

DISABILITY

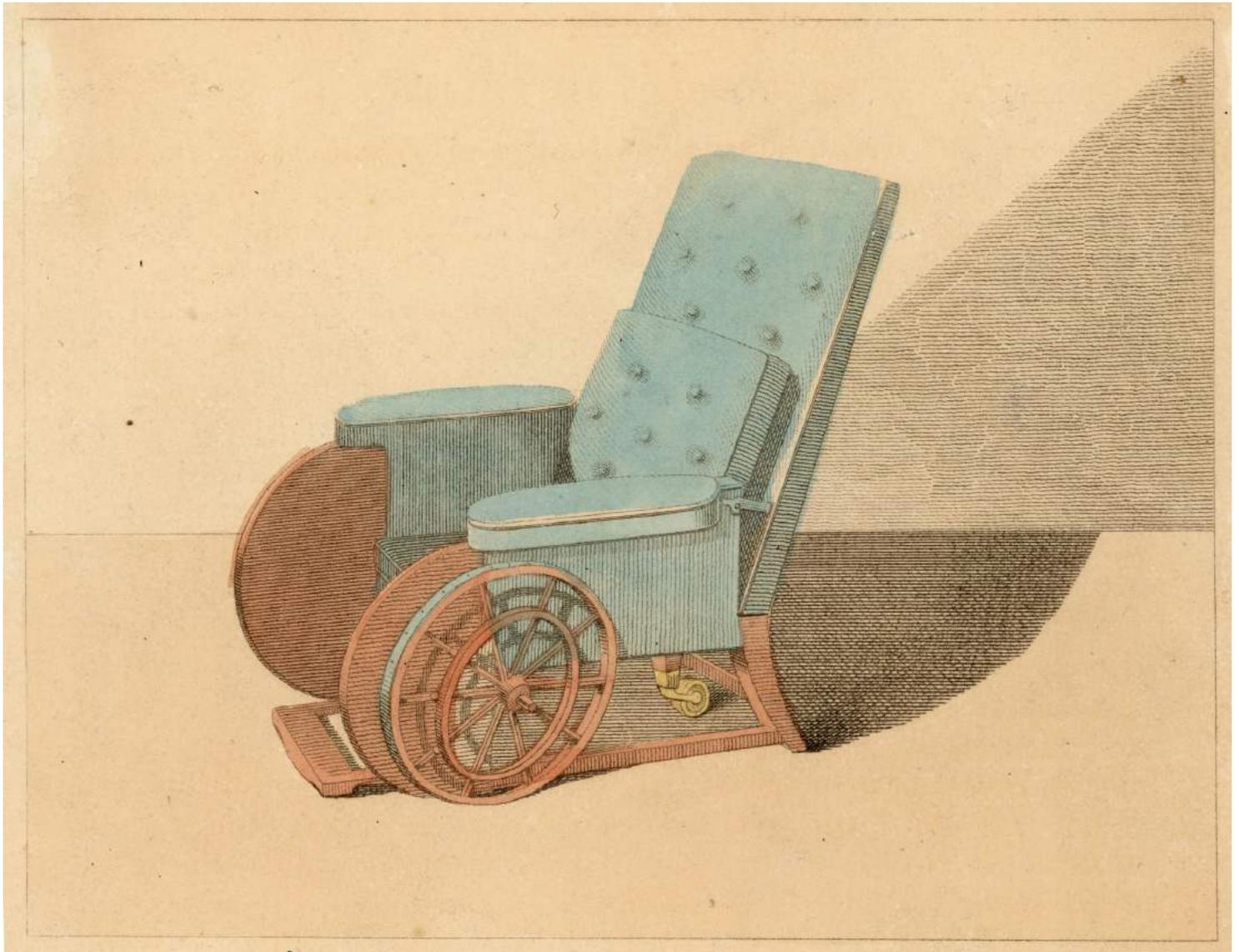
It's Time for a National Museum of Disability

Without a home, many crucial chapters in American history could be lost.

