

## Faculty Spotlight



### **Richard Bell, Associate Professor of History**

Anyone with a casual interest in American History—or who has the Hamilton soundtrack on heavy rotation—knows that the American Revolution did not end well for Britain. Yet, it’s that tumultuous founding conflict that was so magnetic for Richard Bell, a Cambridge-educated Brit and Associate Professor of History at UMD. “American History was not something that was much taught in K-12 schools in the UK when I was a lad, not surprising,” he explains. It was a professor at the University of Cambridge, Betty Wood, who introduced him to the complexities of early America’s past, often through the stories of ordinary people. This experience was a far cry from the traditional political and constitutional approaches to studying history he’d grown accustomed to, and Bell was hooked. “She showed me that American history was much longer, deeper, and more complicated than most British people think. It was incredibly eye-opening.” Bell completed his doctorate at Harvard, working with Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, another champion of history-from-the-bottom-up, before coming to Maryland. Now the author of numerous articles, two books, and a third on the way, Bell continues to refer to those everyday stories to explore the intersections between people, power, and politics in early American history. It has taken him in some unlikely directions; he has spent much of the last year visiting with audiences across the country to discuss the nuances of the smash hit musical, *Hamilton: An American Musical*. Below, Bell talks about some of his research, the incredible story that inspired his new book, and his

loving critique of a musical that remains Broadway's hottest ticket:

Your first book, *We Shall Be No More: Suicide and Power in the Newly United States*, tackles some very big issues like slavery, freedom, and religion, but through the lens of suicide. When did you first start making these connections? In grad school I was asked to write a paper for a class where I had to focus on a particular genre of communication, and so, for reasons I can't now fully recall, I went looking for suicide notes in the archives of the Massachusetts Historical Society. I was really surprised to find some. Most of them were in the archives because they had been transcribed into early American newspapers from the revolutionary era—and it was those newspapers that had survived. This struck me as a puzzle. What were they doing there?

Transcribing suicides notes is not something newspapers do much in the modern era. The *New York Times* rarely runs a suicide note. I set out to explore why newspaper editors in that era commonly transcribed the contents of suicide notes and ended up exploring the cultural significance of self-destruction. Why did acts of suicide make people at the time so anxious, so fearful, so angry, and so confused? That sparked a paper, which became the seed for a dissertation, and then later a book.

That book, *We Shall Be No More*, ended up covering quite a lot of ground. It examined anxiety about suicide as it appeared in debates over sentimental literature, over the legitimacy of the death penalty, over life-saving, over the moral bankruptcy of American slavery, and on and on. It's ubiquity in all these early American debates suggested to me that people found something so confounding in suicide: an act pointed, personal, and inherently political. Times have changed of course, but I think in some ways we continue to be animated and terrorized by the specter of suicide.

Your new book, *Stolen: Five Free Boys Kidnapped into Slavery and Their Astonishing Odyssey Home*, which will be released by Simon and Schuster in October, tells the story of five free African-American boys living in Philadelphia in 1825 who are kidnapped and ferried to the south on the Reverse Underground Railroad to be sold as slaves, but who escape, spurring a manhunt for their captors. The synopsis alone is jaw-dropping. Where did you first hear about this story? I came to this project via suicide, actually. One of the human traffickers in my new book, a woman named Patty Cannon, was arrested for murder in Delaware later in life and died in jail awaiting trial. Many people subsequently suspected suicide, and her story crossed my desk in 2011 when I was finishing up my first book. When I went to investigate it, I learned that whether or not she committed suicide was arguably the least interesting part of the story. Her 20-year career as a woman in the most profitable and durable gang of human traffickers in American history was much more compelling. So, this new book features her as a major character in a story that focuses on one particular kidnapping episode in which five free black boys were ensnared in her net.

How did you research something like this? Well, it was a struggle. Kidnappers typically do not

leave diaries or batches of letters neatly tied up in a reading room somewhere. And their victims, who are often illiterate young people, often do not leave textual traces either. The most successful human traffickers spirited people away before any of their loved ones knew they were gone, and those children usually never returned. In the case I write about in the book, however, there happened to be a paper trail, one comprised of both legal sources and the records of a few government officials, notably the mayor of Philadelphia at the time. That trail only exists because a few of these boys did something miraculous: they succeeded in blowing the whistle on their kidnappers and in exerting political pressure on a handful of powerful white men to investigate what had happened.

What research projects do you hope to explore in the future? I have a few new projects swirling around, including a study of Elizabeth Jennings, a free black woman living in New York City in the 1850s who insisted on sitting in the whites-only section of a NYC streetcar, an act of defiance that caused a legal challenge against that city's segregated transportation system. You could say she was Rosa Parks before Rosa Parks. I'm also interested in a larger project about how the Underground Railroad worked out west in the Mississippi River Valley, and in writing a big book about the generations of enslaved people who labored in the White House in the decades before the Civil War. It's hard to know where to begin. There is really no end of fascinating and important stories about the African American experience that have not been told.

You have been at Maryland for 13 years. What made you choose it and why have you stayed? Back in 2006, the job opening at Maryland was one of the best jobs available for an early Americanist, and I could not believe my good fortune to get it. I remember the day I got the call telling me I got the job and screaming into the cushion of my couch with joy. Thirteen years later, I remain very happy here and I get to work every day with smart and generous colleagues who share my passion for research and teaching.

What's something not a lot of people know about you? Well anyone who hears me singing in my office probably knows this already, but my dirty secret is that I'm completely obsessed with the musical Hamilton. Still, as a historian of that era, I'm a pretty critical fan of the show and so, for the past 12 months, I've been traveling around the country to different cities where Hamilton is touring giving lectures that offer a mixture of praise, context, and critique of the show.

