One day in May 1935, six unemployed young adults demanded to see the director of New York's Emergency Relief Bureau. Told he was unavailable, they announced they would sit there until he met with them. Their eleven-day sit-in and their supporters' sidewalk picketing, followed by the trial of those picketers, drew extensive newspaper coverage. What makes these demonstrators historically significant is that they were protesting discrimination against "handicapped" workers like themselves by public work relief programs and private employers. They soon formed the militant League of the Physically Handicapped (1). In the early twentieth century, businesses and civil service agencies frequently refused to hire handicapped applicants or employed them only part-time. Those who got jobs were often paid lower wages for the same work as nonhandicapped employees. Advocacy groups including the League and Deaf associations protested this discrimination as well as New Deal work relief policies that rejected handicapped jobseekers as "unemployable" (2). Justifying these exclusions, employers and policymakers asserted that workers with disabilities would be less productive and more prone to accidents and absenteeism and that nondisabled coworkers would not accept them.

The labor shortages of World War II changed everything. Individual capacities and job functions previously claimed as necessary were declared inessential. Adults with disabilities formerly said to be "unfit" suddenly became a "vast reservoir" of potential workers. People with every sort of disability got jobs. The Department of Labor rated their performance as equal to that of nondisabled workers. But when the war ended, they, like white women and people of color, lost their jobs to the millions of returning nondisabled, white male veterans (3). For the next half century, researchers reported that the old employer biases persisted, helping to keep the vast majority of working-age adults with disabilities jobless (4).

The ideology underlying these attitudes did more than restrict disabled people's job prospects and social careers. Disability, notes historian Douglas Baynton, has served in the modern era as "the primary term in a fundamental binary opposition—'normal' versus 'disabled'," a major category of social organization, policy formulation, and "cultural signification" (5). That binary informed the "disability category" in employment practices and social welfare policies serving as a tool to manage social and especially class relations (6).

This history of employment and disability illustrates two important facts. "Disability" is, in significant measure, a historically evolving social construction. In addition, it has been a far more significant feature of the American experience than most historians and history teachers have noticed. Traditionally defined as individual limitation in social functioning due to medical and social pathology, it was considered an appropriate subject for applied academic fields such as medicine, rehabilitation, and special education. But more recently, humanities and social science scholars have explained it as, not simply an individual impairment and definitely not an objectively measurable clinical entity, but instead a historically contingent panoply of social identities and roles, sociopolitical classifications, and cultural metaphors. Disability may at first seem questionable as a subject of historical study and teaching, or at least irrelevant, or maybe just uninteresting. In fact, it offers new ways for us and our students to understand a great many aspects of American history and turns out to be fascinating.

**Historians and Disability**

Historical study of disability is developing rapidly. It has for some years now been a focus of sessions at historians' gatherings such as
the annual meetings of the Organization of American Historians and the American Historical Association. In addition to individual studies from many publishers, New York University Press has the “History of Disability” book series which Lauri Umansky and I co-edit, while the University of Michigan Press’s “Disability and Culture” series and Syracuse University Press’s newly launched “Critical Perspectives on Disability” series both include works of history. History journals offer a growing number of articles, forums, and special issues on disability history. In 2005, the Journal of American Ethnic History featured a discussion forum on disability in immigration history, while Radical History Review devoted its Winter 2006 number to disability history (7). Facts on File is about to publish the Encyclopedia of American Disability History of which Susan Burch is the lead editor. Meanwhile, H-Net’s H-Disability listserv recently added its 400th subscriber, and growing numbers of doctoral students in U.S. history are making disability history one of their specializations. The field has developed to the point that in mid-summer 2008 some five dozen scholars gathered at San Francisco State University for a four-day conference entitled “Disability History: Theory and Practice.”

At that conference, a planning group focused on disability history curricular materials to aid middle school and high school history and social studies teachers. A particularly valuable resource for those teachers is being developed online at the Disability History Museum. The team building that impressive website is continually adding to the wide-ranging stock of primary source documents and historical images in its “Library.” Its “Education” section, which is under construction, will include “Teacher Resources” and “Course Packets.” The site will also ultimately include a “Museum” which will present online exhibits and a newsletter. Even in its present state, the “Library” is a useful teaching resource (8).

