

HISTORY HAPPENINGS

*A newsletter
published by the
Department of
History at the
University of
Memphis*

Editors: Caroline Peyton and Peter Brand

Broad Vision: Blake Dexter on History, Democracy, and Education Today

In this feature, Dr. Peter Brand interviews Blake Dexter, a 2026 graduate from our program, and winner of the Major L. Wilson Prize for his essay: “Challenges to Liberalism” written for Dr. Unowsky’s course, HIST 4151: Habsburg Central Europe.

Hi Blake, can you tell a little about what attracted you to study history in the first place and about your experience as an undergraduate history major here at U of M?

Well, I’ve always been attracted to history, but I had never taken it seriously as something to study in college, growing up. I think that often times we are mistakenly told during our primary education that history is dead end subject, that is, your only path as a history major is to become a primary education teacher yourself. While there is nothing wrong with this pursuit, and it is certainly admirable, the opportunities that a history degree presents are much broader, and much more widely applicable than what we are often told. I think this comes from the push for STEM education. STEM is absolutely an important field of study, and with the complexities of technology in the 21st century, one that is right to be emphasized, but I often fear that this emphasis comes at the expense of the liberal arts, a field of study which is desperately needed in this present moment in history.



I believe that this is becoming more and more apparent with the rise of global populist and anti-intellectual movements, something that often times utilizes mass ignorance in important fields such as the humanities and history to scapegoat and seize power. I believe that history, and my pursuit of the liberal arts has informed my belief systems, opened my eyes, and left me as a better and more well-rounded person, all of which is due to my studies.

Cover photos (from top left): Honors students in Dr. Peyton’s Tennessee History course visit the Special Collections; Students in Dr. Peyton’s Parks & Recreation History class explore Overton Park; students in Dr. Gaggioli’s course display ancient technology; Dr. Brad Dixon prepares his American Revolutions class for their “Tea Party” in the Food Lab.

My experience as a history major at the University of Memphis, has been one that has been overwhelmingly positive, transformational, and enlightening. Upon declaring my intentions to attend the UofM, I went to orientation undecided, but with an understanding of what I was interested in, and what I ultimately wanted to study. I always tell people that I walked into orientation with zero majors, and walked out with three, one of which being history. Due to my experience in high school, I knew I would love the content, and would come in with a large bastion of knowledge, but was still unsure of college, the classes and what they would look like, and the whole “lore” of the college professor (of which was unjust). However quickly, any of these fears would dissipate. The zeal and passion for the discipline of history which each and every professor possesses, is something unrivaled when speaking to many of my peers across departments. So then, my time as a history major at the University of Memphis has been one spent with captivating studies, lively professors, and amazing peers met through the department.

What were some of the highlights of your time studying majoring in history? Which faculty had the biggest impact on you as mentors, and what skills of the historian's craft did you gain as a history major?

Each of my highlights as a history major are focused around certain physical pieces of history. Whether it was Dr. Laumann bringing certain artifacts and cultural objects to class, whether it was Dr. Dixon preparing xocolatl or Yaupon tea, or whether it was trying plantain patties and peanut butter drink, it was these unique experiences that really allowed for a connection to the history, putting a “face to the name” if you will. These were some of my favorite experiences as a history major at the University of Memphis.

The faculty which have had the biggest impact on me, would certainly be Dr. Unowsky and Dr. Laumann. Both possess a certain duty and passion for the study of history, and each make a point to engage the student and foster a better understanding of the past, and its contemporary takeaways. I'd simply like to thank them for their mentorship in my own development, both as a historian and as an individual.

Sources, sources, sources!!! I believe in the present media environment, an understanding of where a piece comes from, its intended audience, the author's purpose, and their own source-work, are incredibly valuable. An ability to read between the lines both in content and origin, is a skill that allows for your development as a more informed citizen and a higher functioning adult.

