important even while working remotely.

### Pros and Cons of our current virtual meeting process:

**Pro:** All of the information is easily recordable once we get permission from our collaborators to do so.

**Pro:** Everyone is looking at and talking about the same thing at the same time - it is helpful to have everything on one screen!

**Pro:** We get to meet biweekly regularly, allowing us to develop a relationship and share information more broadly. Due to this there is a level of trust and comfort when sharing unique and unexpected information.

**Con:** Collaborators can only see what we present to them on the screen or shared electronically. Thus the discussion will be directed through our lens to a certain extent.

**Pro:** However, we can show them more than we would be able to in a one-day visit and revisit items or ideas whenever necessary.

## Conclusion

The computer-based, virtual system that we have worked to get into place during the pandemic has several key advantages. It facilitates the ability of staff from all departments to attend meetings and makes our collaborators like-wise more available. This has enabled the Conservation Department to reach out more efficiently and broadly, and allowed us to foster relationships both within the museum and with our collaborators. We have developed a comprehensive communication procedure that helps to direct all of us and will serve as a conservation record.

So much electronic information has been gathered during this time that we are still processing it all. We hope to have a more complete idea of the outcomes of all our virtual collaborations over the coming year. We are also currently working on developing our future collaborative outreach practices. For instance, how do we merge these virtual collaborative methods developed during Covid-19 with the essential need for our collaborators to visit the museum in person? It looks like a combination of both of these meeting types will be essential in the future.

Covid-19 has had a terrible impact on Native communities. It is essential that we try to understand the personal issues faced by our collaborators and recognize that this project is not their priority. Being sensitive to these issues is part of building the relationships essential for good collaboration to take place.

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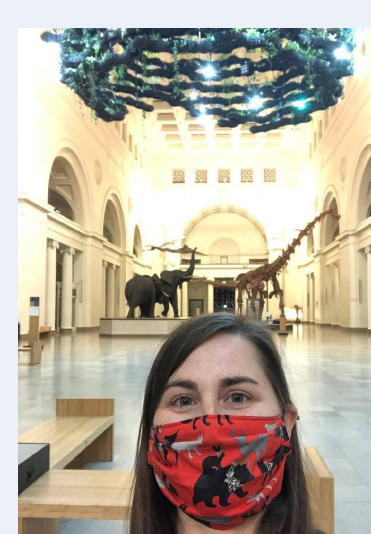
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## Acknowledgements and Biographies

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