Demographic data alone demonstrate the importance of disability in American history. Current surveys estimate that the U.S. population contains at least 51 million persons with disabilities that have a major impact on life activities. That is about one in six present-day Americans (9). It seems likely that in the past the proportions were that high or higher.

Another and more telling indication of the historical commonplaceness of disability and its importance jumps to our attention if we look at the myriad topics scholars have been researching. At that conference on Disability History: Theory and Practice, many papers focused on American subjects. Presenters examined disability in early national U.S. families and antebellum U.S. slavery. They looked at workers with disabilities in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries; “crippled” newsboys and injured railroad workers and other laborers who continued working in one way or another after acquiring their disabilities. Other scholars probed representations of disability in freak shows and political cartoons, Progressive Era social welfare policies and professional practices, and ideologies about parenting children with cognitive disabilities in the era of World War I, raising blind children just after World War II, and regulating “delinquent” teenage girls in the mid-twentieth century.

Likewise, the books, journal articles, and dissertations mentioned above cover topics that stretch across the full course of American history. They include the history and cultural representations of disabled veterans; public policies regarding poor relief in colonial Massachusetts and the early national United States; invalidism in women’s writing; the public career and image of Helen Keller; the historical evolution of American attitudes toward and treatment of people identified as idiotic, then feebleminded, then mentally retarded, and more recently developmentally disabled; provisions for disabled veterans after the Civil War in both the northern and southern states and throughout the U.S. following World War I; the effort of blinded World War II veterans to reestablish their sense of manhood; disability and nationalism; the history of prosthetics and its relation to conceptions of gender and citizenship; the “cripple” in sentimental Victorian literature; Deaf history; and much more (10).

**Agents of Change**

Virtually everywhere we look in American history, people with disabilities and disability-related subjects crop up again and again. It is there in the histories of immigration and labor and social reform, politics, public policy, and war, the economy and education, family life and popular culture. It is not just part of people’s private lives. It is a social problem Americans grapple with in the public arena, a cultural metaphor they unconsciously but constantly invoke, a political and policy issue they debate. In each of these areas, disability operated in distinctive ways. Yet at the same time, its functioning in all of these reflected a deeper culture-wide modern ideology of disability.

Historical research has uncovered both the enormous varieties of disability experiences throughout American history and their commonalities. As a corollary, this scholarship discloses that even though the myriad physiological conditions associated with disability reflected a broad range of etiologies, the people who had those disabilities grappled with similar patterns of bias enforced by social and institutional practices. And the research reveals one other important and perhaps unexpected historical reality. At odds with the medicalized and pathologized view that has dominated the modern era and contrary to conventional perceptions about the social incompetency and helplessness of people with disabilities, they were never passive, never historically inert. They were virtually always actors in their own history. Of particular importance for the study of disability history in relation to American history in general, people with disabilities time and again combined to act collectively to alter their social status and social fate. At times they sought interpersonal support and community; at times they mobilized politically. Though others often viewed them as victims of illness or injury and sometimes even saw them as victims of a stigmatizing society, they themselves frequently exercised historical agency. The League of the Physically Handicapped and the Deaf associations mentioned above are but two of many instances. Another intriguing example is the American Blind People’s Higher Education and General Improvement Association (ABPHEGA). Graduates of several midwestern state schools for the blind founded it in the late 1890s to refute common stereotypes. Lasting only a few years, it gave way in 1906 to the American Association of Workers for the Blind, an organization dominated by sighted professionals. Nonetheless, the ABPHEGA marked the beginnings of the U.S. “organized blind” civil rights movement (11).
Disability rights activists have long been protesting the Muscular Dystrophy Association (MDA) Telethon hosted each Labor Day weekend since 1967 by comedian and actor Jerry Lewis. They argue that MDA promotes degrading stereotypes of people with disabilities as helpless victims who need to be pitied. In February 2009, activist Simi Linton, holding placard, and others formed a group called The Trouble With Jerry, to protest plans by the Motion Picture Academy to give Lewis a special Oscar for his “humanitarian” work. For more on the campaign, see <http://thetroublewithjerry.net/>.

