



aseh news

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Renew Your ASEH Membership

If you haven't already, it is that time of year to [renew your ASEH membership](#), which expires December 31, 2020.

The ASEH Council voted to adopt **new membership categories** for 2021 to keep rates affordable for students and underemployed members. If you see "***You can renew starting December 31, 2020***" below, click the "[Change](#)" link to change membership levels and renew.

This year has been difficult for all of us, and though the challenges facing ASEH pale in comparison to those facing the world, membership dues are the lifeblood of our society. Thank you for your continued membership and support.

Join or Renew

Change Levels



Environmental History Week - April 2021

Apply for Funding to Organize Events

[Environmental History Week](#) is fast approaching. ASEH is excited to announce that we will offer **funding opportunities to support local events** organized for Environmental History Week, up to \$1,000 to offset costs associated with events. Funding is limited, so apply soon!

Step 1: Submit your event for Environmental History Week using [this form](#).

Step 2: Apply for funding [here](#).

Please be sure to include your name, the event, how much funding you are requesting, and how ASEH funds would be used. **The first round of funding review will begin January 15, 2021.**

Many events are already organized and scheduled to take place in the third week of April 2021. Take a look at the [calendar of events](#) and [submit your event](#). We encourage all types of virtual and in-person programs (public health guidelines permitting) that consider environmental history and adjacent fields in all periods and places. Some of the activities you might consider are formal in-person or online mini-conferences to field trips, online film festivals, or days of action or service. Present research on a panel or symposium, lead or arrange a guided tour of a local park, nature preserve, or river, organize an open house or day of service for a local environmental justice organization - join in, reach out, and spread the word about events that support **Resiliencies and Inclusivity: Opening Up Environmental History**.

ASEH is planning several events including conversations with award and prize winners, social hours, and a virtual poster session.

[Environmental History Week](#) will sustain and enrich our community even though we cannot meet in person in April. Environmental History Week is also an opportunity to test out low-carbon alternatives to academic conferences, and plays a crucial role in ASEH's campaign to diversify our membership and our field. You can contribute to these initiatives by inviting scholars and audiences to participate in Environmental History Week activities who work in adjacent fields or subjects you find interesting, but may not have attended ASEH conferences, or who don't see themselves as environmental historians, but work in adjacent fields. We hope to reach out in our local communities and to share the work and interests of the environmental history community across the globe.

QUICK LINKS:

[Environmental History Week information](#)

[Submit an Event for Environmental History Week](#)

[Apply for Funding for Your Event](#)

[Environmental History Week Event Organizing Checklist](#)

[Environmental History Week FAQ](#)

Want to plan an event and avoid conflicts? Organize an activity or panel the earlier or later in April!

Interested in advertising or sponsorship opportunities? Contact David Spatz at david.spatz@aseh.org

environmental HISTORY

Environmental History

The January 2021 issue is on its way to you!

Access [Environmental History](#) online.

PRESIDENT'S COLUMN: How Does One Cancel a Conference?

As historians, we have an obligation to preserve and share a record of the past. That applies to the history of ASEH as well. The most momentous decision of 2020 was cancelling the Ottawa conference, scheduled for March 25-29, 2020, so I am using my year-end column to create and share a public record of events. At minimum, I hope it advances transparency by informing members about how officers tried to fulfill their obligations during a crisis. Beyond that, this account might be useful to future ASEH leaders if they face a similar crisis.

We made a tough decision, and it involved many steps, so this column will have to be longer than most. Even at this length, the account is partial. It reflects my experience as president, and a full accounting would need to incorporate the experiences of other officers, the executive committee, and the local arrangements committee.

One term you will see is executive committee (or EC). That was the name of the ASEH governing board at the time, which was confusing (executive committees are usually subsets of boards), so we later changed its name to council. I have retained the earlier name because it was in effect during the events described. In the text, *** marks the deletion of someone's name to protect confidentiality.

Looking back, I can divide events into several phases.

Phase I: Officers monitoring the risk (January through Wednesday, March 4).

Days to the start of the conference: 21+.

The officers most closely involved with conference management are the executive director (who handles most conference logistics), the vice president (who appoints the program committee and oversees the conference), and the president (on whose desk the buck stops). Current officeholders are, respectively, David Spatz, Sarah Elkind, and I. Our normal routine is to meet weekly by Zoom to discuss the state of the society and what we should be doing.