Were there any impactful experiences outside the classroom related to your history studies you can share with us? (cont'd on next page)

None of which are completely related to the History Department, but I believe my general understanding of history and the broader lens in which I view the world, are two things that I bring along with me no matter where I go, two things of which the History Department has given me.

What particular topics and aspects of history interest you most and how did your studies in the History Department support these interests?

As someone enamored by history, it is historical development and the evolution of human progress that fascinates me most. With this being the case, all subsets of history captivate me, and are equally deserving of study and examination. With this being said however, I believe that the department has its hands tied behind its back at times. A product of 21st century education, I believe that the proliferation of online classes is something that is detrimental to all learners, both those partaking in online learning, and those who prefer in person classes who may be stunted and not given the full array of courses available to them, due to the lack of demand for those put forward in person. While online learning is certainly an innovation and its ability to meet students where they are should be commended, it is largely a product of COVID, and with what is largely been a return to normalcy, I believe that further emphasis should be placed on in person learning. By taking classes in person, students have the opportunity to connect with their peers and professors, ask questions on the content, and expand the number of classes offered, while also diversifying the history which is being taught. As for myself in particular, I would enjoy seeing more ancient histories being taught, as I am quite the nerd of the classical era, something of which I have learned about entirely on my own, this being a result of lack of in person demand, and a subsequent push to online study.

We hear you have a bright future going into graduate level studies, with no less than eight acceptance offers. Congratulations! Can you tell us what subject areas you want to explore at the graduate level and what goals you have for your next level of historical studies?

Thank you! I am very excited about my next steps. At the present, I will be attending Northeastern University to pursue a Master of Public Administration in order to pursue work that can make a real and substantive change in the lives of people. This to me, has been in no short part a result of my majoring in history. As stated, history is a discipline which has opened my eyes to both the past and the present, and has pushed me to assist in the creation of next stories of history, hopefully driving them in a positive direction. My most passionate area of focus is that of international studies and affairs. Connecting with people of different cultures and backgrounds is something of which I have always enjoyed. The ability to share and connect while learning hitherto unknown ways of life, is something that I value so sincerely.



To me, an opportunity to do that on a professional level as a diplomat or foreign affairs officer would be an honor, a privilege, and an absolute joy.

Going forward into graduate school and beyond into life after university, how have the skills and disciplines you have acquired through historical studies prepared you for future success in graduate studies and beyond?

I believe that due to my studies in history, I am simply better positioned as a citizen and as a functional adult. My ability to read between the lines, to process information, and to home in on key details and takeaways - something of which many people would overlook - is a strength of mine due to my pursuit of a degree in history. As previously stated, I believe we need an informed citizenry now more than ever, and I think that history and an emphasis on the liberal arts are key contributors in producing this informed body. I believe that these skills, learned through my study of history, will set me up well for the future, in an environment where they are needed more and more. Carl Sagan once said, "We live in a society exquisitely dependent on science and technology, in which hardly anyone knows anything about science and technology." And while that might be the case, the subsequent push for STEM education has largely been an attempt to remedy this dichotomy, but the humanities mustn't be forgotten about as the ills of living in a democratic society, in which hardly anyone knows anything about democracy and the liberal arts, becomes more and more apparent.

Photo: Blake Dexter served as a guest speaker at this year's department banquet, where he discussed his prize winning paper.

Language & The “Land of Golden Wheat”

Congratulations to history major, Evan Hans Schlinsog, who was awarded a Boren scholarship. The Boren scholarship funds undergraduates studying abroad in nations “critical to US interests.” Through the program, students receive funding to acquire language skills, and in return, agree to one year of service through federal employment. These are highly competitive and prestigious scholarships, and provide a fantastic opportunity for the recipients to immerse themselves in other places and languages.

