

## MTHS Delivers at Successful Conference in Great Falls

More than 300 history buffs gathered in Great Falls on Sept. 26-28 for the 51st Annual Montana History Conference.

This year's theme, "Central to History," highlighted Great Falls and Central Montana with a wide range of topics, including industrial, agricultural, military, and women's history; Indigenous heritage and culture; and more.


The conference kicked off with guided tours of the Black Eagle Dam powerhouse, the town of Fort Benton, and Malmstrom Air Force Base. It concluded with an Indigenous team-making workshop and tours of Little Shell tribal sites, Fort Shaw, and the town of Belt. A walking tour also was given for the Electric City's historic Northside.

"The Great Falls area has so much to offer from a historical perspective, and the tours showcased various aspects of the greater Electric City and Fort Benton areas," noted Christine Brown, who puts together the conference for the MTHS. "Attendees just love the opportunity to see where history happened and be immersed in

local heritage and culture with guides who make the story come alive."

Conference-goers also appreciated the opportunity to hear from historians, authors, and educators, as well as students, who lectured on a wide range of Central Montana history topics.

Keynote speakers included 2023-2024 Montana Poet Laureate Chris La Tray, a Metis storyteller and enrolled member of the Little Shell Tribe of Chippewa Indians; and cowboy poet Randy Rieman, who gave a colorful presentation on Charlie Russell's illustrated letters. Troy Hallsell spoke on building Malmstrom's missile fields in Central Montana; additionally, Mariah Gladstone – Piikuni (Blackfeet) and Tsalagi (Cherokee) – discussed a history of Indigenous food systems and the relationship between cultural identity, health, and native plants and animals. University students also presented posters on their undergraduate and graduate research topics.

Next year's conference will be held in Helena on Sept. 25-27, 2025. 



Randy Rieman



Troy Hallsell



Mariah Gladstone



Chris La Tray

## Hands-On History at Carroll College

During the 2024 spring semester, MTHS interpretive historian Melissa Hibbard used Hands on History Footlockers to teach pre-service teachers

at Carroll College in Helena about Montana history and lesson planning.

Throughout the semester, students worked with footlockers related to

homesteading, mining, fur trapping, and World War II, updating existing lessons and creating new ones. Their professor, Justine Alberts (now curriculum direc-

tor for the Helena School District), required students to make sure lessons aligned with fourth-grade standards in social studies and "Hands on" (cont. on p. 3)

## Kindness



At the Montana Historical Society, we practice kindness. Those of you who have interacted with the programs at the Society recognize that we value service, and we especially value service with kindness.

In my years working in our public reference room, we practiced kindness toward our many researchers

and ensured they had access to every piece of information that might meet their needs. As part of our culture, we enjoy leaving no paper unturned in the quest to find accurate information for our patrons.

Kindness is practiced in our State Historic Preservation Office. These incredible historians go above and beyond to ensure our rich, place-based history is preserved. Recently, when Missoula experienced overwhelming damage from summer storms, our SHPO team responded immediately to review requests to ensure federal disaster funds could be received.

Our front-line staff works diligently to connect shoppers, visitors, and information seekers with what they need. Whether asked about books or Montana-made items, our store associates go the extra mile to fill customers' requests. In serving Montana's students and educators, our tour guides expertly answer questions and provide insights into Montana's storied past.

During this incredibly busy and challenging time with the construc-

tion of the Montana Heritage Center, it's equally important that Society staff treat one another with kindness. As we work through the many challenges that come with a large and complicated project, it's imperative to show empathy and compassion. Recognizing the decisions and deadlines that each of us faces every day, we are considerate of the pressures and practice thoughtfulness toward one another.

I am fortunate to work with a team of talented, dedicated professionals. Without the wealth of skills present throughout the Society, we could not have begun to approach the construction and operation of the Montana Heritage Center. And it is only due to their passion and willingness to go the extra mile that we will open the new building with all new exhibits and many new services in 2025.

By practicing kindness with one another, we can accomplish great things. And I'm privileged to work with an incredibly kind group of people.



## MTHS Aids Helena Indian Alliance Preservation Effort



Lee "Leo" Pocha

In April, members of the Helena Urban Indian Community worked with the Helena Indian Alliance and the Montana Historical Society Outreach and Education Program to digitize photographs, artwork, and records of community events to provide a record of their 20th- and 21st-century urban Indian life.

