

Episode 1, 2023/1973: In Conversation
Stories and Histories

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SPEAKERS

Michele Anstine, Tom Byrne, Barbara Benson

Tom Byrne 00:11

In 1973, what's now known as Delaware humanities was born, beginning its mission to strengthen communities across the state by connecting Delawareans through the diversity of human experiences. Now, five decades later, Delaware humanities continues that work, promoting a respectful exchange of ideas to help the first state do its part to build a flourishing democracy. And to help celebrate these 50 years, we bring you 2023 1973 in conversation, a podcast focused on the conversations Delaware humanities has engaged in with Delawareans over the years, and continues to encourage today in the first state. This podcast is brought to you by Delaware humanities, a state affiliate of the National Endowment for the Humanities, and 2023 1973 in conversation is produced by Delaware Public Media, Delaware source for NPR News. Thanks for joining us on 2023 1973. In conversation as we celebrate 50 years of Delaware humanities, I'm your host, Tom Byrne. In this first episode, we want to offer an overview of the history of Delaware humanities, looking at how it started, and the issues that events that shaped it through the years, think of it and this podcast Overall this year, as a conversation about the conversations that have defined Delaware humanities over the years, and are setting its agenda into the future. To help us do that. On this inaugural episode, we are joined by the current Executive Director of Delaware humanities, Michelle, and Stein, who has been with Delaware humanities since 2018. We are also joined by Barbara Benson, past member of the Delaware humanities board in the late 1980s, and early 1990s, who also served as board president at one time. So to both you, Michelle, and to Barbara, thank you so much for joining us on 2023 1973 in conversation. Thank you, Tom. Thank you. So I want to start by noting the fact that the two of you know each other. So I'm going to ask, I guess we'll start with Michelle, how did you guys meet?

Michele Anstine 02:21

Well, I was a young, just out of having earned my undergrad degree in in history when I applied to work at the Delaware Historical Society. And Barbara Benson was the director of the historical society at the time. So although she wasn't my direct supervisor, when I started, I guess I could consider her my first boss in a professional situation.

Tom Byrne 02:54

And so Barbara, what are your recollections of meeting Michelle and, and kind of forging a relationship with her around not just against the Delaware historical society, but also, eventually into what we're talking about here, then Delaware humanities

Barbara Benson 03:09

are very clearly remember. First meeting, Michelle, she was very impressive beyond where she was academically at that time, and also very, very interested in committing herself to history, particularly, not just Delaware history, but public history, and she was very engaged with the public. And I thought that was really a very, very good quality to get in someone.

Tom Byrne 03:40

And certainly, I guess that is a larger portion of how you both kind of gravitated toward Delaware humanities. I guess, using your history and your interest in history and your study of history as a conduit. Barbara, I'll ask you specifically how you initially got involved with Delaware humanities, what drew you to the organization?

Barbara Benson 04:02

That's interesting, because when I, I came to Delaware in 1973, to work at Hagley. And I believe that's the year. Michelle, is that the year that they'll or humanities started, basically. Yeah, it is. And so I knew about the National Endowment for the Humanities, and they were opening these state programs. But I didn't think much about them because they didn't really affect my life very much. Until I started at the Historical Society when it was a conduit to gain support for programs that we wanted to do that had broad, let's say, public interest. And so then I became very interested in the historic in the Humanities Forum. I was invited to join the board and then there I was,

Tom Byrne 05:00

Michelle, for you. How did you wind up going to Delaware humanities being led to Delaware humanities, I assume it's kind of a simple maybe a similar path to Barbara's