When asked about his plans for the program, Evan writes:

“From August 31st, 2026, through May 7th, 2027, I will be participating in the Russian Language and Area Studies Program in Almaty, Kazakhstan. The program will consist of twenty hours of Russian language courses a week. Class time will focus on grammar, vocabulary, and conversation. Outside of the classroom we will explore the local area through excursions to cultural centers, museums and national monuments, providing us with the opportunity to use our language skills in real-life settings. For an even more immersive experience, I will be living with a Russian speaking host family. This will allow me to experience life in Almaty in a more authentic fashion as I spend time getting to know the city and culture through my host family. Through dedicated study and use of Russian in everyday life, I hope to achieve a high level of proficiency during my academic year in Almaty, Kazakhstan.”



“Land of Golden Wheat” from Summer Evening, Prairie Night, Land of Golden Wheat: The Outside World in Kazakh Literature (Cognella, 2016); Upper Right, Evan Schlinsog; Bottom Right, View of Kazakhstan

Hands-On History: Ancient Technology in the Classroom

BY DR. AMANDA GAGGIOLI



In the Ancient Technology course at the University of Memphis, students engaged directly with the material and engineering practices of the ancient Greek and Roman worlds through hands-on, collaborative projects that transformed the classroom into a laboratory of historical inquiry. Rather than studying ancient technologies solely through texts and images, students reconstructed them. For instance, one team focused on Roman military equipment, building a pilum designed to bend on impact and a life-sized curved scutum using layered materials, drawing on archaeological evidence and museum collections. Another group designed a model inspired by the Aqua Claudia, grappling with the challenge of maintaining a consistent gradient over long distances while experimenting with materials and surveying tools such as the chorobates, and considering the broader social and political significance of water infrastructure. A third team reconstructed a crane attributed to Heron of Alexandria, working through questions of scale, materials, and mechanical advantage while adapting ancient designs. Across these projects, students confronted the same environmental, technical, and logistical constraints faced in antiquity, gaining insight into how engineering solutions were shaped by cultural values and societal needs. This approach fostered creativity, collaboration, and critical thinking, while demonstrating how experiential learning can deepen students' understanding of the ancient world and its relevance to the present.

Photo: Students in Dr. Gaggioli's class display their ancient technologies.

New Histories of Nationalism: Dr. Selina Makana on *Beyond the Battlefield*

In February 2026, Dr. Selina Makana's *Beyond the Battlefield: Women and the Nation in Twentieth Century Angola* was published by Ohio University Press. In our book forum, Dr. Caroline Peyton is in conversation with Dr. Makana about her book and her research.

Why did you write *Beyond the Battlefield: Women and the Nation in Twentieth-Century Angola*?

I wrote this book out of my frustration with how histories of nationalism in Africa privilege stories of a select and almost exclusively male group of historical actors. This dominant conceptualization of the nation, what I refer in the book as a heroic masculinist narrative, downplays and even marginalizes African women as mere bystanders in their nation's history. Therefore, as a scholar of modern African history working at the intersection of gender studies and histories of militarism, writing this book was a way for me to pierce this popular narrative by centering Angolan women as historical and political subjects. Another motivating factor for writing this book stemmed from my desire to tell a gendered and complex history of nationalism in the Portuguese speaking world of Africa, an area of study that tends to be marginalized because of the entrenched geopolitical biases inherent in African studies.

Could you explain the role that “maternalist nationalism” played in Angola? Why is this a useful concept for understanding Angola's history, and where else is this framework applicable?



In the book, I argue that nation building exists in an uneasy relationship with women in that on the one hand, women are revered for their roles as “mothers of the nation.”

Through this role or symbolic image of mothers of the nation, women's bodies are constructed in service of greater political goals of caring for soldiers and civilians, fighting for the country on the home front, and building the nation. On the other hand, women's bodies also become targets/battlegrounds when wars break out. In the case of Angola, maternalist nationalism, that is the this activation of the maternal body to serve the nation, manifested itself in the way that women heeded the call to mobilize in multitude ways and join the armed struggle against Portuguese colonialism (1960–1975); and in how they continued to survive and sustain their communities during the civil war and conflict (1976–2002).