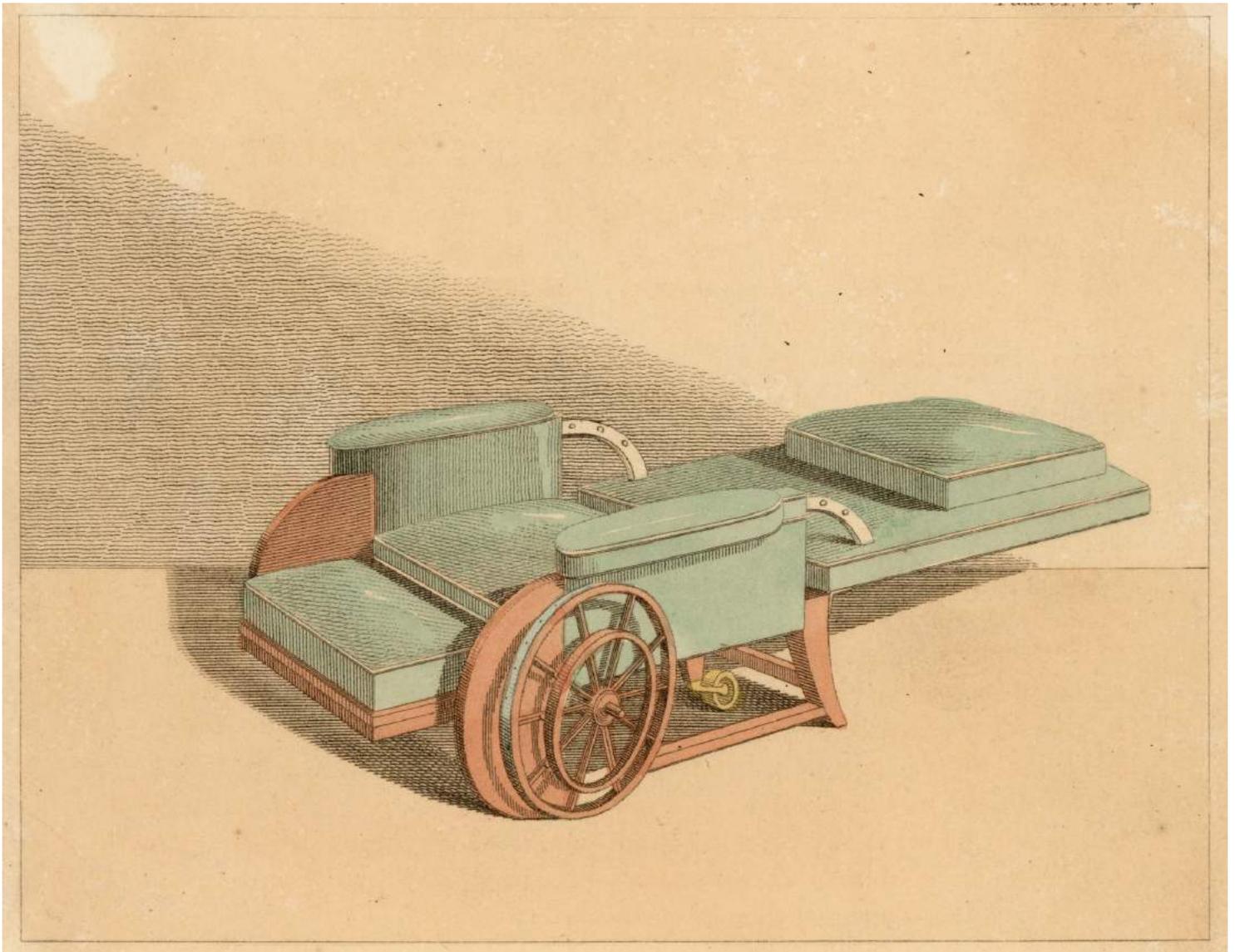
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By Elianna Gerut, Sarah Levin, Daniel Rabinovitz, Gabe Rosen and Ben Schwartz

The authors are 12th graders at Gann Academy in Waltham, Mass.



An early-19th-century reclining wheelchair. Hulton Archive/Getty Images



Hulton Archive/Getty Images

WALTHAM, Mass. — Like most high school students, we have spent years studying American history — from the cultures of the Native Americans to the Revolutionary War, right up to the 21st century. Yet when we look closely at the story of who we are as a nation, we find little, if anything, about the history of people with disabilities.

This is not surprising. The extent of what most Americans know about disability is limited — we see bright blue logos plastered on parking spaces or hear accounts of friends with challenges. We may know people with autism or dyslexia. We may see loved ones with permanent injuries or physical ailments. But for many, the understanding ends there.

