

# An Interview with Hannah Davis, Regional Folklife Survey and Program Development Consultant for the New York Folklore Society and the New York State Council on the Arts

by Jason Baird Jackson on July 17, 2016

*Hannah Davis earned her MA in [Folk Studies](#) from Western Kentucky University and a BA in [Folklore and Ethnomusicology](#) from Indiana University. While at Indiana, she served for four years as a Program Coordinator with [Traditional Arts Indiana](#), Indiana's statewide folk and traditional arts agency—*now* a constituent program of the [Mathers Museum of World Cultures](#). Throughout her MA training at WKU, she worked as a Graduate Assistant for the [Kentucky Folklife Program](#). In June 2016, she began work in a public folklore position based within the [New York Folklore Society](#) with funding from the [New York State Council on the Arts](#). While a student, she gained additional internship experience working with the Smithsonian Institution's [Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage](#) and the [American Folklore Society](#).*

**Jason Jackson (JJ): Hannah—I am so happy to be doing this interview with you, especially just as you are getting settled into your new role as a public folklorist in upstate New York. Could you describe your new position?**

Hannah Davis (HD): Since June 1, I've been working as a contractor for the New York Folklore Society and New York State Council on the Arts. I've been tasked with doing a folklife survey of nine counties (six in the [Finger Lakes](#) and three in the southwestern corner of the state). I'm also responsible for coordinating a few public programs with smaller regional arts organizations and acting as a consultant in the planning of future folklife-based programming. The state of New York is unique in that it has an organized network of folklorists working in many different capacities. This position was created as a way to serve counties that are not otherwise served by folklorists.

**JJ: For those who are reading about such work for the first time, what goes into doing a multi-county folklife survey? How will your findings translate into further research and eventually presentations, publications, or other outcomes?**

HD: Surveys involve, in many ways, all the fun parts of working as a folklorist. Between now and the end of my contract, I will have conducted dozens of interviews with all kinds of artists, musicians, and other informants, and crisscrossed the state documenting fairs and festivals. I'll record, photograph, and film as much as possible.

Especially when a survey includes so many unique communities, it's important to stay organized and keep your eyes on the big picture. There's only one of me, and so many hours in a day. This is not intended to be a comprehensive survey of all the traditional arts and culture that one may

find in each of my nine counties. Rather, my goal is to be able to paint a picture for our partner organizations of the kinds of traditions that exist in their service areas, and the ways in which they may continue to do folklife programming in the future.

It's important to me to respond directly to the needs of these organizations. The [Auburn Public Theater](#), for example, is interested in doing a narrative stage, during which informants will engage in a conversation with each other about a specific topic, and their audience will be able to interact and ask questions. As I'm conducting fieldwork in their service area, then, I will make note of informants who seem to particularly enjoy discussing their life and work. Towards the end of my contract, I'll work on organizing photos and recordings, transferring files to others, and drafting my programming recommendations. It's possible that parts of this project will turn into more long-term work for NYFS. I'll also publish a few articles discussing my work in NYFS's journal, *Voices: The Journal of New York Folklore*.

**JJ: It does sound like it will be a lot of fun. You know you will meet great people but you do not yet know who they all are or what they are passionate about. How did your work in Indiana and Kentucky prepare you for your new work in New York state?**

HD: Exactly! A big part of my job at TAI [Traditional Arts Indiana] was transcribing, logging, and organizing materials collected by fieldworkers. I'm grateful to [Jon Kay](#), the organization's director, for introducing me to basic ethnographic methods through this kind of work, and allowing me to participate (even as a college freshman!) in collaborative projects like the one I'm tackling now. Certainly, entering my grad program already comfortable with convening meetings, drafting grant applications, and planning public programs allowed me to work more independently at the Kentucky Folklife Program. My time in Indiana and Kentucky really equipped me to take a "big picture" approach to my work here in New York—I didn't just learn how to do fieldwork, I learned what to do with fieldwork.

**JJ: That is good. As we continue working with students in TAI and at the museum as a whole, your experience will be a source of encouragement. On the flip side, what kinds of experiences do you wish you could have had while at IU and WKU? What are you surprised by as you get going in New York?**

HD: I certainly wish I had been able to take some [undergraduate] public folklore classes to complement my work at TAI. I didn't really understand the origins of the field I was working in until I began graduate-level classes at Western. Once I got to Western, though, I really missed being able to take advantage of the diverse programs offered at IU. Pursuing my interests in digital media, for example, became a lot more difficult. There's only so much you can study and prepare for, though! There's a lot to be said for just diving in.

