

**ILLINOIS STATE MUSEUM  
BOARD MEETING**

**November 17, 2025, 10:00 a.m.**

**Webex**

Attending: Officers: Chair Jonah Rice, Vice Chair Sara Phalen, and Secretary Tamira Brennan; Board Members: Leverne Backstrom, John Barker, Jenny Davis, Wanza Davis, and Director Natalie Phelps Finnie; Illinois State Museum Staff: Jenn Edginton, Meghan Lindstrom, Meredith Mahoney, Brooke Morgan, Jeff Nevins, and Logan Pappenfort; Illinois State Museum Society Staff: Jamila Wicks.

**I. Welcome**

Chair Jonah Rice called the meeting to order at 10:02 a.m.

Leverne Backstrom joined the meeting at 10:04 p.m.

**II. Roll Call**

Meghan Lindstrom called the roll and a quorum was present.

Jonah invited Board members and other attendees to provide short introductions of themselves.

**III. Approval of the Minutes of April 30**

The Minutes from the April 30 meeting were presented for approval. Leverne moved to approve the Minutes, Tamira Brennan seconded, and the Minutes were approved unanimously.

**IV. New Business**

**Director's Report**

**Illinois State Museum (ISM) Updates**

Jenn reminded the Board that mandatory trainings for State employees and appointees would need to be completed by the end of the year. She also reminded them that all Board members except for Jenny Davis were up for reappointment and needed to reapply.

Jenn provided a brief overview of the exhibition changeovers that had taken place since the last Board meeting. The art exhibit *Peggy McNamara: In Flight* had opened at Dickson Mounds Museum (DMM) and featured the watercolor works of Peggy McNamara, the artist in residence at the Field Museum. Jenn stated that the Peoria Nation had donated an exhibit on Emiquon and it had been installed the previous year. Director of Tribal Relations Logan Pappenfort and Curator of Anthropology Brooke Morgan were creating the exhibit labels with the Peoria and other partners within Emiquon. The history exhibit *In the Middle* opened at the Lockport Gallery with a Society reception. The exhibit explored growing up during World War II in the center of the country through the eyes of Jewish author Sybil Mervis. At the Illinois State Museum in Springfield the Indigenous exhibits *Minohsayaki: Painted Robes*, *Sharon Hoogstraten: Dancing for our Tribe*, and *Indigenous Beadwork of the Great Lakes* were all opened. Jenn stated that the annual *Ofrendas* exhibit had been moved to the Earth Forces Theater on the first floor and the Museum had hosted another successful Día de los Muertos event with over 400 visitors in attendance.

Jenn also provided a short preview of upcoming exhibits. She shared that the Beardstown project was nearing completion as the Spanish Club students finalized the language for the labels. A reception had been scheduled for December 5th. Other upcoming exhibits included a change in artwork displayed at the Governor's Mansion, the Route 66 exhibit, and the America 250 exhibits.

Jenn shared that the Route 66 Oral History Project created by Curator of History Erika Holst and Registrar of History Amanda Bryden had been completed and was available on the Museum's website. Erika and Amanda had recorded 100 oral interviews with individuals who had lived, worked, and traveled along Route 66 to commemorate the 100th anniversary of the road.

Jenn stated that Logan Pappenfort and Jeff Nevins, Director of Historic Sites, have been discussing the Tribal Relations work needed to be done at Historic Sites including Black Hawk and Cahokia Mounds. Jeff is also addressing infrastructure issues at Historic Sites before interpretation changes can be planned.

Jenn provided an update on staffing at the Museum and the Department of Natural Resources (DNR). Changes in the leadership structure at DNR moved the Museum under Deputy Director Russell Orrill. In July Bob Sill retired as

Director of Research and Collections after nearly four decades of service to the Museum and State of Illinois. Curator of Zoology Meredith Mahoney accepted the interim position to fill Bob's Director role. Guard Hank Redding, Dickson Mounds Site Tech Adam Reich, and Educator Sarah Davis all accepted other State positions. The Museum welcomed Molly Rannebarger in September as Natural Sciences Registrar and Sara Shafer-Henry would start as Associate Director of Dickson Mounds Museum on December 1st. Jenn stated that there were still eight key positions the Museum needed to fill including her old position of Director of Interpretation.