In early 2020, we folded discussion of COVID-19 into our weekly discussions as we monitored advice from public health experts and the actions of other societies. David was in regular conversations with the conference hotel and the local arrangements chairs.

On March 3, 22 days before the conference was to begin, the CDC announced that the U.S. as a whole had 60 COVID cases. To let members and registrants know we were monitoring the risks, and to encourage everyone to consult public health experts, we sent this public message that day.

We are writing to inform you about the potential impact of COVID-19 on our annual meeting in Ottawa, March 25-29, 2020.

Currently, we plan to meet as scheduled. We are monitoring developments closely and will send a message to members and participants if things change.

Here is some information that you might find helpful related to coronavirus, travel and meeting:

CDC Information on Travel (<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/travelers/index.html>)

CDC Advice on Mass Gatherings: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/mass-gatherings-ready-for-COVID-19.html>

Ottawa Public Health (<https://www.ottawapublichealth.ca/en/public-health->

Ottawa Public Health (<https://www.ottawapublichealth.ca/en/public-health-topics/novel-coronavirus.aspx>)

Government of Canada (<https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/diseases/2019-novel-coronavirus-infection.html>)

Phase II: Involving the executive committee (Thursday, March 5).

Days to the start of the conference: 20.

On March 5, officers wrote long messages to the executive committee to bring them into the discussion about what to do. Officers and executive committee members used a discussion board to discuss the situation almost daily beginning March 5. The discussion board is confidential, so I cannot quote the comments of others, but I can quote from my own post to give you a sense of the variables we considered.

I see the safety and health of conference goes as our top responsibility. The data available today do not show an increased risk for people in Ottawa. Ottawa Public Health reports no cases of COVID-19 (<https://www.ottawapublichealth.ca/en/public-health-topics/novel-coronavirus.aspx>). The CDC does not recommend cancelling trips to Canada, which it [sic] has the same low risk as the US. In fact, even if it raises its assessment from no warning to watch level 1, CDC would still not recommend cancelling: “CDC does not recommend canceling or postponing travel to destinations with level 1 travel notices because the risk of COVID-19 is thought to be low.” <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/travelers/faqs.html> The best scientific evidence that I have seen to date, then, do not seem to support cancelling the conference for public health reasons.

News from our Canadian partners (organizers and the hotel) indicate a much lower level of alarm about COVID-19 than in the US. We have roughly 200 Canadians registered to attend, and as of today it seems reasonable to expect that most of them will attend. So we can expect a significant turnout.

The big question mark for attendance is for people from countries other than Canada. We have had cancellations from China because those scholars cannot travel, but they were not a large number. It is unclear how many Americans will attend. Some US employers have restricted foreign travel. The restrictions range from a complete ban on university-funded foreign travel, at the strictest end, to a ban on traveling to countries with high risk according the CDC (China, Iran, etc.), at the more flexible end. I do not know how many employers have put restrictions in place. Some may decide to pay for the trip themselves (or already were self-funding), but, if many employers ban subsidized travel to Canada, we can expect a major hit to attendance. I have no data on policies or plans for scholars from countries other than Canada, the US, and China

US, and China.

We are obligated by contract to pay the hotel a minimum amount for rooms and food. If our attendees do not stay 720 nights, we will have to pay the hotel for the difference between actual nights and 720. If we have fewer meals to serve than the contracted amount, we pay for the unserved meals. Every person who attends, then, reduces the penalty ASEH pays for falling short of contracted nights and meals.

In sum, David and I do not see a public health or financial reason to cancel the meeting. We are monitoring the situation daily, and David is talking regularly with the hotel, ACLS, and local arrangements.

The sense of the executive committee was that, following CDC advice, we should adopt germ-control techniques (hand sanitizers, elbow bumps, etc.) and continue to monitor the situation.

Researching COVID, government policies in two countries, and the responses of other societies with conferences became full-time jobs for officers. We stayed in touch with the chair of the program committee, Nancy Jacobs, and the local arrangements chairs, Will Knight and Kirsten Greer.

Phase III: Explosion (Friday, March 6 to Sunday, March 8).