Michele Anstine 05:09

actually it is I think I can build off of what Barbara has already said. But definitely, during my time at the Historical Society, Delaware humanities, Delaware humanities form, as it was, at the time, was just so important. For the work that we were doing, whether it was for producing exhibits or conversations, lectures for the public, really, it was probably on a local level, one of the few if not the only organization that really was focusing on that type of humanities work and funding that sort of humanities work through grant making. And so I think that that was something that definitely interested me, when I knew that the prior director right before me was retiring. And I think also my trajectory, I had been with the Historical Society for over two decades, and definitely felt like I had, I learned so much, but I also felt like I was getting to a point in my career, where I needed a little bit of a shift. And I had earned my Master's degree in liberal studies, which, I mean, when does that happen? Usually people specialize, they get, you know, more specific, right when

they're getting their advanced degrees. But I went, you know, sort of broader, and I found that I was working with a lot of people. When I was directing the historic site that I directed in Newcastle. I was working with a lot of people, especially professors, and other members of staff at the University of Delaware, who were working in different humanities based disciplines. So it just, you know, my interests broadens. And I felt like the next step really to continue to to ask the questions that I wanted to be asking, you know, to benefit the Delaware public was really to look at some of the other humanities disciplines and how that fed into the work I was doing,

Tom Byrne 07:17

which kind of I guess takes me to where I want to go with our conversation, you told this idea that you kind of broadened out from your background in history. And I guess, in a lot of ways, as we talk about 50 years of Delaware humanities, one thing that that people wonder is when you say Delaware humanities, what does humanities mean? And it seems to me, it's evolved over time. Right? So I guess, Barbara, I'll bring you in here at this point as well. You know, what a humanities and I guess, specifically, Delaware humanities were at the time, the Delaware Humanities Forum look like in 1973. But what was kind of the sense of what it was supposed to be all about?

Barbara Benson 07:56

I think when it began, it had relatively narrow vision. And I don't think that's surprising, because there were 50 of these organizations, one for each state. And so that, by its very nature gave it a more narrow focus. And Delaware being a small state gave it a very narrow focus. And there was one other thing with the humanities forums, when they started, there was always a concern that the National Endowment, he-man of humanities would either disappear or the state programs would disappear. So they had a kind of only semi permanence in the beginning. And I think that made people look really very locally at the kind of programs they were going to do. It also came in 73. An interesting period in history in the war, Nick Nixon's resignation, but the bicentennial of American Revolution. And that really kicked off a great interest in history, I think, a renewal of history interest.

Tom Byrne 09:09

And I imagined yourself as far as it started very narrow, it was almost inevitable, I guess it would have to broaden to find kind of those reasons for being and those spaces to fill, whether it be these statewide state humanities forums, or just nationally.

Michele Anstine 09:28

Yeah, I definitely think that Barbara has really brought out a very pertinent point. And I think that exactly when the the state councils were first, you know, founded in the early, really 1970, up through probably 1974 1975. Most of them. I do really think that it was a grand experiment, because the NIH the National Endowment for the Humanities, was really focused On academia, and so I think there was really a push, and a push, you know, because this is the NIH is a federal agency, so a push from our congressional representatives to really make sure that it was applicable to the public. And I think, over the decades, you know, I think, although the the heart of what the humanities are, and what they do, has remained the same, how we use them has, you

know, in many ways remained the same, I think the language that we use to describe them, and also, really the people we look to, in some cases, to sort of lead us on our journey has broadened as well, it hasn't, you know, veered away from where it was in from academics who play such an important role. But I think there are others being brought into the conversation constantly.

Tom Byrne 10:59

Barbara, there's some kind of like milepost that you recall, during your time with Delaware humanities that helped kind of define it, or as Michelle was saying, kind of broaden kind of the scope of what was being looked at. You mentioned, the bicentennial in 1976, is one kind of key marker were to some, some things like that, that kind of said to you in your mind, oh, this is something else that Delaware humanities can can be about can look at can focus on.

Barbara Benson 11:29

Well, of course, because I'm trained as a historian, and I worked for the Historical Society of Delaware, that was always my personal responsibility. So, of course, after the revolution, then you got the Constitution and you got all these things moving along, that Delaware plays so much into. And I digress for a second, because I think about this now, particularly because I live in Rockford, Illinois, and the East Coast history is of negligible interest out here. Whereas in Delaware, for the vast preponderance of the population, they know and take pride in many of those things. So there were milestones, but often they were very historical. And I think the challenge for the historic to the Humanities Forum always wants to look at the broadest possible definition of the humanities. Not always easy to do.

