

ForumJournal

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“Every Story Told”: Centering Women’s History



National Trust *for* Historic Preservation

**Preservation
Leadership Forum**

THIS ISSUE IS DEDICATED TO
BOBBIE GREENE MCCARTHY
AND KAREN NICKLESS.

Dedication: For Bobbie and Karen

STEPHANIE K. MEEKS

The *Forum Journal* issue before you explores the challenges, opportunities, and intersections associated with the preservation and interpretation of women’s history. As such, we are dedicating it to two inspiring preservationists who laid so much of the groundwork for the telling of these stories and struggles: Bobbie Greene McCarthy and Karen Nickless. Bobbie and Karen entered our field at a time when both history and preservation too often focused solely on “great men and great houses” and spent their careers working tirelessly to broaden our movement and elevate the stories of American women.

When I joined the National Trust for Historic Preservation in 2010, Bobbie Greene McCarthy occupied the office next to mine, and I couldn’t have asked for a more impassioned or empathetic guide into the world of preservation. After serving as the director of the Oral History Program at the John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and as deputy chief of staff for First Lady Hillary Clinton, Bobbie went on to become the director of [Save America’s Treasures](#)—a grant program that, in its first decade, assisted in the restoration of nearly 900 historic sites and resources across the country.

From the beginning, Bobbie worked hard to ensure that Save America’s Treasures did right by women’s history. In fact, it is thanks to her leadership that the Sewall-Belmont House was among the program’s first four grant recipients in 1999, alongside the Constitution of the United States of America, the United States Declaration of Independence, and the Star-Spangled Banner—heady company! Once the headquarters of the National Women’s Party, the Sewall-Belmont House in Washington, D.C., is now a [national monument and museum dedicated to women’s suffrage](#).

Save America’s Treasures also supported scores of other important women’s history sites on Bobbie’s watch, including

[The Mount](#), Edith Wharton's Massachusetts estate; the [Harriet Tubman Home](#) in Auburn, New York; and the [M'Clintock House](#) in nearby Waterloo, where the 1848 Declaration of Sentiments was drafted as part of the Seneca Falls Convention. Bobbie's passion project was [Val-Kill Cottage](#), the Hyde Park home of Eleanor Roosevelt and the only National Historic Site dedicated to a First Lady.

When I think about Bobbie, I most vividly remember her deep-seated conviction that our work is ultimately about people. Years before we crafted the [Preservation for People](#) vision statement to guide us in the next half-century, Bobbie was already supporting those who do the hard and unglamorous work of historic preservation on the ground. From her early days in the Peace Corps to her final years at [Vital Voices](#), a nonprofit that works to politically and economically empower women around the world, Bobbie *a/ways* put people first.

Much as Bobbie broadened the scope and mission of Save America's Treasures, Karen Nickless brought the same laser-like focus on honoring women's history to the National Trust.

Karen was a scholar of women's history: her doctoral research at the University of South Carolina focused on the community of Shaker Sisters in Pleasant Hill, Kentucky. "My biological family," she wrote at the beginning of her Ph.D. dissertation, "recalls my interest in women's history as early as fifth grade."

While writing her dissertation, Karen engaged that interest in virtually every way she could, working with the Palmetto Trust for Historic Preservation (now [Preservation South Carolina](#)), the [Edisto Island Preservation Alliance](#), the [Historic Columbia Foundation](#), [McKissick Museum](#), and the National Trust Historic Site [Drayton Hall](#). After she joined the Trust, Karen applied her keen insights and fierce intellect to ensuring that we fully incorporated women's history as central and integral to our signature portfolio of National Treasures.

"Every single historic site is a women's history site," Karen once wrote in an essay with Heather Huyck, president of the [National Collaborative for Women's History Sites](#), "including the ones you

don't think are. If you think not, look again, and think about what prejudices you might bring to the process." As a senior field officer in our Charleston Office, she helped bring in and manage critical preservation projects such as [Little Havana](#) in Miami; the [Sweet Auburn neighborhood](#) in Atlanta; and her own passion project, the [Pauli Murray House](#) in Durham, North Carolina.

The National Trust's executive vice president and chief preservation officer David J. Brown recalls Karen's enthusiasm: "I had no idea who Pauli Murray was or the scope of her impact, but Karen made sure that my shortcomings in this regard were quickly rectified. Her passion for this place, the history it represented, and the future of reconciliation that it promised was contagious."

And indeed it was. I well remember Karen telling me the story of Pauli Murray. An LGBTQ African American woman, Murray was the brilliant legal mind who wrote *States' Laws on Race and Color*, which Thurgood Marshall called the "Bible for Civil Rights law"; a cofounder of the [National Organization for Women](#); the first woman African American Episcopal priest; and an Episcopal saint.

I am so glad that, before she passed away, Karen heard the news that the Murray home would be named a National Historic Landmark by President Barack Obama in January 2017. Karen requested that, upon her death, donations be made to the Pauli Murray Center in her name. She called saving the Murray House her "greatest achievement."

Interestingly, in February 2016 historian Patricia Bell-Scott published [The Firebrand and the First Lady](#), which tells the story of the close friendship between Karen's historical muse, Pauli Murray, and Bobbie's, Eleanor Roosevelt. Murray and Roosevelt began writing to each other in 1938, and became closer in the years after Franklin Roosevelt's death, when Murray would often visit Roosevelt at Val-Kill.

"One of my finest young friends is a charming woman lawyer," Roosevelt wrote in *Ebony* in 1953, "who has been quite a firebrand at times but of whom I am very fond." When Roosevelt was dying nine years later, Murray wrote to her: "For many years, you have been one of my important models... Two generations of women

have been touched by your spirit.” At a conference a few years before her own death in 1985, Murray reflected on what Eleanor Roosevelt had meant to her. “Hopefully,” she said, “we have picked up the candle that she lighted in the darkness and we are trying to carry it forward to the close of our own lives.”

Many generations have been touched by Bobbie and Karen’s spirits and their tremendous work to highlight women’s stories. We will continue to carry forward the candles they lit for as long as it takes—until women’s history in America is given the full recognition it deserves.

Thank you, Bobbie and Karen. We miss you both, and this issue is for you. FJ

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TAKEAWAY

Read a Forum Blog post by Karen Nickless.