The MTHS then worked with the Montana History

Portal to upload the files and make them available to the public.

Quincy Bjornberg, who does cultural outreach with Helena Indian Alliance, explained the significance of the project.

"It's just important to have Montana history within our own voices, the people of Montana, especially Native American people because history usu-

ally isn't told by our side of the story," Bjornberg said. "So it's good to just have our voices in there."

Materials can be viewed on the Montana History Portal under the heading [Montana Urban Indian Collection](#).





# Great Falls' Union Bethel AME Receives African American Civil Rights Grant

The Montana Historical Society (MTHS) recently was awarded a \$497,712 grant to stabilize and provide safe access to the historic Union Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church (AME) in Great Falls.

The funding comes through the Department of Interior's National Park Service, which is home to the Historic Preservation Fund's African American Civil Rights grant program. The program focuses on preserving sites and stories directly associated with African Americans' struggles to gain equal rights.

Union Bethel AME church stands as one of the most significant properties associated with Montana's African American civil rights history. Organized in 1890, congregants dedicated Union Bethel's current church in 1917. By the 1910s, discriminatory "Jim Crow" laws had infiltrated

Montana's codes and local ordinances, placing restrictions on Black residents' ability to marry, work, and patronize businesses. Unofficial but pervasive policies placed many constraints on African Americans. In response, Union Bethel AME became the center of Great Falls African American citizens' civil rights work for social uplift, education, and equality at the local, state, and national levels.

Pastor Betsy Williams describes the Gothic Revival-style church as a jewel in the neighborhood.

"I see life that comes from here," Williams said. "It's a shining brightness ... in the middle of this neighborhood; [it] is somewhere where you can gather, where there can be resources, where there can be help, where there can be spiritual uplifting."

She thanked MTHS historian Kate Hampton, who wrote the grant pro-

posal, for her active participation in preservation, noting, "She is the soul of the historic building, ensuring that AME's heritage is remembered and cherished."

This grant, together with the church's additional \$200,000 grant from the National Trust for Historic Preservation's Saving Black Churches program, will fund repairs to the failing exterior brick, the installation of a new lift to provide access, creation of ADA-compliant bathrooms, and updates to the electrical system. The MTHS will provide technical guidance, as church leadership, community members, local government officials, preservation professionals, and craftspeople make the building safe and usable for another century of service. ▼▼▼

## "Hands On" (cont. from p. 1)

science, as well as Indian Education for All essential understandings.

At the end of the semester, students presented their trunk revisions to faculty and MTHS Outreach and Education staff.

"Working with the Montana Historical Society and updating their trunks was one of the most beneficial projects that I have completed as an education student at Carroll College," said Brooke Vandehey, an elementary education major from North Plains, Oregon. "I loved getting to collabo-

rate with MTHS and create a project that not only taught me valuable lessons on unit designing but also ended with a physical representation of our work that will be implemented in many different classrooms for years to come."

Joe Helbling, director of teacher education at Carroll, said he was impressed by the dedication and creativity the pre-service teachers demonstrated in this project.

"Knowing that their work would directly impact real classrooms across Montana heightened their motivation and commitment. ... It's



Outreach and Education Program manager, Martha Kohl, listens as students present their proposed updates to "From Traps to Caps," a footlocker on the Montana fur trade.

projects like these that prepare our future educators to make a meaningful difference in the lives of their students," Helbling said.

To learn more about MTHS Hands on History Footlockers, visit <https://mhs.mt.gov/education/HandsonHistory>. ▼▼▼

# Five Educators join MTHS Teacher Leader Program

Five educators from across Montana are now “history missionaries” as part of the Teacher Leaders in Montana History Program.

The teachers include Chris Dantic of Terry, Vicky Nytes of Superior, Mary Zuchowski of Frazer, Heath Nordquist of Missoula, and Kim Konen of Dillon.

They’re in addition to 11 existing history Teacher Leaders in Montana, who help write lesson plans, mentor teachers in best practices in history education, and share Montana and Indian education-related resources with fellow educators. They do this in one-on-one sessions, as well as by presenting at regional and statewide conferences.