Tom Byrne 12:32

Where there were there some things in the discussions you had during your time on the board and as board president that you recall, helping to to broaden that discussion, or that you felt kind of helped move the needle in in that direction?

Barbara Benson 12:47

I think some because we had. And I think Michelle, you still have it, speaker's bureau, define people who didn't necessarily come out of the academy, or didn't work in the academy, who, who had interesting insights and research in areas that the public was interested in. I think particularly in terms of new topics, women's history, race relations, all kinds of things that just began to broaden away from just the bicentennial of the Constitution say,

Tom Byrne 13:30

how about you, Michelle, as you look at the kind of evolving definition of Delaware humanities? And, you know, it seems like the theme here is it started with that, that narrow focus on history. But as Barbara said, when you start looking at, you could broaden, obviously history out right from that kind of like colonial Revolutionary era to women's history, but also Barbara mentioned, you know, kind of racial issues. It seemed natural that these would be the places that you would find of real interest to the community in Delaware. Are there some some things that you recall, the

Delaware humanities has done or directions they've gone in that that started to kind of pull that in that direction?

Michele Anstine 14:11

Yeah. You know, it's interesting, I would put it also in the context, there were certain things because, you know, we've always been tied to the NIH, even though we're a private nonprofit. We received most of our funding still from the NIH. And so there were certain things that were asked of us, and asked of all state humanities councils over the years, and there were just also certain trends. So it's interesting that really in the 1970s, you know, the focus of humanities councils was on public policy. In the 80s, it switched to multiculturalism in the 90s. It was a broader public culture. And then in the 2000s Civic Engagement, which I think continues on nobody's really analyzed I think just See, you know, 2000 10s And what, you know what, what was brought forward there. But I do really think that civic engagement continues to be a through way. And as well as the other, you know, focus points for the different decades, they tend to fit into what we do. But I definitely think within those, you know, sort of broad topics, there were specific things that were done, I, when you talk about, you know, sort of civil rights and thinking we're heading into the anniversary of Brown versus Board of Education. And, of course, Delaware was, you know, so important in the cases that were brought together for Brown versus Board of Education. So there's been work done through the years around that, I was looking recently at our documentaries that we've either funded, or actually commissioned. And, you know, they run the gamut from looking at Dell State University's history to dirt track racing to the broiler industry here in Delaware, I really think that there are so many facets that are so key to understanding Delaware, the Delaware humanities has hit on over the years. And I was really, I'm going to say surprised, but you know, to look back 50 years ago and see that some of the same things, I shouldn't be surprised, because I've had, you know, training in history. But, you know, same themes, repeated again, and again, maybe, if exactly, you know, looked at it in a bit of a different way. But, but definitely, we have been asking ourselves the same or similar questions over these five decades.

Tom Byrne 16:53

And Barbara, so what what Michelle was talking about kind of goes back to what what last year was focused on this idea of Delaware identity. And it feels like a lot of of this is kind of all pulled together by that idea is some of the projects that Michelle was talking about, maybe wouldn't necessarily be something that you would initially the broiler industry, or things like that wouldn't necessarily be something you'd immediately identify as. So that's something that Delaware humanities would be interested in. But in terms of establishing what the identity of a community is, that's what you're looking for. Right?

Barbara Benson 17:30

Absolutely. And I am remiss to not mentioned this before, that I think one of the things that we have to remember about the state humanities forums, is that each represent a different part of the country, a different size, a different makeup, perhaps, of their population, and Delaware being such a small state. I don't mean that we have to keep repeating the same topics, but that we have

some communal interests in our state that are more joined and say if you live in California, sure. So that that does affect how you program?

Tom Byrne 18:16

How's gonna say I mean, you speaking of programming, you mentioned the speaker's bureau, that is something that's been a long, consistent kind of staple of Dell, or humanities, or are there any other pieces of what humanities has done that, that you feel have always stood out? You mentioned some of the projects and documentaries. I'm curious, are there some other things that we haven't talked about that have helped? Because I guess going back to what you said, Michelle, all those things kind of connect to community engagement, whether it's a speaker going out and talking about something and answering questions, a documentary that really takes a deep in depth dive into something, or there are there other things that humanity has done, and you can jump anytime you want barber that you recall being like, wow, this is something that really helped shape the conversation that we're trying to have over the course of 50 years.

