

the SOUTHERN
HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION

To our colleagues:

I write to you today both as your colleague and as current president of our SHA. Let me begin with an apology from those of us you selected as representatives for the lack of clarity about the upcoming annual meeting in New Orleans. During the spring, we had every expectation that we could successfully hold a fully in-person meeting. The program committees for the Memphis and New Orleans meetings worked extremely hard to put together what is a conference and a half, with many more sessions than we generally have and with remarkable plenaries. We felt great pride in the program and knew that you would feel as excited as we did and would look forward to coming together.

Then the Delta variant began to scorch the country and, especially, those states where vaccination rates are low. Louisiana was one of those states and remains extremely hard hit. We had to decide how and whether we could go forward, and if we could find a line to walk between the health of our members and the holding of an in-person or hybrid (partly in-person and partly virtual) meeting. We listened attentively to your concerns on-line and by petition, and we recognize that some of you have made travel plans and registered for the meeting.

After many lengthy discussions, we have decided that the best option for our members and our organization is to cancel the in-person meeting and instead construct a meeting that is virtual but incorporates the entire program.

Let me explain how we arrived at this decision. First and foremost, our concern was for the health and well-being of members, program participants, and their families. We have been equally concerned for the health and well-being of the people of New Orleans. As we know, the Delta variant is highly transmissible, and even the vaccinated can infect others, including other vaccinated individuals and children if they are exposed. We had already mandated vaccines and masks for those who would attend the meeting, but that of course is no guarantee for full safety. New Orleans has issued vaccine and mask mandates for restaurants and shops but not for hotels. What's more, owing to COVID and the hurricane, the medical facilities in New Orleans are strained to capacity (perhaps beyond capacity) and may not be able to treat members or participants who are in need of care during the meeting, or, in caring for us, be unable to treat the citizens of New Orleans. A fully in-person meeting seemed increasingly risky and ultimately unacceptable.

The remaining options were for a hybrid meeting or a fully virtual one. But hovering over all of this, was our financial obligation to the hotel where the meeting was to be held and where members and participants were to have stayed. That obligation was substantial if we

cancelled, more than one-third of all of the SHA's treasury and endowment: a catastrophic blow from which the organization may not have been able to recover, at least in any form we could recognize. A hybrid meeting, with far fewer attendees, also would have inflicted a significant financial penalty from the hotel together with enormous costs to equip the meeting rooms with the necessary technology.

The reason it took so long for us to reach a decision and contact you about it is that we have been in lengthy negotiations with the hotel. We had to do the best we could to limit our losses, and as you can imagine they were looking to limit theirs. Just yesterday, we finally came to a resolution: the hotel agreed to a smaller in-person meeting without penalty or a cancelled meeting with a substantially smaller penalty together with a commitment on our part to hold our annual meeting at their facility in 2027.

Yet, however appealing a smaller in-person meeting with virtual components appeared to be, it also posed what we saw were unacceptable problems. We couldn't know how many members or participants would, in the end, choose to come, at least until late in the game, and it was not entirely clear how we could successfully carry out a program such as we had when many panels would have had less than a full representation of presenters. The logistics were quite overwhelming, especially for a small organization such as ours. Moreover, while we originally had the entire hotel for both the meeting and room stays, a smaller hybrid conference would mean that many of the hotel's rooms would be occupied by people who were in New Orleans for business or pleasure, and who might or might not have been vaccinated or chosen to wear masks. Under those circumstances, our members and participants would have been in close proximity – in the halls, in elevators or possibly in bars and restaurants – to more potential COVID carriers.

A fully virtual conference is the best way to protect our members and participants from COVID and to stage the entire program. We will shortly send out the conference program, and during the next few weeks we will explain how the sessions will be organized and made available to our members. We will have to charge a registration fee for you to have access to the panel presentations – we will need to recoup what we still owe the hotel and also fund the costs of the virtual meeting. Those of you who have already registered will, of course, be given access without any further cost or a refund if you prefer.

I know that none of this is good news and much of it may be frustrating. Please know that we have been working long and hard to navigate what quickly became undesirable, and potentially disastrous, choices. We believe that we have managed to keep the SHA afloat financially, made it possible to reap the rewards of a truly outstanding program, and, most of all, keep our members as safe and healthy as we can.

Steven Hahn
President, Southern Historical Association