Days to the start of the conference: 19-17

Over these three days, alarm and the number of cases and travel restrictions grew rapidly. ASEH members wrote us with increasing frequency to express concern. Some scholarly societies cancelled their meetings, but others, such as the Organization of American Historians and the Business History Conference, announced that they still planned to meet.

I felt sucker punched when I learned that the White House was censoring the CDC, which we had been relying on for medical guidance.

To keep up with the fast-changing landscape, David, Sarah, and I increased the frequency of our Zoom meetings from weekly to daily. The executive committee continued to post data (such as travel policies at their universities) and discuss what we should do on the discussion board.

Phase IV: All but deciding to cancel (Monday, March 9 and Tuesday, March 10).

Days to the start of the conference: 16-15

On March 9, the local arrangements chairs—Will Knight and Kirsten Greer—recommended cancelling the conference because the health risks of COVID-19 were too high. David explained their reasoning to the executive committee,

and I posted this message.

My feeling is, with great regret, that we should cancel the conference. One of the reasons I have wanted to proceed cautiously and incrementally is the sense that our Canadian colleagues were ready to meet. We have discussed, and *** confirmed, that things looked less bad from the Canadian perspective. I did not want our Canadian members to feel that Americans cancelled the conference for American reasons when the Canadians would have been happy to meet with whomever could attend, which would likely be a significant number of Canadians not subject to the same travel restrictions that Americans face. Plus, I did not want local arrangements to feel their hard work and fund raising were going to waste.

Everything changed today when local arrangements recommended that we cancel. I have a hard time seeing how we could in good conscience override their recommendation. In addition, travel recommendations are becoming increasingly stringent. Everyone over 60, and everyone with certain health problems, should avoid non essential plane trips anywhere, the CDC now says. Many of our members fall into that category. Plus, employer travel restrictions, and the concern of individuals who do not want to transmit the virus in either direction by attending, is leading to large cancellations. Local arrangements is cancelling the sessions they are organizing, whether we cancel the meeting or not. Attendance looks to be small in the best case.

I think it is best for us to decide to cancel and move to the next step: dealing with the consequences.

All comments on the executive committee discussion board supported cancellation. We did not rush to a vote because we needed to understand, discuss, and plan for the consequences.

Our top priority was the health of our members, but we also had a responsibility to the health of ASEH as an organization. The hotel was taking a hard line on our contract. So long as it was open and able to host us, the hotel said, it was fulfilling its part of the contract. If we failed to show up, for whatever reason, that was our problem. We were not being singled out. David was consulting a lawyer who also worked for other societies, and the hotel chains were taking the same position with everyone. I summed up the financial situation in a post to the executive committee discussion board.

Thanks for the excellent comments, all. I think it is important that we have a rough idea of the financial impact if we make a decision to cancel. Here is my understanding in VERY ROUGH estimates.

\$250,000. This is the worst case scenario--the hotel holds us to the contract and we refund all registrations. I hope we do not see the worst case, but for

planning purposes it seems reasonable to assume it.

\$500,000. The amount in the ASEH bank account.

\$250,000. The amount that would remain in our bank account after a complete loss on Ottawa. Cancelling will not bankrupt us, but it will put us one more cancelled meeting away from bankruptcy.

500 people. The number of people registered for Ottawa before cancellations.

\$100,000. The best case scenario for the amount we can retain if all registrants allow us to keep their registration fees, including their field trip and meal fees (so *** and I reached the same estimate). I got it this way: The member registration is \$190. Some people paid more than that for field trips and meals. But others paid less--students paid \$80, and some may not have signed up for any additional events, so \$200 per person seems like a reasonable rough guess. $500 \text{ people} \times \$200 = \$100,000$.

Our only escape from financial disaster was the force majeure clause of the contract. It said that if the hotel was unable host the conference, we would owe nothing. We were hoping that Canadian authorities would announce restrictions, such as a ban on large gatherings, that would prevent the hotel from hosting us. The longer the crisis went on, the greater the chance that officials might issue such a ruling.

We decided to let members and registrants know that (a) the public health advice had turned decisively against large gatherings, (b) there was a good chance we would cancel, (c) we were considering alternatives, such as an on line conference, and (d) we needed time to try to negotiate with the hotel to reduce our losses and figure out whether to try to put the conference on line. This public message went out in the wee hours of March 10.

