

B+/B

Good ideas but not grounded  
in the historiography of the  
field.

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Fall 2009

### Public History Seminar Final Exam

**Public History or Historians in Public?** The term public history is admittedly problematic. Should the National Council on Public History eliminate the term public history from its title and replace it with historical practice, public humanities, or something else? Write a petition to the NCPH board defending or dismantling the use of the term public history. How has the term/field been defined? Why has the field suffered from definitional problems? How has public history changed since the term was coined? And why or why shouldn't we change the use of the term?

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To the National Council on Public History on the Matter of the Term "Public History." ✓

In the September 28th 2009 edition of *Newsweek Magazine* (Newsweek 9/2009), senior editor Jon Meacham sought to make the obvious but nonetheless important point that "words have consequences." With this in mind, the term "Public History" at first glance appears to be a clear and concise description of the work of a wide range of professionals in the historical realm who practice their craft beyond the borders of academia. The express purpose of this petition is to first affirm the worth of the field. More importantly however we intend to make the case that it is in the best interest of both public historians and the historical profession in general, to not only consider new ways to describe the study of what is considered public history but to also consider if the term is, at base, superfluous. why? Argument?

The movement that brought to life what we know today as the study of public history began in the early 1980's. A *New York Times* article of that era (*New York Times*, 19) couched the issue perfectly by noting that interest in history in United States was dwindling due to the fact that the discipline was for the most part confined to "students and other academics." One of the solutions to this problem was to institute a movement to bring history to a "nonacademic clientele" by doing "public" rather than academic history.

The reasons why the term was used to describe historical study and activities in the public square and other places beyond the world of academia are obvious. The word public as defined by Webster (*dictionary.net*) means "Of or pertaining to the people; belonging to the people; relating to, or affecting, a nation, state, or community; -- opposed to private; as, the public treasury." With this definition in mind, it is no wonder that the early pioneers of the movement used the term to drive home the point that history belongs to everyone.

Schultz  
Tyell &  
Stantron?

good  
but use  
public history  
from council

But while at first glance the word public might seem more than apt to describe the field it is important to note that the word also can mean "Open to common or general use; as, a public road; a public house" (*brainyquote.com*). At base, the word stands on the Latin root publicus, meaning quite simply, of the people. As we have seen, used in this vein it conjures up positive thoughts of individuals performing services not for their own aggrandizement, but for the "public" good." In this context, the word public then effectively imparts the idea of self-sacrifice for the good of the community. It is no wonder then that for almost three decades on many levels the term "public history" is one that served us well in helping to describe the myriad ways that history is imparted and taught in the public square.

Schultz?

But, while the term has many positive aspects, we believe the time has come to realize that the word "public" can have many meanings. The subjectivity of the term also raises the possibility that it can be perceived at times as less than positive, depending again on the context. It is a fact that the term, rightfully or wrongfully, is also often used pejoratively to denote a second-class state of existence.

People of lesser means often have to use "public" golf courses rather than the country club. They send their children to "public" schools rather than private ones. Many times while driving on a long trip they are forced to use "public" restrooms. Most recently large portions of the citizenry of the United States have made it known that in the latest effort to reform our nation's health care system they do not wish to be subjected to anything close to resembling a "public" option.

? not  
Sure  
how this  
fits.

Let us be clear, we are not necessarily making the case that the term has relegated "public history" to a lesser status. However, we believe that the term has at times been insufficient to describe the indispensable work done by legions of historians, park rangers, docents, archivists, preservationists, archeologists, sociologists and other professions who make their living in the promoting of history in the public square.

We understand and acknowledge the reasons for the original decision to use the term, but we also believe it is time to begin to reconsider the way we describe the field. Part of our objection to the present description is based on our observation of the way that other fields and professions are denoted both on and off campus. Our society today does not require that skilled professionals who predict weather for the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration be referred to as "public meteorologists." We do not refer to the health professionals who work in city and country hospitals as "public" nurses and doctors. Those who earn the degree of Masters of Library science earn the right to be called librarian no matter where they practice their craft. As in the other examples, in most professions there does not appear to be a need to put the word "public" before the title of the profession.

Many books that have traced important aspects of the field, such as *The Lowell Experiment: Public History in a Postindustrial City*, frequently make reference to the term public history. However, at the same time, many others, such as David Glassberg's *Sense of History* (Glassberg, Index), Max Page and Randall Mason's (Mason, Page, Index) *Giving Preservation a History*, and

- what  
does she  
say or  
how do they  
define the  
field?

Edward T. Linenthal's *Preserving Memory* (Linenthal, Index) do not mention the term (thus proving that the definition of public history is indeed in the eye of the beholder).