I find the logic of maternal nationalism to be a useful framework for thinking about what the task of nation building entails and appreciate the roles of women in the nation as political subjects in their own right. A key aspect of maternalist nationalism is the idea of patriotic motherhood, which is the complex interweaving of societal expectations around women's reproductive labor with the politics of nationalism. Within the larger heroic masculinist narrative of nation building in Angola, maternalist nationalism allowed women from all walks of life, especially non-elite women and those in rural areas, the space and the justification to dig deep into their motherly and nurturing roles to mobilize politically and regard themselves as contributors to Angola's liberation struggles. Rather than seeing maternalist politics as a disempowering framework and a propping up of patriarchy, as some may argue, the Angolan context demonstrates how women leaned into their maternal roles to navigate, challenge, and support nationalistic goals. However, as empowering as patriotic motherhood was to women's wartime participation, motherhood also exposed them to tremendous violence.

What source material (or materials) seemed particularly vital to your project? Were there any surprises in the course of conducting your research, and if so, what were they?

While writing history requires an engagement with hard evidence, sometimes scholars must confront the question of what then happens when that evidence is scarce? Another important issue to consider is that since women's histories oscillate between private and public, personal and political, hidden and muted, it is difficult to research stories of women and girls in Africa using a single method. For me, conducting historical research with limited archival evidence pushed me to embrace a different methodological practice, one that required me to use multimodal and intersectional research methods. I relied on materials from the colonial archives in Lisbon and Angola to help me map out a story of why women were mostly missing from these archives. I combined historical and literary analysis—mostly (auto)biographical works, films, and novels—to locate Angolan women's activism in unexpected places, therefore broadening the field of possibility for imagining and representing women's place in the nation. Using literary texts for historical context was methodologically useful because this multifaceted approach to history allowed me to center African women's political subjectivities and visions without limiting them to the masculinist worlds they operated in.

Angola is a uniquely challenging place for conducting fieldwork on memories of war, partly because the archives—both colonial and postcolonial—present fragmentary resources for historians. As such, I do not treat the archive as a stable, transparent collection of facts. Rather, I regard it as a treasure trove fraught with contradictions and worth critiquing. While the archives I consulted contained abundant material from the independence period, their scope was largely concerned with the androcentric perspective of modern Angolan nationalism. And although these archival sources were of value in understanding Angolan nationalist politics, they did not illuminate much about women’s lives.

For this reason, I turned to oral histories to give voice and texture to the histories of women whose written records are scant. In Angola where the country’s political past is always contested and what is considered “true history” is carefully disseminated and defended by powerful state apparatuses, women’s testimonies were useful in complementing and contradicting official government or written sources. In the course of conducting my fieldwork, I was surprised and inspired by how eager the women I interacted with and interviewed were to share their experiences of the involvement in Angola’s fight for independence from the Portuguese as well as their horrific memories of the civil war which ended in 2002. In sharing their stories, some of them insisted that their stories were part of the nation’s history and crafting their own stories allowed their personal memories to become part of the popular memory long after the wars ended.

The biggest challenge I encountered, which also turned out to be a blessing, was how to navigate my positionality as an African woman from Kenya (English speaking country) conducting research in Angola (a Lusophone country). Prior to entering the fieldwork, I had not taken seriously how my insider/outsider position would impact my research experience. However, once I was acutely aware of the politics of location, identity, and representation I had to reexamine constantly my location as a researcher in relation to my participants. In the book, I describe these fieldwork dilemmas as the ebb and flow of fieldwork. This ebb and flow as a methodological strategy helped me to move beyond the false dichotomy of insider/outsider, to navigate the uneasy interactions I experienced with some participants, and to explore the complex negotiations of identity, power, and positionality.