If disability history is significant and worth studying in its own right, it also helps us to understand better a great many other areas of American history. A few examples will illustrate its usefulness.

Surveys of antebellum America describe it as the era of the most energetic and extensive reform movements in U.S. history. Yet while our textbooks and teaching may mention Dorothea Dix’s efforts to reform insane asylums, most overlook other campaigns regarding Americans with disabilities. The movements with the greatest long-term impact established the first wave of schools for deaf, “idiotic,” and blind children. Those advocates operated from distinctive ideas about human nature, aimed to expand contemporary Americans’ thinking about the character and promise of American democracy, and sought to implement specific qualifications for full membership in American society. People with disabilities themselves invoked some of these principles to alter their position in society. One primary source useful for teaching about antebellum reform is Abram Courtney’s pamphlet *Anecdotes of the Blind* (1835) which recounts his adjustment to blindness in his teens and twenties. Courtney traveled as a peddler through upstate New York, Ohio, and Pennsylvania. Customers initially bought his goods, but on his subsequent trips he found that the novelty of a blind peddler had worn off and people often told him he should go on poor relief instead of trying to support himself. Paraphrasing Shakespeare’s Shylock, he asked rhetorically: “If you prick a blind man, does he not bleed?—if you tickle him, does he not laugh?—if you treat him with contumely, does he not feel mortification and bitterness of heart? Shall he not also have an honest pride?” His pamphlet aimed to counter social prejudice while promoting education for blind people. He also sought out other blind people and reported on their activities and occupations. Courtney’s tract offers not only a glimpse of unnoticed inhabitants of the social landscape, but a different angle on the character of reform in antebellum America and the constraints some reformers faced.

We and our students would also find our thinking about historical notions of appropriate Americanness stimulated by Baynton’s “Disability and the Justification of Inequality in American History.” This seminal essay examines three historic debates about citizenship: the status of African-Americans during and after slavery, the turn-of-the-century women’s suffrage campaign, and the contemporaneous controversy over immigration. Baynton shows that disability, attributions of disability, and refutations of those ascriptions were important features in each of these contests. For example, while nineteenth-century U.S. immigration policies restricted foreigners with disabilities, the new immigration laws adopted in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries increasingly intensified those exclusions. Immigration restrictionists recognized that employers often discriminated against job applicants with disabilities; for that reason, examining officers were authorized to bar any person with a “defect” that might affect their ability to earn a living and who therefore might become a public charge. Those policies also gave examiners much greater latitude in rejecting immigrants, licensing them to turn away individuals with disabilities the officers believed might undermine the national genet-
ic stock. Baynton demonstrates that in all of these controversies about immigration, gender, and race concepts of disability were central to modern American thinking about citizenship (13).

**Disability and Modern America**

Expanding on Baynton’s valuable observations, history teachers and historians would do well to consider the role of issues and ideologies pertaining to disability and people with disabilities in the rise of the modern American state. During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, political leaders and policymakers, as well as medical, education, charity, and social service professionals, sought to address disability as a social problem in a range of policy arenas: social welfare, public health, public schooling, warfare, and immigration. Not only is an understanding of disability necessary for full comprehension of the histories of each of these policy areas, but the presence of disability-related issues in each of them should alert us to the linkage between the histories of disability and modern state formation. For example, Theda Skocpol’s Protecting Soldiers and Mothers: the Political Origins of Social Policy in the United States traces the central role of disability pensions for Union Army Civil War veterans in the historical evolution of federal social welfare policies (14). The work of scholars such as Skocpol demonstrates that we cannot fully and adequately explain the rise of the modern American state without examining the function of “disability” in its development.

It would seem much more obvious that we cannot adequately understand or recount U.S. history since World War II if we leave out the enormous impact of disability-related issues and disability rights advocacy. During that era, those issues became central and pressing in every institution, in every sphere, of American life. Both the U.S. Congress and virtually all of the state legislatures adopted extensive legislation regarding citizens with disabilities. They passed laws pertaining to everything from access to public accommodations, education to employment, and health care to welfare. This large body of federal and state lawmaking in turn generated an ever-growing corpus of federal and state case law. Disability-related legislation and litigation became a major area of governmental and judicial activity. The impact on two spheres, public schools and public spaces, illustrates the ramifications throughout U.S. society.