We are writing to update you about plans for our annual meeting in Ottawa, scheduled for March 25-29, 2020.

New information is arriving all the time, including increasing concerns about public health impacts and restrictions on travel. We are considering various possibilities, including cancelling the conference, proceeding with a small conference, and putting parts of the conference on line. **The executive committee will make the final decision, and it needs time to deliberate. We expect to inform you by the end of the week of its decision.**

Many of your institutions have already restricted international travel, and public sources are offering some guidance and guidelines about how to reduce the spread of and risk of contracting COVID-19. Here is some useful information

from the US and Canada.

Dr. Anthony Fauci, director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, recommended Sunday that elderly and vulnerable Americans limit their exposure to travel and large crowds.

The CDC expanded its guidance and precautions for people at extreme risk of serious illness - those over 60 or with underlying health conditions. They recommend avoiding non-essential travel, such as long plane trips.

Ontario's chief medical officer of health Dr. David Williams discussed the province's response today. They are not yet recommending canceling large gatherings, but are strongly encouraging people who have traveled internationally not to attend large events.

If you have already decided not to attend, please cancel your hotel reservations. This may help us renegotiate our contract with the hotel, and reduce our losses if we have to cancel.

Phase IV: Cancelling (Wednesday, March 11).

Days to the start of the conference: 14

On the morning of March 11, a past president phoned me before breakfast to report that ASEH members on social media were voicing dismay that we had not cancelled. We had asked for members to give us until March 13 to announce a decision. Those days would buy time to negotiate with the hotel in hopes of reducing our financial catastrophe, and to figure out whether we would try to put the meeting on line. The past president recommended, however, that I use emergency powers to cancel immediately.

To strike a balance between autarchy and republicanism, I discussed what to do with Sarah and David. We agreed that cancelling was the right thing to do. I made the emergency presidential decision to do so, and we sent out this email to members and registrants the same day.

It has become clear over the last few days that we cannot hold the Ottawa meeting as planned, **so we have decided to cancel the in-person meeting in Ottawa, scheduled for March 25-29, 2020**. The individual and collective health risks are too great.

This still leaves several questions unanswered: Do we simply cancel this meeting, or do we try to reschedule later in the year?

As a member and supporter of ASEH, you should be aware that either of these options has serious financial consequences for the organization. At worst, this loss could amount to \$250,000, or about half of ASEH's total bank account. A rescheduled meeting, if it was successful, might reduce those losses.

rescheduled meeting, if it was successful, might reduce these losses significantly.

The best way you can help is to donate to ASEH - perhaps by donating some of what you had budgeted for the meeting. It is easy to [DONATE HERE](#).

We promise to provide more information and an explanation about why a cancelled conference will cost so much when we have figured out whether we are simply cancelling or whether we will try to reschedule.

Then I sent this post to the executive committee.

Sarah, David and I agreed to send out an email to registrants and members announcing that we will not meet as scheduled and we need donations. I, and I am sure David and Sarah, were loath to get out ahead of an EC vote--no desire to usurp powers. But it seemed clear that all voices on this board favored not meeting as scheduled, and we were hearing that we needed to get something out soon--most recently in a phone call from *** this morning, who reported that discussion on line was growing increasingly dismayed that we have not cancelled. We are in a crisis and sometimes crises call for quick action.

Although we are announcing that we do not plan to meet, I think it is important to give the EC the chance to weigh in on the decision and, if you think it is a mistake, to register that objection. If the EC approves this action, and my sense is that it does, it is valuable to go on record with it as an EC decision.

The executive committee voted unanimously to cancel the meeting. Past presidents, led by Gregg Mitman and Nancy Langston, wrote a helpful request to members to donate to ASEH to cushion the loss. Sean Kheraj and NICHE offered to put the conference, or part of it, on line.

Phase V: Dealing with Consequences (Wednesday, March 11, to Saturday, March 28).

Days to the scheduled start of the conference: 14-0.

We spent the next two weeks responding to the consequences of cancellation. We decided to cancel the meeting, not to reschedule it. We decided to put the business meeting and awards meeting on line for everyone to see, and to have the executive committee meeting (which always takes place during the annual conference) on line. We decided not to put the conference on line ourselves, though we were happy to see others do so.