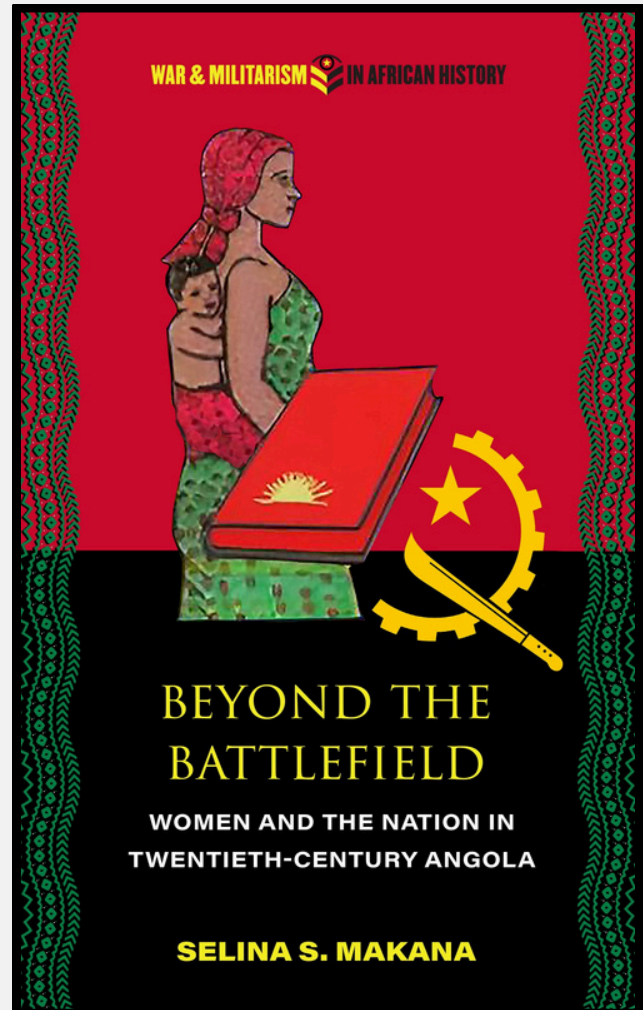


Photo: *“View over Luanda, Angola”* by *oneVillage Initiative* (CC BY-SA 2.0).

What led you to become of a scholar of African history and African women's history? What works in those fields have influenced you the most, and what is one especially dynamic or exciting area in either African history broadly or African women's history more specifically?

I have always been fascinated with how African women are represented in popular culture and how their stories are written. This fascination turned into a vexation because during my undergraduate years, I realized that the one-dimensional lens used to tell histories of women on the continent, did not reflect the reality of the women who raised me. So, when I went to graduate school, I made it my mission to research women as agents of history, rather than mere victims and casualties of historical productions.

The field of African women's history is quite dynamic and exciting. Scholarly works by historians such as Judith Byfield, Abosede George, Amina Mama, Carina Ray, and Alicia Decker have been influential in how I think about African women and questions of agency. I work on war and militarism in Africa, so I will be biased and say that is one area that I find exciting. But beyond that, I believe militarism, as a particular ideology that pervades everyday life, is one of the most underrated -isms in African studies. If one were to think about the complex phenomena that shape different countries in Africa, the list ranges from neoliberalism, to capitalism, to ethnocentrism, to environmentalism. But what cuts across these factors is militarism.



What's your next project?

I am currently working on a new project on the social history of public health in early twentieth-century Angola. This project makes a crucial argument that the creation of social hygiene laboratories and other public health protocols in Angola in the early 1900s was a particular form of colonial governmentality that had as much to do with the “physical well-being of the natives” as with the advancement of the Portuguese “civilizational” project of turning the indigenous population into “a civilized”, physically healthy, able-bodied, and productive labor machine for the colonial regime.

“Roots & Routes”: GAAAH 2026

BY SAVANNAH JACKSON-CORNELL

The Graduate Association for African American History (GAAAH) upheld a nearly thirty-year tradition at the University of Memphis by hosting our annual conference. This year's conference was themed, Roots and Routes: African Heritage and the Diasporic Journey. This event bolstered the presence of diverse scholars of interdisciplinary backgrounds.