The five give a range of reasons for being in the Montana Historical Society’s Teacher Leader program.

Zuchowski initially didn’t realize how important the training would be for her.

“It is fantastic to work with a crew of like-minded fans of history,” she

said. “I’m also excited to have an outlet to inform others of ways to incorporate Montana and tribal histories in their lesson plans at the high school level. Bringing history alive and relevant in our current world is a blast.”

Konen notes that she loves history and teaching it.

“The Teacher Leader program will be very impactful for myself and other teachers to learn how to incorporate Montana history in their curriculums,” she said.

Nordquist also feels lucky to serve with other educators who try to provide the best and most up-to-date information about Montana’s history.

“This team is dedicated to making the students of Montana understand and appreciate our unique culture, landscape, human history, and ancient topics as well,” he said.

Dantic is inspired to learn from the best and share it with others.


“I want to be able to present to

other teachers what works in the classroom, from lessons to strategies to the most updated methods being used,” Dantic said. “I’m excited I was selected to be part of this elite group.”

Nytes also is excited to join with educators across the state who love teaching history as much as she does.

“I look forward to sharing the great resources of the Montana Historical Society with other educators throughout the year,” she said.

Martha Kohl, the MTHS Outreach and Education Program manager, noted that since they started the Teacher Leader program in 2017, the fellows have made a real difference.

“MTHS is committed to serving every corner of the state – and working with Teacher Leaders from Culbertson in the east, Eureka in the west, Sunburst in the north, and Dillion in the south makes that possible,” she said. 

## New Employees



**Dave Colamaria**, the new MTHS photo archivist, grew up in Massachusetts, where his love of camping, skiing, and history led him to consider pursuing degrees in forestry or archaeology. His practical

side won out, though, and he earned an engineering degree and did data analysis in Boston and Washington, D.C.

Colamaria next earned a master’s degree in history at George Mason University, where he met Professor Paula Petrik, a former MTHS board member. He also discovered the Navy’s official history command in D.C. and fell in love with the collections in their photo archives. He secured a job as a Navy photo archivist, working with the personal collec-

tions of famous admirals like Chester Nimitz and Ernest King for more than a decade. He also enjoyed launching off the deck of an aircraft carrier.

In 2019, his wife Angie accepted a job in Helena with the Department of Environmental Quality, and on their first weekend in Helena – before they had even moved here – they toured the exhibits on display at the MTHS. Colamaria decided his goal was to get a job in the photo archives.

He first worked in

records management at the Montana Highway Patrol, managing their crash photography. In 2021 he joined the Montana State Library working on the Montana History Portal, which is the online home to MTHS digitized photography.

For nearly three years he worked with the 10,000 digitized images from the MTHS Photo Archives, getting to know Montana photography legends, and is thrilled to finally be here working at the MTHS.

“New” (cont. on p. 5)

“New” (cont. from p. 4)



**Cindy Davis** is a new MTHS accountant.

Davis was born in California and lived in Guam and Washington state.

She has worked for the state for three years, beginning with the Department of Health and Human Services as a general ledger accountant.

“I have been in Montana for five years and absolutely love it,” Davis said. “I always wanted to be an accountant. When I was 12 years old, my stepdad let me keep the books for his trucking business. Back in those days we used the old T-account worksheets. From then on, I knew that was my calling.”

Davis had been a stay-at-home mom, but she attended college in her 40s and earned her accounting degree.

She has four grown children living in California, Washington state, and Helena, plus three grandchildren and another on the way.

In her spare time, Davis and her husband enjoy

photographing wildlife, exploring the history of Montana, traveling, and being outdoors.

“I am thrilled to be a part of the Montana Historical Society and look forward to learning more about Montana and her history,” Davis said.



**RJ Hillman** is the State Historic Preservation Office’s newest review and compliance officer. Born in Hornell, New York, Hillman grew up exploring the dense forests and pristine lakes of his home state, acquiring an appreciation for the outdoors and the rich history it holds.

He attended Alfred University, where he studied American history with a focus on environmental history.