Jenn shared that the Museum had received notice of reaccreditation by the American Alliance of Museums just the previous week. She briefly explained how the site visit was organized in August and how the two evaluators were able to meet with stakeholders and tour the Illinois State Museum facilities. Jenn shared that the positive feedback from the evaluators including driven staff, strong community partnerships and engagement, commitment to NAGPRA, and an improved relationship with DNR and the State of Illinois. The evaluators also listed areas in need of improvement including establishing a formal evaluation for educational programming and growing site visitation instead of just community outreach.

Jonah congratulated Jenn and the staff for earning reaccreditation. He asked if the Museum was required to report anything to AAM during the next ten years, such as improvements outlined in the ten-year timeline. Jenn confirmed the Museum was not required to report until the next Self-Study due in 2034. She further clarified that staff were aware of the improvement needed and were actively working to address them.

### **ISM 150 Brainstorming Session**

Jenn invited the Board to participate in a brainstorming session to help determine how the Museum will commemorate its 150th anniversary. She reminded the Board of the new Mission Statement approved in February to guide the discussion.

Jenn asked the Board to consider the question: *What do you want the world to know about the ISM?*

Tamira stated that the ISM was known for art and culture but the public should be informed about the excellent research completed by employees, such as tracking invasive or endangered species.

Leverne suggested a display be made to showcase the 150 most interesting or exciting exhibits that the Museum has shown or to highlight changes to the Museum over the 150 years.

Sara stated that the Museum covered a vast diversity of stories and fields and that not all the public is aware of the many levels of history at ISM.

Jonah stated he would like for the people of Illinois to know more about the education opportunities offered by ISM, especially in southern Illinois. Director Natalie Phelps Finnie supported the statement and suggested that Historic Sites may provide an opportunity for statewide outreach. Jeff Nevins stated that there were spaces at many Historic Sites where pop up exhibits could be displayed.

Jenn asked the Board to consider: *What new stories/perspectives/voices must be centered moving forward?*

Director Finnie suggested rural stories be shared at the ISM. She provided the example of the shuttering of coal mines and how that continues to affect communities in the modern day or similar locations such as Old Shawneetown. Sara suggested art could be used to help connect stories of Illinois, such as art pieces half completed by a rural community and the other half by an urban community. She also suggested art be added to the side of the Museum building.

Jenn asked the Board to consider: *Where is ISM not showing up where we should be?*

Director Finnie suggested the ISM have more outreach in schools. She provided the example of DNR's collaboration with the Future Farmers of America to develop youth conservation curriculum.

Jonah asked if any brainstorming sessions had been held with staff. Jenn stated that the previous brainstorming efforts with staff had been focused on America 250 and they had not yet discussed ISM's 150th anniversary. Jonah requested more suggestions be gathered from the staff.

Jenn asked the Board to consider: *What large scale ideas or events should ISM consider?* She provided the example of planning to have 150 collection items on display at different locations around the state.

Jenny Davis suggested the Museum identify 150 things about the state that the public might not know, such as civil rights activism along Interstate 74 and Urban Indian history in Chicago. Sara recommended the Museum identify 149 facts and invite the public to add the 150th item. Director Finnie supported the suggestions.

Tamira suggested the Museum also identify 150 items around the state for an Illinois scavenger hunt. Director Finnie shared that DNR had experience developing passport books for Conservation World at the State Fair.

Leverne suggested that the Museum staff consider what has held ISM together for 150 years, how the institution has both survived and thrived, and determine how best to share that story.

Sara suggested staff consider if any fundraising would need to be held to support extra projects or events.