Michele Anstine 19:03

Yeah, I definitely think that there have been some really innovative programs. And I think one of the the beauties of the state Humanities Council network, is that we, we share liberally with our programming. You know, I think about for many years, there was a program that we ran in conjunction with bayhealth and with some other health facilities throughout the state, but it was called literature and medicine. So really looking at you know, the the fact that we need to be thinking about humanities. And it can be quite helpful to folks who are very science driven as well. But it really helps in you know, relating to patients, and also getting through the stress of having a high pressure career in med Listen, if we are able to have some of these discussions about, you know, kind of the world in which they're functioning and literature that really touches on some of those points as well. So we've had definitely programs like that speakers has been a long running program that continues to be very popular and very useful, I think, especially to libraries throughout the state, who are trying to program in their communities. And I think one of the things that, you know, this, this might, you know, sort of bring back memories for you to Barbara, because one of the things that I found in our history, as Delaware humanities is, there have been several touch points, with humanities organizations, and specifically, history and museum based organizations throughout the state. I know that this was something that we also touched on at the Historical Society, but trying to find a way to really bring that community together to draw on the strengths of, you know, sort of collectively, of what they had to bring to the table, and work together on themes and, you know, just different approaches, even to be able to just network and bounce ideas off of each other. And that's something that we're really launching into, again, through a new partnership with the Delaware Museum Association, and Delaware's Division of Historical and Cultural Affairs,

Tom Byrne 21:33

barber, are there some things that you recall that that stand out to you in terms of the programming and how it helped connect different groups, Michelle mentioned, something

specifically focused on on the medical industry in the medical world. Anything that the you recall, that kind of also maybe touched some some areas that needed a little bit more attention?

Barbara Benson 21:56

Well, I can think of the areas that we didn't get to be able to get into, because I think one of the problems for the Humanities, is it's such an amorphous word. What does it really mean? You know, for those of us who are liberal arts majors, we, we have our sense of what it means, but it's it's far broader than that. And it's taken a long time to get public interest in talking about what they think the word means. And therefore, want programs in those areas. Because everything can't always be driven from the top down, you have to have people who want that in their communities. And that's, I think they've made big strides in that.

Tom Byrne 22:45

I was gonna say, and that's, that's part of a 50 year journey, right? I mean, you said, we this started as a very, as you mentioned, Barbara, very focused, narrow thing. And the conversation has helped build it out. But as I guess, you're saying, Barbara, it still needs to broaden even further, perhaps,

Barbara Benson 23:01

I think there are so many opportunities.

Tom Byrne 23:04

Michelle, how about you? I mean, do you see that, that possibility of continuing to redefine what humanities means. And as Barbara mentioned, kind of you finding people who may not necessarily think they're connected, but they in fact, are?

Michele Anstine 23:20

Absolutely, and I think that, as I said earlier, I think even in the language, you know, the word humanities can often seem like a barrier, I used to think working in the history field that history became a barrier in conversations, but Well, humanities, even more so. But I, you know, I really do try to stress even though the academic definition of the humanities might be all of these disciplines, like history, and philosophy, and languages and literature that really funnel into these, you know, sort of non science explorations of human beings, it really is the way that we, you know, document and process, what it means to be human. So it's very fundamental in the what people do in their daily lives. And it really does feed into this idea of critical thinking, and being able to make good decisions, you know, sound decisions, where you're drawing on, you know, kind of multiple sources of information. And I really think that in navigating this very complicated world, today, that's more important than ever, and we need to go, you know, hand in hand with, with other, you know, science and technology that are definitely important, but need to be tempered a little bit by some very important and fundamental humanities questions.