Panels on the performance arts, technology, incarceration, enslavement, resistance, and Pan-Africanism filled this year's program. Our audiences got to engage in conversations with emerging historians, lawyers, and sociologists. The panel on Pan-Africanism bolstered an impressive lineup of scholars studying liberation in Ghana (Wendy Yeboah, University of Memphis) and cultural nationalism in Benin (Oluwakemi Adeyemi, University of Illinois College of Law). There were also many papers on resistance including themes of Afrocentric class consciousness (Tyler Williams, University of Memphis), Black students' educational journey's at PWIs verses HBCUs (Mariah Wade, University of California, Davis) and Black environmental knowledge (Sidney McCall, William and Mary). These presentations fostered meaningful conversations, creating an environment for growth and reflection among aspiring scholars.



These conversations were especially meaningful during this year's Writing Workshop, led by Dr. Sarah Potter and Dr. Aram Goudsouzian. They not only shared practical dissertation-writing strategies, but also offered thoughtful guidance on developing the craft and artistry of academic writing.

Dr. Robert Lockett, a GAAAH alum, served as our keynote speaker this year. Dr. Lockett currently serves as a tenured Professor of History and Director of the Margaret Walker Center and COFO Civil Rights Education Center at Jackson State University.



His address, “Lessons from the Mississippi Civil Rights Movement,” highlighted the courage that was required of young, African American adults as they participated in the Mississippi Freedom Summer in 1964 and the broader Civil Rights Movement. His address focused on the sacrifices and dedication of figures like Bob Moses, Fannie Lou Hamer, Margaret Walker, and Memphis’ own Ida B. Wells. Within their stories, Dr. Lockett highlighted a truth that is all too often forgotten, “We cannot do everything, but we can all do something.” This simple, but powerful sentiment led to an interconnectivity that you could sense throughout space and served as a reminder of how powerful history is, in both academic and public history settings.

The final event of this year's conference was a History in the Now Roundtable. Dr. Cookie Woolner served as the moderator with Dr. Brian Kwoba and Dr. Monet Lewis-Timmons serving as panelists. The discussion created space for graduate students to reflect on shared challenges while offering practical guidance and support for sustaining their scholarship, teaching, and professional development.

In addition, the 2026 conference was supported by many other UofM faculty members. Drs Beverly Bond, Dennis Laumann, Aram Goudsouzian, Eron Ackerman, Terrence Tucker (English Department), Monet Lewis-Timmons, Sarah Potter, and Brian Kwoba served as commentators.

This conference would not have been possible without the Department of History, African & African American Studies program, the GAAAH Executive board Members (Aniya Gold, Damarius Harris, Meridian McDaniel, and Savannah Jackson-Cornell), GAAAH Faculty Advisor – Dr. Brian Kwoba, Karen Bradley and Dr. Erika Feleg.



Photos: Faculty, students, and GAAAH participants celebrate another successful annual conference.

THE PHI ALPHA THETA REPORT

BY DR. ERON ACKERMAN

Honoring a year of academic achievement among UofM history students, including a five-year run of awards at the annual Phi Alpha Theta regional conference!

Numerous University of Memphis graduate and undergraduate students were recently honored with awards for their outstanding academic work. Two of our PhD students presented papers at the regional graduate conference of Phi Alpha Theta (PAT), the national history honor society, at Arkansas State University in Jonesboro on March 14, 2026. RaSean Jenkins, who won an award at the PAT regional conference in April of 2024, presented a paper titled “Militarization and Resistance,” which compares strategies of civil rights activism in the United States and anticolonial resistance in Africa. This year, Neil Sharma won an award for his paper, “Preaching Patience,” which examines the celebrity status and historical legacy of the Great Awakening preacher, George Whitefield. This makes five years in a row that UofM students have won awards at Phi Alpha Theta regional conferences!