After completing his bachelor’s degree, Hillman moved to Fort Collins, where he received his master’s in cultural resources management and historic preservation from Colorado State University. His master’s work focused on the policy and practices that guide and inform

cultural resources management. He also studied ways of integrating the management of natural and cultural resources to create land management plans that combine the needs and use of natural and historic resources.

In his down time, Hillman enjoys hunting, hiking, fishing, cooking (especially barbecue), learning new skills, and pursuing personal history projects. Currently he is learning wood carving and studying the history and impact of whitetail deer hunting in post-World War II America. Hillman also enjoys visiting breweries and looks forward to meeting new people and integrating himself in Montana.

He is excited to return to a rural setting and explore the expansive public lands and wild side of Montana.

“I look forward to using my education and skillset to protect Montana’s historic resources and ensure that Montanans have places that highlight the state’s unique history,” Hillman said.

**Becca Jones**, the MTHS assistant store manager, spent her childhood split between southern Idaho with her parents and central California with her extended family. Spending the school year in a small rural town in Idaho (population 500!) and the summer visiting family in



California cities created a dichotomy of “home” for her – comfortable both on the farm and in the city.

Jones came to Helena when she started college at Carroll, graduating with bachelor’s degrees in biology and chemistry with a focus in plant biology and biochemistry. After college she decided to stay in Helena, where downtown was starting to come alive, and nature was just outside her door.

Realizing a life spent in a lab was not for her, she switched career fields and went into hospitality, working at The Hawthorn for more than seven years, where she still works events and the occasional night shift. Learning about the process of making wine, from the ground to the bottle, cemented her love for wine.

Her favorite time of the year is autumn, when she can hike with her two dogs, or winter, when she can curl up and read with her three cats.

“I pretty much live in a zoo,” Jones said. “I never

“New” (cont. on p. 6)

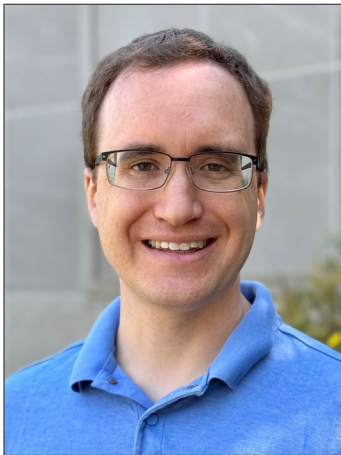


“New” (cont. from p. 5)

expected to have so many animals, but they are well worth the hassle.”

Her summer weekends are normally spent camping at the lake or out of town with her partner, John. Having recently moved into a house in the Helena Valley, Jones spends many nights and weekends gardening or working around the house.

“I’m excited to spend time learning more about the history of Montana and the people who call it home,” Jones added. “Everyone has been so welcoming and passionate. I know I’m going to love it here.”



**Terence Kratz** is the new digital projects archivist at the Montana Historical Society.

Kratz grew up in Los Angeles and earned a master’s degree in library and information science at University of California – Los Angeles in 2010. He worked on digital projects with the Pasadena Digital History Collaboration and

the Altadena Historical Society before moving to Montana in 2012 to work as the systems and web services librarian at Carroll College.

“I’m excited to be a part of the MTHS and am looking forward to working on projects to expand online access for Montanans to historical photographs, manuscripts, and exhibits,” Kratz said. “At the same time, I will also be working to preserve archival materials and state records that were originally created and exist only in an electronic format.

“If you think about it, nearly everything we create today in terms of information, whether it be a document, correspondence, photograph, or video, is digital. But the electronic files we create in our work and our daily lives are more fragile than many people realize, and the historical records they represent face serious risk of disappearing forever. That’s why the MTHS is working hard to implement the tools and techniques that will help to preserve Montana’s digital history for future generations.”

In his spare time, Kratz likes to kayak the lakes and rivers around Helena, collect Japanese and Chinese paintings and woodblock prints, cook, and go on picnics with his wife, Anna.



**Sue Leferink** is the new IT system administrator.

She has lived in various parts of western Montana since she was 5, exploring the outdoors and living off the land. When in town, she was often found at the local library with her nose in a book.

Leferink graduated from Helena High School and majored in business marketing at Montana State University. She then moved back to Helena with her husband, Richard.