A wonderful piece of news arrived on Friday, March 27—the same Friday we would have been meeting in Ottawa. The news was that the hotel was holding us harmless. The government of Ontario had closed restaurants and banned large gatherings, which made it impossible for the hotel to host us legally.

large gathering, which under the force majeure clause of the contract meant we owed the hotel nothing. Even the deposit we had paid would be refunded to us.

On Saturday, March 28, the executive committee met on line. It decided to honor the travel grants awarded to graduate students.

Later the same day, we had the business meeting and awards ceremony on line. The business meeting focused on the consequences of meeting cancellation. The awards ceremony announced the winners of all our prizes. About 75 individuals signed in to watch.

So there it is. That is how one cancels a conference.

If you asked for one word to sum up the experience, I would say “traumatic.” I felt obligations pulling in opposite directions. In one direction, I felt an obligation to hold the meeting, if we could do so safely, to advance the professional, intellectual, and international goals of environmental history. And I felt a fiduciary responsibility for the survival of ASEH.

In the opposite direction, I felt a responsibility for the health of our members. It would have been hard deciding what to do if we were facing a well-understood disease. At least we would have had some sense of the scale of the health risk. With COVID, knowledge of the disease was in its infancy in March. We did not know how risky or widespread it was, nations were taking different positions, medical advice was politicized, guidance on large gatherings was changing almost daily, and other academic societies seeing the same data were going ahead with their meetings. So the question boiled down to weighing known costs to cancelling against uncertain health risks if we went ahead.

In the end, we agreed to cancel to protect public health. That decision may seem obvious in retrospect, but it was not at the time. We were having to make a decision with incomplete and changing information. I felt confident, however, that we had done our best to make a careful and considered decision.

Phase VI: Learning from Experience (spring 2020)

One of the worst parts of the cancellation in Ottawa was seeing an enormous investment of time go to waste. The local arrangements committee, program committee, executive director, president, vice president, panel organizers, and many more people had invested time that would not be recouped. (A rare rescue of invested time came this fall, when Nancy Jacobs and Rob Gioelli put [three environmental justice panels](#) on line. They were a big success.)

That experience led me to wonder about the Boston conference scheduled for spring 2021. If we kept it on the schedule, we risked losing the same amount of invested time we lost on the Ottawa conference. We thought it unlikely that a

vaccine would be administered universally by spring 2021, so we might end up with an in-person conference with a dozen lonely attendees and a gigantic bill (our contract required us to pay a large minimum amount, no matter how many people attended). Plus, if COVID risks persisted as we approached the conference date, we would go through the trauma all over again while deciding whether to meet or not. And we might well not be lucky enough to get our deposit back if we cancelled.

So we decided to be proactive. The officers decided to propose that we postpone—not cancel—the Boston conference to a future year. We guessed that approaching the hotel almost a year in advance about rescheduling might enable us to avoid losing the deposit—they would still get the conference, and they would have plenty of time to schedule other people into the hotel if they were optimistic about a resumption of travel. And that turned out to be the case. And we decided to encourage local events in place of a big, central meeting in 2021. We brought the council (formerly executive committee) into the conversation, and they supported the plan.

Phase VII: Planning Environmental History Week 2021 (spring 2020 to present)

We have both an opportunity and a risk. The opportunity is for [Environmental History Week](#) in April 2021, which Sarah Elkind is spearheading, to succeed in ways that a centralized annual meeting cannot.

One aspect I am most excited about is enhancing the diversity of participants. I am thinking of many kinds of diversity—in skin color, occupation, educational stage, income, residence, and more. People who are not professional environmental historians are unlikely to invest the time and money to attend a big conference in a faraway city. But they might think it worth their while to attend an event that lasts an hour or two in their hometown.

The same goes for presenters. Some people who would diversify ASEH might not be able to attend a big annual meeting, but they might be able to participate in their hometown or on line.

With this kind of opportunity in mind, I approached my Carnegie Mellon colleague, Professor Joe Trotter, about collaboration between ASEH and the Urban History Association (UHA), of which Prof. Trotter is president-elect. Prof. Trotter approached his board, which was supportive. With the help of others in UHA, we are in the process of trying to organize a panel on African Americans and environmental injustice.