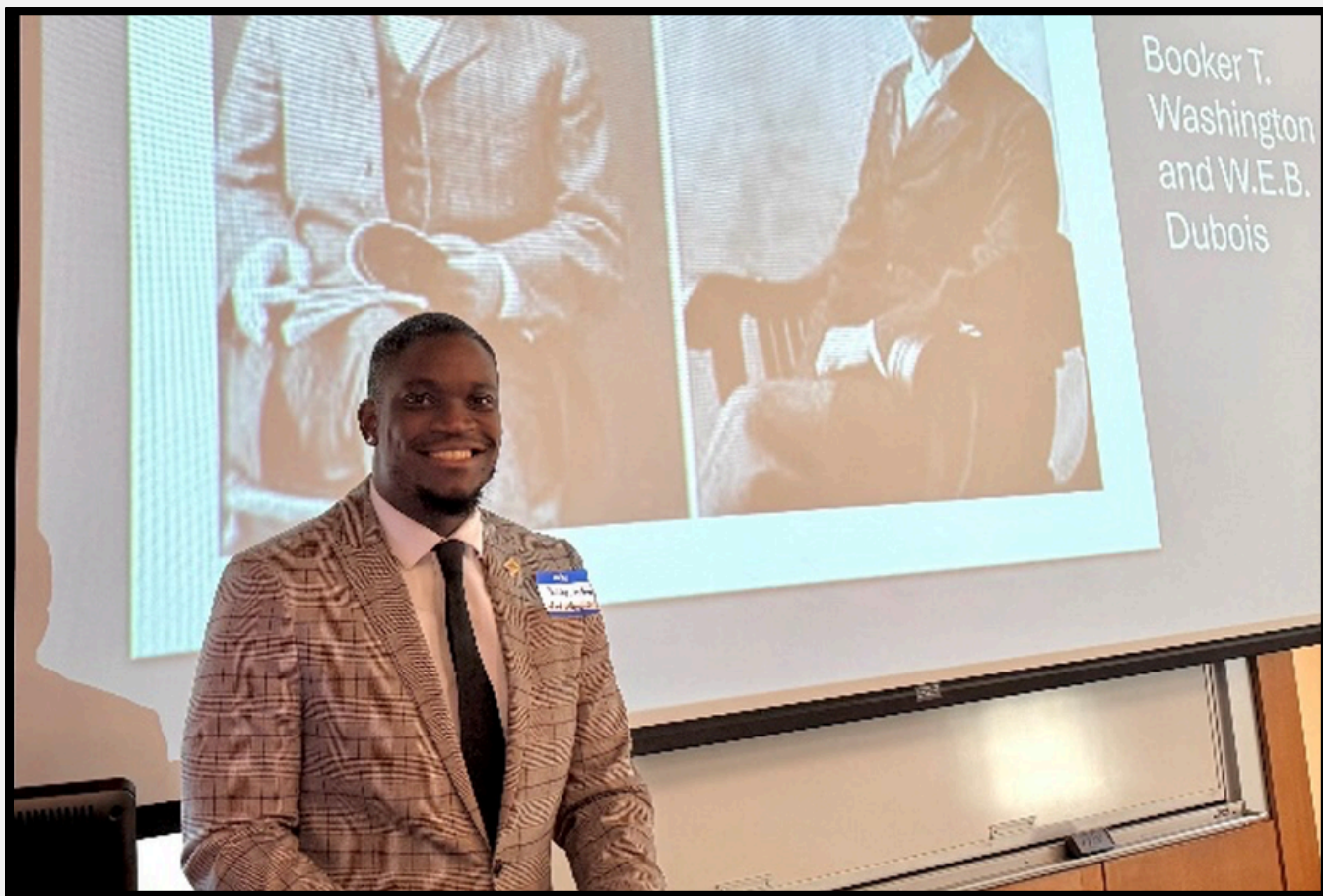
On April 8, the History Department held its annual Phi Alpha Theta award ceremony recognizing academic excellence among UofM students and adjunct faculty. The awards include competitive department grants as well as fellowships and scholarships from private endowments to support history research, teaching, and public service. The winners of the Major L. Wilson Paper Prize, awarded for the best long undergraduate and graduate essays in history, were invited to speak at the ceremony.