This might be a silly answer, but honestly, I've been most surprised by how smoothly things have gone. I don't mean this to be self-congratulatory at all—the people here have just been so kind, and so happy to share their work with me. When you're learning how to do fieldwork, you hear a lot of horror stories. I don't have any yet!

**JJ: Building up undergraduate course opportunities for public and applied folklore work is on the agenda at IU, as are opportunities for public humanities involvements more generally. Your reflection contributes to the making of the case for such efforts. I am glad that you have no horror stories and I hope that things continue in that vein.**

HD: That's great to hear.



Hannah photographs a recreation of a Viking ship at the Scandinavian Folk Festival in Jamestown, NY.

**JJ: What are you learning about public folklore infrastructure in New York state? Things seem really strong there and this seems to be a longstanding pattern**

HD: The infrastructure here is part of the reason I was so excited to take the job. There are capable and accomplished folklorists, including a few IU students and grads, working across the state. Many are within arts organizations, some work more independently, but they are all part of a collaborative network loosely bound together by [Ellen McHale](#) at NYFS and [Robert Baron](#) at NYSCA, who both work hard to support what we do (financially and otherwise). Their leadership has been crucial to the longstanding pattern you've noticed.

**JJ: What is one cool cultural discovery that you have already made as you begin to learn your way around your part of the state?**

HD: Word on the street is that there's a game called "[roque](#)" played in the western part of the state. I hadn't heard of it until a few days ago! An annual tournament is held in [Angelica](#), a village in Allegany County, during the community's Heritage Day celebration. It resembles croquet, but has entirely different rules. Readers might be interested in this [2010 ESPN article](#).

**JJ: I knew you'd have something great to share and just like that you serve up roque. Hopefully we'll all be playing it soon, or at least watching your documentary!**

**Here's two to go out on. If you could share a word of counsel with an IU sophomore with an interest in a humanities career, what would you say? As an alumna, what would you share in conversation with our Provost or President about your training at IU.**

It's scary to think about how recently I was an IU sophomore. Feels like it's been ages! Here's what I'd say: "It will be okay. There are jobs." Sincere commitment to an interest goes a long way at IU, especially in the [Department of Folklore and Ethnomusicology](#). I knew as a freshman that I wanted to graduate as a folklore major, and it was entirely because of a pep talk from a grad student who saw some potential in me and sent me to talk to Jon [Kay]. With the guidance of wonderful professors like you, Jason, and some very honest graduate students, I became a success story. And there are so many others. I'm proud to be an IU alumna, and to be part of the community that the department has fostered. A degree in the humanities is not a death wish.

To the provost and president, I'd say this: "My training at IU made me the professional that I am today." I've been thinking a lot about my time at IU since yesterday's announcement about the department's move to the Classroom Office Building. I met some of my nearest and dearest friends and mentors in the TAI office. Our buildings were run-down. They were not accessible to members of the community with different physical capabilities. That's a terrible thing. But they were home, and I'm sad that I won't be able to go back there. The department is a whole lot more than a cluster of neglected brick buildings, though. It's an incubator, it's a community, and it's a wonderful thing to be a part of. I couldn't have learned the things I learned there anywhere else.\*

**JJ: Thank you Hannah for sharing your experiences with me and with our readers. Keep us posted on your adventures and come back soon and teach your Bloomington friends how to play roque!**

\*In her closing remarks, Hannah is referring to the offices of the IU Department of Folklore and Ethnomusicology from which she earned her BA and in which I serve as a Professor. The department's offices and seminar rooms in a cluster of four historic brick houses located adjacent to one another on N. Fess Ave. and N. Park Ave in Bloomington have, for alumni, staff, and faculty, become icons of the department over the course of many decades. In July 2016 it was [announced](#) that the Department would be moved to new more modern and accessible quarters in a university building known as the Classroom Office Building on 3rd Street, across from the

campus' historic "[Old Crescent](#)" area. The department looks forward to showing off its new home to returning alumni very soon. (JJ)