The Urban History Association welcomes invitations from others who might like to collaborate on other events during Environmental History Week, too. If you are organizing an event for Environmental History Week, think urban historians

would be valuable partners, and want to solicit self-nominations for participants, please send an invitation to [H-Urban](#), the discussion board for urban historians, as well as [H-Environment](#).

The risk of [environmental history week](#) is that decentralized responsibility—which is what EH Week is all about—will not work. It is possible few people will feel motivated to organize events, in which case the week will not fulfill its potential. If you have already organized or joined an event, fabulous. Thank you so much. If not, this would be a great time to start.

One parting thought. In my presidential column of April 2020, I said I was unable to joke about COVID because of my fear that it might fell our members. And I requested that, if a member did pass away from the disease, someone would notify ASEH officers so we can announce that fact. So far we have not heard of any ASEH members killed by COVID. I hope that continues to be the case, but please let us know if you hear unfortunate news.

Have a safe holiday season. I send all best wishes for a bright 2021.

Edmund Russell
President

As 2020 comes to a close, please consider [donating to ASEH](#). Your support and membership allows ASEH to continue to offer prizes, graduate student fellowships, travel grants, conferences, and programs. We appreciate all of your support and your membership, and we look forward to a brighter and healthier 2021. Thank you.

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ASEH Elections

ASEH will hold its biennial election in January 2021. The Nominating Committee (Liza Piper (co-chair), Kendra Smith-Howard (co-chair), Michael Egan, Ling Zhang) assembled a slate of candidates, and members will elect colleagues to the following offices:

- Vice President/President-Elect
- Treasurer
- Secretary
- ASEH Council members (3)
- ASEH Nominating Committee members (2)

The election will commence on January 15, 2021, and members will be able to vote for 30 days. **Only ASEH members are eligible to vote in the election.** Make sure to [renew your membership](#), and [change membership levels](#) if necessary.

[Click here](#) for more information about the slate of candidates and the election

NEWS AND OPPORTUNITIES

- Videos are available for all three ASEH [Race and the Environment Series](#) programs. Thank you to Nancy Jacobs, all of the participants, and the Initiative for Environmental Humanities at Brown (EHAB) under the auspices of the Cogut Institute for the Humanities at Brown University.
- Kathleen A. Brosnan, Ann Durkin Keating, and William C. Barnett recently published [City of Lake and Prairie: Chicago's Environmental History](#) in the History of the Urban Environment Series with the University of Pittsburgh Press.
- The [Linda Hall Library](#) is now accepting applications for its 2021-22 fellowship program, which will be virtual. These fellowships provide graduate students, postdoctoral researchers, and independent scholars in the history of science and related STS fields with financial support to

in the history of science and related S T S fields with financial support to explore the Library's outstanding science and engineering collections. All application materials are due no later than **January 15, 2021**. For further information, visit <https://www.lindahall.org/fellowships/> or e-mail fellowships@lindahall.org.

- The Department of Social Sciences at Michigan Technological University invites applications for the position of department chair. The department takes a transdisciplinary approach to addressing socioeconomic, technological, and environmental change to create a sustainable, just, and prosperous world. It offers two graduate programs (M.S. and Ph.D.) in Environmental & Energy Policy and Industrial Heritage & Archaeology and its undergraduate majors include Sustainability Science and Society, Anthropology, History, and Social Sciences. **Review of applications will commence on January 22, 2021**. You can find out more about this position, including where to submit your materials electronically at: <http://www.employment.mtu.edu/cw/en-us/job/492425>.
- The [Research Institute for the History of Science and Technology at Caltech and The Huntington](#) seeks applications from graduate students and post-doctoral scholars to participate in a week-long residential institute on the theme of 'Anthroforming the Landscape: A Historical View from Asia.' **The deadline to apply is February 1st, 2021**. For information and application guidelines please see the [Research Division's website](#).
- The Newberry Library has canceled its 2021-22 short-term fellowship competition. The [Newberry Library-ASEH Fellowship](#) will return from 2022-23.
- If you would like stop receiving the print version of [Environmental History](#), log into your member profile on aseh.org, and check to box "Receive Online Journal ONLY."

Join Us in Boston for ASEH 2023



Massachusetts State House



Granary Burying Ground



Boston from above

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