What did they get wrong? First of all, I should say that Hamilton gets loads of stuff right, which is an amazing feat for any show featuring rapping and dancing Founding Fathers. However, its portrayal of the American Revolution as a simplistic conflict between good guys and not-so-good guys is obviously not very thoughtful, and I don't just say that as someone with a British accent. The show's endorsement of Alexander Hamilton as an up-from-his-bootstraps immigrant striver is also a bit problematic because it skips over Hamilton's rather nasty anti-immigrant politics in later life, notably his support for the 1798 Alien and Sedition Acts during John Adams' administration, two of the most hateful and short-sighted pieces of public policy

we have seen in the history of this country. Still, I come at all this with a lot of love for the show and I'm so grateful that this great American musical has given teachers like me an opportunity to talk about this history.

Article by Maggie Haslam

## Awards| Recognition| Leadership Development

### 2018-2019 USM Board of Regents Faculty Award Recipients



**Reid Compton**  
**Biology**



**Jandelyn Plane**  
**Computer Science**



**Larry Davis**  
**Computer Science**



**Miao Yu**  
**Mechanical Engineering**

**Congratulations to these faculty members for their excellence in mentoring, public service and research.**

# 2019 American Academy of Arts & Sciences Newly Elected Members



**Michele J. Gelfand**  
**Psychology**



**Frances E. Lee**  
**Government & Politics**

Congratulations to Michele J. Gelfand, Distinguished University Professor, and Frances E. Lee, Distinguished Scholar-Teacher. They are part of the Academy's 239th class and will be inducted in October 2019.

Courtesy of Maryland Today;  
headshots courtesy of the College of Behavioral and Social Sciences.

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## Policy & Procedure



## **APT Annual Reports**

Each year, the Associate Provost for Faculty Affairs presents a report of the details of the APT Committee's work to the Provost and the Senate. Reports from 2011 through 2018 are linked below. The 2019 report will be available in early fall. [Read more.](#)

## **Preparing for Retirement**

The retirement process varies according to whether special arrangements have been made with your Department or Unit prior to retirement. Visit our website to read the [Retirement Process and Procedures](#) information for more details.



## Faculty Development



### Faculty Forum: Academic Freedom & Free Speech

On April 9, participants learned about rights of faculty members in higher education. Speakers from the Offices of General Counsel and Diversity & Inclusion, and Strategic Communications provided insights on how various laws, policies and issues shape this hot topic.

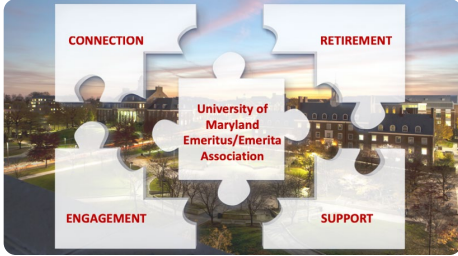
### Demonstrating and Evaluating Research Impact

This program held on April 17, sponsored by OFA and the Libraries, provided details on impact measurement strategies, including journal impact factors, H-index, and Altmetrics. Topics also included Google Scholar, Web of Science, and Publish or Perish along with other tools that provide measures of research impact.



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# UMD Emeritus/Emerita Association (UMEEA)



New leadership to come for Emeritus/Emerita Association

This month emeritus/emmerita faculty members took steps to shore up the next round of leadership for the group. Faculty voted for new Steering Committee members and officially acknowledged their membership in the Association. Voting results will follow in May.

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## Diversity & Inclusion

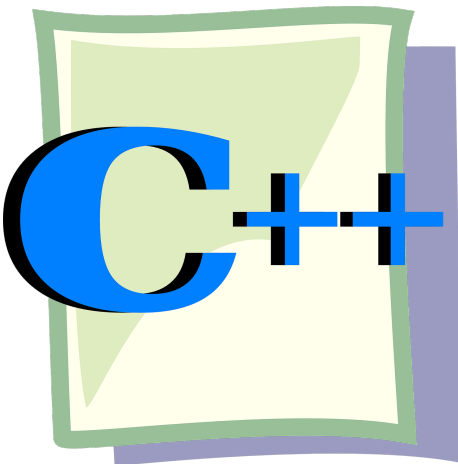


UMD Diversity Strategic Plan

"The University of Maryland has long promoted diversity as a core value, and recognizes a diverse educational community as one of our greatest strengths."- President Loh. [Click here](#) to view the plan, Transforming Maryland: Expectations for Excellence in Diversity and Inclusion.

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## Tips & Resources



### Grading Dilemma: Should We Round Up?

Among the trickiest decisions teachers make is whether to round up the final grade for a student who is just a few points shy of a passing score. Although some students need a "second lap" to master academic skills needed for later coursework, repeating courses makes it .....[Read more](#) from Faculty Focus.

### Teaching in Higher Ed Podcasts

Listen to these podcasts from professors and others in higher



education on topics ranging from digital pedagogy, teaching, work/life balance and more. The site also features other tools and resources to assist with professional development and productivity. [Learn more.](#)



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## Program & Events

April 25 - Chair Workshop: What Chairs Need to Know about Security and Conflicts of Interest+

[April 29](#) - APT Workshop: APT Committee Members and Chairs

August 13 & 14 - New Administrators Orientation

August 20 & 21 - New Faculty Orientation

+ Registration sent via Google Form.

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**Do you have a  
suggestion for  
content ideas?**

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