Jenn thanked the Board for their contributions.

### **Deaccession Requests**

Jonah invited Curator of Anthropology Brooke Morgan to present two deaccession requests.

Brooke presented a deaccession request for ancestral remains initially transferred to the Museum by the Illinois State Archaeological Survey (ISAS) in 2021. They were originally thought to be from the Cahokia Dunham Tract project curated by ISM. Brooke reported that ISAS had started reviewing past transfers and determined that the remains were more likely to have been from the 1961 Collinsville Airport project, which was under the jurisdiction of the University of Illinois. Brooke stated that the situation was not of a typical repatriation request so the Board would have to approve deaccession before she could arrange a transfer to the University of Illinois NAGPRA office. She confirmed the office was aware of the transfer and was prepared to start the consultation and repatriation process.

Jonah asked for a motion to approve the deaccession request. John Barker moved, Tamira seconded, and the motion passed unanimously.

Brooke presented a second deaccession request for unidentified human remains and all associated artifacts, soil, and samples from the Old Grafton Cemetery removed during mitigation in advance of relocating the town of Grafton. She explained that the 2023 update to the Human Remains

Protection Act allowed decedent communities outside of Native communities to file for reburial. The Grafton Historical Society had reached out to the Museum to arrange for the reburial on a lot donated by Quarry Township. Brooke directed the Board members to review the letter from Dawn Cobb in the meeting packet which stated the request satisfied the standards for repatriation established under the Human Remains Protection Act.

Sara asked why a vote was required for a reburial request. Brooke explained that there was no compulsion under the state law to return human remains if a request is made, unlike NAGPRA. She also explained that there could be situations where a request could be denied due to reasons like insufficient planning or a competing claim from another community.

Leverne asked if the vault described in the request was of sufficient size to house all the human remains. Brooke clarified that a vault is larger than a casket and multiple vaults could be made if needed. She further clarified that the soil samples requested would not need to be buried within a vault.

Jonah asked for a motion to approve the deaccession request. John moved, Leverne seconded, and the motion passed unanimously.

### **DNR Report**

Director Finnie gave the DNR report.

She described the ongoing budget planning process and that all agencies had been required to submit plans with potential budget cuts. She confirmed that DNR had prepared plans with the proposed cuts but had also drafted a plan for increased headcount if the cuts are unnecessary. Leadership had also been considering other potential revenue sources outside of the General Revenue Fund while still ensuring DNR sites remain free to access for the people of Illinois.

Director Finnie stated that she was proud of the reaccreditation and congratulated Jenn and her staff for the achievement.

Director Finnie briefly described the experience of Russell Orrill, the Deputy Director now over ISM, and shared that a reorganization of the department was ongoing and expanding to add a fourth deputy.

Jenn thanked Director Finnie for her leadership and continued support for the Illinois State Museum.

## **ISMS Report**

Jamila Wicks provided the Society report.

Jamila reported that the Fiscal Year 2025 audit was completed the previous week and the Executive Board had voted to approve it. The Society Board Chair would send the report to the appropriate people in IDNR. Jamila stated that copies of the report would be available on request.

Jamila provided a short report on the Society's strategic planning process. The planning began in April of the previous year with the hiring of a third party firm. It ended with listening sessions held over the summer. Jamila stated her appreciation for DNR and the Museum for participating in one of the listening sessions. A draft plan had been prepared and would be reviewed by the Society Board with the final Society Strategic Plan projected to be ready by the end of December.

Jamila also shared that the Society's annual members meeting would soon be held at the Old State Capitol and that three Society Board members would step down.

Jonah thanked Jamila for the Society report.

## **V. Old Business**

Jonah asked for old business.

## **VI. Public Comment**

None present.

## **VII. Adjournment**

Jonah thanked the Board for a productive meeting and encouraged all to reapply if their Board term was up for renewal.

Leverne moved to adjourn, Director Finnie seconded, and the meeting was adjourned at 11:30 a.m.