Tom Byrne 24:49

Well, I'm interested because you both have expertise in history. How important is that? And we're going to talk a bit more about kind of like pillars in a second for Delaware here. amenities. But but one of those pillars appears to be history and using history as kind of a through line, in almost any topic you're talking about to help give people a sense of where we've been to understand how we got to where we are, and perhaps see where we're going to go. How crucial is that to you have kind of these fundamental pillars that help guide the conversation? No matter what the topic is, Barbara?

Barbara Benson 25:26

Well, that's true. Because when you think about it, I mean, history is really changed over time. And therefore, it affects many other disciplines, art, medicine, all kinds of things. And so the word Well, that's people, every time I tell people, I'm a historian, they kind of wave goodbye to me. It is, it is fundamental, to almost everything a humanities organization will do. And we'll think through that lens,

Tom Byrne 26:02

Michelle, picking up on what Barbara said, you talk about that, that concept of, of a through line and a lens to to look at things through to help and history being one of those lenses to to use to define whatever topic you're discussing?

Michele Anstine 26:16

Well, yeah, I one of the things that I definitely learned in, you know, in my work as a student, as a history student, and then even drawing on history, for my grad degree, was the importance of context. And, you know, history is a field where it is just constantly drawing on context, and I think it, it really does, you know, make the make certain touch points, relevant, you know, in in space and time to the world around us. So we can't, we can't possibly operate without the effects of, you know, kind of the outside world on us. And I think we need to constantly be looking, you know, back as we're making decisions as an organization, as, as human beings, as well as looking at, you know, the the present situation to really understand where we're situated to the best of our abilities right now.

Tom Byrne 27:20

And I mentioned the fact that we wouldn't talk a bit more about pillars, because that's one of the things that the Delaware humanities has done in recent years is kind of established these kind of like four core concepts. And largely what we're talking about today is stories in history, right? I mean, it's the story of Delaware humanities, the history of Delaware humanities, and how it kind of leads us from 1973 to 2023. And that's why the podcast is 2023 1973 and conversation, but the other pillars, that core concepts that Delaware humanities established at this point, held that environment, culture and community, Media and Democracy, how important is it again, to like history have these other kind of focal points to help guide the conversation, Barbara, to go going back to you said about where Delaware humanities started, how it's grown? I think you've said even at one point, at some point, you kind of need to find that focus, to have these kind of core concepts is is that almost necessary to help kind of create the guardrails for the conversation?

Barbara Benson 28:24

Yes, and and to give you touch points for a programming and activities that that you the Humanities Forum, wants to support and encourage within a community, because you want something to grow beyond your just the program you support.

Tom Byrne 28:45

And, Michelle, when these core concepts were established, what I guess what was the thinking behind them to was that the thinking was to say, like, we need to find, as Barbara said, these touchpoints, these things that kind of kind of shaped the conversation. I think,

Michele Anstine 28:57

definitely, that's part of what we were thinking, a very important part of what we were thinking. And we were also thinking about, you know, some of the conversation we've already had today, which is when people say Delaware humanities, what what are they thinking? What do they think we do? Are they familiar with us? You know, I think that having those four core concepts, really says a lot about not only the work that we do, but also what we think is important about our Delaware community going forward. And we'd like to not only, you know, bring in experts to talk a little bit about those, those topics, but we also really want to launch conversations within Delaware's communities that focus on those specific topics.

Tom Byrne 29:47

And certainly those are conversations in these other areas that we will be having on this podcast as the remainder of the year. As we start to wind down. Barbara, I'm going to go back to you and ask you as you think about 50 years we It's an incredible run for Delaware humanity so far. I guess Can Can you try to summarize in some way kind of your thoughts on on the journey that Delaware humanities has made so far? And and if you feel it's, it's lived up to the the ideal that started back in 1973

Barbara Benson 30:26

when when the humanities legislation was passed, to create state programs, it seemed very new and perhaps tenuous. And I think that humanities forms crossed the country. And certainly Delaware's have done a wonderful job in in building on the opportunities that this program has given them. To become a an important element in communities to get people talking, and get people thinking and giving them an opportunity in. I don't want to use the word safe spaces, but in what spaces where people can talk about things?