Up until 1975 and the passage of PL 94-142, The Education for All Handicapped Children Act (later renamed the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act), many children with disabilities in the U.S. received inadequate education or no schooling at all. By the end of the century, the vast majority were in school, many of them “mainstreamed,” that is, integrated in classrooms along with nondisabled peers. Most teens with disabilities were graduating from high school; many were moving on to higher education. (This should be evident to history teachers at all levels given our various experiences in dealing with middle school and high school efforts to comply with PL 94-142 as well as the growth of college and university service programs for students with disabilities). This mandated effort resulted from a nationwide movement of parent, professional, and disabled advocates that began just after World War II. The results have significantly reconfigured the population of U.S. schools, placed major material and fiscal demands on school systems, and provoked extensive rethinking about the purposes of education and the processes of learning (15).

Meanwhile, federal and state statutes along with disability rights activism brought about a massive rebuilding of the architectural, physical, and technological infrastructure of American society. These included provisions for accessibility and accommodations in public buildings, public spaces, public transportation systems, and public telecommunications: ramps and braille markers and auditory and visible signals and curb cuts and blue parking spaces and sign language interpreters at public events and open and closed captioning on television and a variety of telephones and a vast array of technologies to make both computers and the Internet accessible to people with every sort of disability, along with a great many other modifications, innovations, and devices. This enormous transformation not only reallocated public and private financial and material resources on an immense scale. It also provoked advocacy, protests, and lawsuits as well as resistance and political lobbying to limit the scope of these mandates. But the long-term result has been participation of millions of Americans with disabilities of all sorts in the public sphere, people who in prior generations and centuries remained out of sight and out of mind.

One could go on citing example after example of the impact of “disability” on U.S. society since World War II. Yet despite its importance in America’s recent past, the major general overviews of that entire epoch and the important synthetic studies of its particular sub-eras either give disability scant attention or ignore it altogether. These histories recount the civil rights movements to combat racism, anti-Semitism, sexism, and homophobia, but they generally leave out disability prejudice and discrimination and the disability rights movement. When people with disabilities do appear in these accounts they are frequently objects of charity but very rarely civil rights activists (16).

The point is that in recent American history, as in all previous eras, disability-related experiences and issues, controversies and campaigns appeared in virtually every social institution and sphere: in lawmaking and policy administration, in professional and institutional practices, and in Americans’ understanding about some of their most basic values, values regarding equality and fitness for citizenship, autonomy and appearance, gender and sexuality, progress and the “health” of society. It is time for teachers of American history at all levels to incorporate this significant subject and useful tool in order to deepen our analyses as well as enriching our students’ understanding of the American experience.  

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A group of children sing the Star Spangled Banner at St. Rita’s School for the Deaf, Cincinnati, Ohio, 1918. Established in 1915, St. Rita’s was an exception to the rule. Most disabled children received inadequate, if any, education from the nineteenth to the late twentieth centuries. (Courtesy of Library of Congress.)
Endnotes


9. The use of demographic data in the historical study of disability, as in contemporary social analysis and public policymaking is complicated by several factors. Different research surveys use different definitions of "disability." They also study differing populations. The results are too varied and complex to go into in this short article. For a concise overview of the demographic data on noninstitutionalized persons with disabilities see Matthew Brault, "Disability Status and the Characteristics of People in Group Quarters: A Brief Analysis of Disability Prevalence Among the Civilian Noninstitutionalized and Total Populations in the American Community Survey," (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Census Bureau, February 2008), <http://www.census.gov/hhes/www/disability/disability.html>.


Paul K. Longmore is professor of history and director of the Institute on Disability at San Francisco State University. He specializes in early American history and the history of people with disabilities. He is the author of *The Invention of George Washington* (University of California Press, 1988) and *Why I Burned My Book* and Other Essays on Disability (Temple University Press, 2003). He is coeditor of *The New Disability History: American Perspectives* (New York University Press, 2001). In 2005, he received the Henry B. Betts Award, given annually by the American Association of Persons with Disabilities and the Rehabilitation Institute of Chicago, to "honor an individual whose work and scope of influence have significantly improved the quality of life for people with disabilities in the past, and will be a force for change in the future."