Blake A. Dexter, who won the undergraduate Wilson Prize, gave a presentation titled “Challenges to Liberalism,” based on a paper he wrote for Dr. Dan Unowsky’s course on Habsburg Central Europe, that explores the labyrinthine politics of the Austro-Hungarian Empire after the Napoleonic Wars.



PhD student Abbey Jean Sedlak, who won the graduate Wilson Paper Prize, also presented research from her essay, “All Mixed Up: The Mary Toft Case and Inversion in Eighteenth-Century England.” Sedlak’s essay, written for Dr. Ben Graham’s graduate research seminar, uses the curious case of Mary Toft, a woman who claimed to give birth to rabbits, as a lens for examining scientific discourse and gender politics amid the professionalization of medicine in 18th century England.

The award winners are too numerous to list in detail here, but we would like to thank our generous award donors and congratulate these students for their hard-won achievements. Their admirable dedication to the discipline of history reflects the pursuit of academic excellence at the University of Memphis, the stellar mentorship of our History Department faculty, and the noble ideals of the Phi Alpha Theta honor society.



Photos: Graduate students Neil Sharma and RaSean Jenkins present their research at Phi Alpha Theta's regional conference.

SPRING 2026 PHI ALPHA THETA INDUCTEES

Congratulations to the department's 2026 PAT inductees: Jonathan C. Carroll, Jr.; Sarah McIver Coker; Mabel Yaa Fosua Dunyo; Kathleen M. Elrod; Pia R. Galban; Rosalind L. King-Scoular; Vanessa X. Le; Shahnaz V. Lighari; Taylor L. O'Kelly; Elizabeth A. Raspa; Cindy Roper; Alexander D. Tickey; Dylan W. Vaughan; Anthony M. Ward



Photo: Some of this year's inductees at the Department of History's spring banquet.

SPRING 2026 AWARD WINNERS

Bob Baker Scholarship: Michael
Hardaway

2025-26 Belle McWilliams Scholarship:
Vanessa Le

Major L. Wilson Undergraduate
Paper Prize: Blake A. Dexter,
“Challenges to Liberalism”

Kell F. Mitchell Memorial Award: Vindez
Nesby

Walter R. Brown Award: Aspen-Marie
Viola

Janann M. Sherman Undergraduate
Award for the Study of Women’s History:
Em Brown

Paul R. Coppock Scholarship: Nathaniel
Blake Magnin

Major L. Wilson Graduate Paper Prize:
Abbey Jean Sedlak “All Mixed Up: The
Mary Toft Case and Inversion n
Eighteenth Century England”

Dr. Dalvan M. Coger and Dr. Greta M.
Coger Fellowship in History Award:
Dzeukeze Marie Judith Seka

Dr. William R. and Helen Lucile Gillaspie
Scholarship: Mabel Yaa Fosua Dunyo

Ruth and Harry Woodbury Graduate
Fellowship in Southern History: Meridian
Pinkerton McDaniel



Photo: Abbey Jean Sedlak, winner of the Major L. Wilson’s graduate paper prize, served as one of two guest speakers at this year’s banquet.

Dr. Peggy Jemison Bodine Fellowship and
Dissertation Award: Aniya Andrea’T Gold

One Semester Dissertation Writing Fellowship:
Meridian Pinkerton McDaniel

Best MA Thesis Award: Madison Z. Cothorn

Best PhD Dissertation Award: Margaret Taylor
Deane

2025-2026 Outstanding Graduate Student
Teaching Award: Brandon Joshua Poppell

2025-2026 Outstanding Adjunct Teaching Award:
Dr. James D. Conway

2025-2026 Student Choice Award for Favorite
Instructor: Dr. Amanda Gaggioli