This was pretty much true of us, too, until we spent most of our junior-year American history class studying disability and creating “Division, Unity, Hardship, and Progress: A Disability History of the United States,” a museum exhibition to share what we learned with the public. It is on view at the Charles River Museum of Industry and Innovation here in Waltham.

Throughout the year, we researched and analyzed historical artifacts and subject areas related to disability history. We learned about institutionalization and the reasons behind person-first language. We investigated the origins of polio leg braces, learned about advances in hearing aids and the invention of blind baseball. We

also interviewed important figures in the disability community, like Matan Koch, a lawyer with cerebral palsy who served on President Barack Obama's National Council on Disability, and Richard Robison, the executive director emeritus of the Federation for Children With Special Needs, who is the father of two children with Down syndrome.

We now know a few things. And we believe informing the public about the history of people with disabilities is necessary. We also believe that a major step in doing that means having a national museum dedicated to disability history.

This matters to us personally — many of our classmates, and some of us, identify as having a disability — and learning this history has given us perspective and a fuller sense of who we are as people and as citizens of the United States.

You might wonder why people should care about disability history if they do not have disabilities themselves. The truth is that over time, disability will affect the lives of most Americans. In 2016, a University of New Hampshire study found that 35 percent of all people over 65 have a disability. The same paper estimated that in 2015, 13 percent of the American population was living with disabilities (many other estimates are higher, near 20 percent).

Even experts on disability say they do not know the full story. When we spoke with Mr. Koch, he told us that there were moments when he thought to himself that as a young man, “I didn't even know my own history.”

That was not Mr. Koch's fault. Far from it. It was not taught in school. So where would anyone find this history? There are places. The Museum of disABILITY History in Buffalo, for instance, produces exhibits that can travel and be displayed at other museums. The Smithsonian has a website dedicated to the subject, and there are surely others. But there has never been a central repository for disability history.

That's why we are calling for a national museum, one that would be a hub of information for, by and about people with disabilities. It would bring all aspects of disability history together in one place and tell a cohesive story using artifacts, firsthand accounts, media and more. It would allow visitors to interact with the story and better understand what it means to be part of the disability community.



Victorian women photographed by Henry White. The Royal Photographic Society Collection — National Science and Media Museum/SSPL, via Getty Images

Without a place like this, disability history in this country could be lost.

This year, we studied an institution founded in Boston in 1848 originally called the Massachusetts School for Idiotic and Feeble-Minded Youth — a name that could never be used today — and renamed the Walter E. Fernald Developmental Center. (We also learned about the use of respectful disability language and how that idea changed over time.) The school had one goal: teach students who were thought to be too cognitively or developmentally disabled to learn. It was the first public school of its kind in America. Despite its name, the school made some progress. Its base of special education techniques grew. The observations made in teaching the students there influenced education practices across the country. In 1887, the school moved to a larger campus. Then slowly, it became nightmarish, complete with abuse and experimentation on residents.

The remains of the closed school are less than a mile from our own, but when we began our work, few students knew of it. Good and bad, the Walter E. Fernald Developmental Center is an important historical landmark, and it's only one of many such chapters in the history of disability that deserve a home. And in this case, many

of the buildings on the campus could be repurposed to serve as a home for the museum.

Establishing a national museum of disability history would go a long way toward incorporating this history into our public school curriculums and would eliminate the need to seek history that should be accessible and taught to all. The National Museum of African-American History and Culture and the National Museum of the American Indian are inspiring examples — they provide resources for teachers and students to bring the history of these groups into schoolrooms nationwide.

Creating a space like this, and filling it, would be no easy task. But we shouldn't be discouraged. The history of people with disabilities is part of *our* story as Americans. Like the Walter E. Fernald Developmental Center, this history is all around us, even right next door. Yet if we aren't careful, what is being lived will be forgotten. A national museum would help to sustain and promote this history, and begin to integrate it into its rightful place in the American narrative.

The authors are 12th graders at Gann Academy in Waltham, Mass. The completed history project, "Division, Unity, Hardship, and Progress: A Disability History of the United States," is on view at the Charles River Museum of Industry and Innovation in Waltham. This article was written with their teachers, Alex Green and Yoni Kadden.

Disability is a series of essays, art and opinion by and about people living with disabilities. The entire series can be found here.

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