Tom Byrne 31:25

I guess I've looked at barbers is creating comfortable conversations like that people feel they can, they can they can bring something to the table as they take something from the table.

Barbara Benson 31:36

Yes. And, and we live in a period right now, it seems to me, that is a very contentious period. And we need all of that we can get in our lives.

Tom Byrne 31:48

And Michelle, that's that's clearly a lot of what Delaware humanities is right now. You know, as you reflect back on X, I'm gonna ask you kind of a two part question as you reflect back on Delaware humanities over 50 years, your thoughts on on how it's lived up to that ideal? And how can it? Second question? Take it from here, so to speak?

Michele Anstine 32:07

Yeah, I agree with Barbara, I really think that, you know, as I said, In the beginning, in 1973, it was an experiment. And it had a lot of energy, you know, from the people who were staff members and board, early board members, and also the community because there was, you know, federal funding that was coming into the state specifically for Humanities based programming. And I think that we have continued to build on that and make something that is much more permanent. I also think through the work that we're doing, collectively as humanities councils across the US, that we are really proving, you know, the need for the National Endowment for the Humanities and also for the state programs. And very soon, I'll be traveling to Washington, DC, to talk with our congressional representatives about the work that we do, because I really think that, you know, we're, we're really trying to, as we've discussed before, take the humanities to the public. And without the state programs, it could never happen. So I think that Delaware humanities, in its own unique way, has made a very, very solid place for itself here in the Delaware community, and amongst especially nonprofits that do humanities based programming. Looking forward, I definitely think that will continue in this vein. So I think that there, you know, there are certain things that again, you know, the the thread runs through all of the decades. But I think that we'll continue to listen to the public, listen to the audience's that we serve, and really to try to provide services that are meeting them where they are, and serving what they need, I have to say, because I grew up in Delaware. My grandfather actually worked for DuPont for a number of years. You know, I like to think that it's better living through the humanities here in Delaware. But definitely, I think that there's a definite place for us going forward. And really trying to make sure that all of these really important organizations that that serve the humanities and serve their local communities are receiving the support and attention that they need to really, you know, give everybody a solid grounding as they're going through their lives here in Delaware.

Tom Byrne 34:49

I was gonna say it seems to be 50 years is a pretty good proof of concept. It's a from an experiment that started in 1973. And now, as Barbara alluded to noodled too as well, there seems to be a sense that what human humanities councils forums provide, is is needed now is is maybe more than ever, in terms of, as Barbara mentioned, having these conversations in a way that are civil. And as you mentioned earlier, doing it in this kind of public civic engagement way that the ROI draws in as many people as possible.

Michele Anstine 35:23

Absolutely. And I would say that in that vein, we have launched this year facilitators program. So we do have facilitators who have been trained to facilitate a variety of different conversations, you know, based in our four core concepts, but really, to hit on some of those elements that are really important to different communities. So just like our speakers, they can be, basically engage through Delaware humanities and come to a community organization. And instead of talking, you know, to the people, they're really trying to guide a conversation among all the participants. And we hope that this will continue to help bring people from different backgrounds together, and really understand one another and empathize with one another, as as much as

Tom Byrne 36:20

possible. That seems to be something that only an organization like Delaware humanities could do. Maybe there are others, but but it seems tailor made for an organization like this based on what has happened over the course of 50 years. Delaware humanities Executive Director, Michelle and Stein, and past humanities Board Chair Barbara Benson, we thank you so much for joining us on this first edition of 2023 1973 in conversation as we celebrate 50 years of Delaware humanities. Thanks for being with us, Barbara and Michelle. Thank you. Thank you, Tom. Thanks for listening to this episode of 2023 1973 in conversation. This podcast is brought to you by Delaware humanities, a state affiliate of the National Endowment for the Humanities. Its mission is to strengthen communities by encouraging all Delawareans to be inspired, informed and engaged through exploring the diversity of human experience. 2023 1973 in conversation is produced by Delaware Public Media, Delaware source for NPR News.