During high school, Leferink learned customer service while working at the Helena Chamber of Commerce. After eight years in retail, she switched to IT in state government and obtained a master’s degree in e-government online from the University of Maryland. She now has 27 years of experience in IT, having worked at the Department of Public Health and Human Services, Montana Department of Commerce, and Montana Public Employee Retirement Administration.

Leferink has been

a garden club member for more than 30 years, working on various local projects including the Cooney Home, Original Governor’s Mansion, Reeder’s Alley, Tizer Gardens, and Montana Wild. Among other volunteer activities, she has acted as the laundress, seamstress, and Chinese gardener for the Nevada City, Montana, living history program.

In her free time, Leferink loves traveling, gardening, cooking, hiking, scuba diving, reading in her hammock, and learning about other cultures. She is very excited to dive into her new position and looks forward to serving the MTHS staff and customers.



**Devon Malizia** joined the Montana Historical Society in December 2023 as the MT250 program coordinator. In this role, she supports the MT 250 Commission as it implements an overall program to build public awareness of and foster public participation in celebrating and

“New” (cont. on p. 7)

“New” (cont. from p. 6)

commemorating the 250th anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence.

Malizia went to college at the University of Pennsylvania, taking classes just down the street from where the Declaration of Independence was initially signed in 1776. Upon graduation, she moved to Kathmandu to work as a photojournalist during the height of the Nepalese civil war. This stint kicked off a 15-year career in media, marketing, and public relations with relocations to San Francisco, Houston, and New York City.

“Along the way, I became an avid trail runner and an unapologetically obsessive gardener, which also led to my launching my own landscape design company,” Malizia said.

Since 2019, she has lived in Helena with her husband, three children, a geriatric cat, and an enormous Newfoundland (that has been mistaken for a bear on more than one occasion). She is thrilled to be part of the Montana Historical Society.

“The U.S. Semiquincentennial is a big, complex, and meaningful event,” Malizia said. “Montana has so many voices, perspectives, and stories to bring to light and honor as we continue our ongoing American experiment. I’m proud to be part of its legacy.”



**Randa Renenger** is the Montana Historical Society’s new human resources generalist.

She previously was employed at the Public Service Commission for almost two years and at the Office of Public Instruction for five years. Most of her state career has been in payroll, which gave her a great introduction into HR.

Renenger was born and raised in Three Forks, Montana, and graduated from Three Forks High School. She attended Montana State University – Billings and received a bachelor’s degree in elementary education. After graduation, she taught kindergarten in Willow Creek, Montana, for two years. She then moved to the Helena area, after meeting her husband from Montana City.

She and her husband have a 4-year-old daughter, a 2-year-old son, and a Catahoula lab named Fitz. They enjoy camping, riding side by sides, fishing, and boating.



**Carly White** is a new tour guide with the MTHS and is working in the Outreach and Education office. White is a Helena native and grew up surrounded by the Montana outdoors and its rich history. She loves her home state.

She spent her youth as a dancer with the Creative Arts Center/Premiere Dance Company. In high school she enjoyed taking theater classes but loved being in front of a crowd long before then. After graduating from Capital High, White attended the University of Calgary to study ancient/medieval history, with a minor in museum/heritage studies.

She spent a brief time at the Loughheed House in Calgary, where she learned to love small, local heritage institutions and historical houses. Her special interests are in Greco/Roman art/culture/architecture, mythology, numismatics, Latin and Ancient Greek languages, and the ancient history of the Mayans and Aztecs.

White recently moved back to Montana and is

excited to apply her knowledge in the Classics to Montana history.

“The second half of my degree was spent in lockdown in Canada, so I’m especially energized to be back out in the public and dropping some serious history knowledge,” White said.

White also works at The Myrna Loy, and enjoys spending time with her two cats, Figaro and Cleo, catching local shows and concerts, and delving deeper into pepper farming. She’s an avid Swiftie, too, and would love to talk your ear off about “Mother” Swift.

“I am very excited to be on this new journey with the MTHS and hope everyone catches a free tour soon at the Capitol or the Original Governor’s Mansion,” White said. “I am as excited as everyone else is to see the new building finished.”

## ABOUT US

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## Big Sky~Big History

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Thanks to our  
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*MaryAnne George and Laura Marsh participated in Juneteenth events, which included an egg and spoon race.*