In short, it is clear that in the future we as a profession would be wise to begin to make the case that effective and accomplished historians whether they are at Harvard, the State Department, or Yellowstone National Park should be referred as just that. The insertion of the word "public" has too great a potential to cause confusion and possibly detract from the credibility of those who impart history in places other than college or university campuses.

✓ Agreed  
Tyrell?

Eric Foner once noted that history belonged to anyone and everyone (Foner, xix). If that is true, it is certainly the case that the discipline of history, no matter where it is practiced, is, by its very nature "public." With this in mind we urge the members of the board to not only explore new and better ways to describe the field. In addition, however, we also urge the board to consider the idea that rather than apply labels to historical professionals they focus on giving them the support, training and credibility they need practice their craft whenever and wherever they may be. The goal should not be to produce "public historians", but historians who have the ability to perform their work in public

B

Good ideas & reasonable argument but  
~~was~~ not enough historiography -

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#### Works Cited

Jon Meacham, "Words Have Consequences", Newsweek Magazine, September, 2009

Joel A. Tarr, Peter N. Stearns, "New Public Uses for Public History", New York Times, June 7, 1980

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Cathy Stanton, *The Lowell Experiment: Public History in a Postindustrial City* (2007).

David Glassberg, *Sense of History: The Place of the Past in American Life* (2001).

Max Page and Randall Mason, eds., *Giving Preservation a History* (Routledge, 2004).

Edward Linenthal, *Preserving Memory: The Struggle to Create America's Holocaust Museum* (2001).

Eric Foner, *Who Owns History*, 2002 full citations?

Part II: Identifications (25%)

Choose five (50) Please identify the origins and discuss the significance of the following terms, ideas, questions.

Each answer is worth five percent.

Length: Answers should be 200-250 words each.

Begin each answer with a sentence that gives the most apparent source for the term/idea/institution/question and lists the author and the title of the book or article where it's discussed. Then analyze its significance within the history and the practice of public history.

Be sure to say why public historians should know and understand the importance of this term, idea, group, cultural institution/agency, area of practice, or question and discuss all relevant readings and debates from the course.

**(1)7. The Tough Stuff of American Memory**

The aforementioned term refers to the title of the 2006 book *Slavery and Public History: The Tough Stuff of American Memory* by James Horton. Horton is the Benjamin Banneker Professor of American Studies and History at George Washington University and Historian Emeritus of the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of American History. His book laid out in excruciating detail the problems public historians face in presenting and informing the public on troubling and controversial subjects such as slavery. *race?* *thesis?* *essays?*

Horton's work shows that many organizations and commercial entities are interested in presenting history only as long as the history in question is done on their own terms. This becomes particularly critical when prominent donors and benefactors link their participation and their contributions to the condition that historical sites and exhibits avoid focusing on the portions of the historical narrative that they believe to be unsettling or too controversial.

But Horton's work not only shows the challenges that a historical site such as Williamsburg faces in dealing with the subject of slavery it also prompts public historians to understand that "tough memories" in American history are not limited to one subject. Other issues such as gay rights, segregation, women's rights, economic exploitation (i.e. Lowell Mass) have been a critical part of the history of the United States but have not always popular topics with the public. Thus, it is clear that public historians must not only develop the capacity to generate and promote history but also have the ability to reason, negotiate and facilitate complex questions and issues in the public square. *Steelman?*

## (2) 10. Wikipedia and the question of "Can History be Open Source?"

In 2006, the digital historian Roy A. Rosenzweig asked the question, "Can History Be Open Source?," (*The Journal of American History* 93:1 (June 2006). Rozenweig passed away in 2007 but during his life he was "a prominent advocate for "digital history," a field combining historical scholarship with digital media's broad reach and interactive possibilities." In the 2006 journal article, Rozenweig took a hard look at sources like Wikipedia and pondered as to whether or not they had the ability to produce worthwhile and credible history. ✓

what is his argument?

To public historians, it would seem that the late professor's ideas are intriguing. What better way to spread history in the public square than the World Wide Web (WWB). It would seem obvious that the digital realm is the perfect vehicle to get individuals on all levels of society engaged in historically related scholarship and events. If the purpose of public history is to extend the discipline beyond the borders of academia it would seem that the digital revolution was heaven sent. However, while Rozenweig lays out some impressive data showing that good and credible history can, at times, come from sites like Wikipedia he also provides examples that clearly show the dangers and letting (to quote Foner) "anyone and everyone" practice history. ✓

name them

So the answer it would seem is somewhere in the middle. The WWB is indeed a powerful tool for any public historian. However, serious professionals who make their living in the historical realm have a responsibility to ensure that the power of the web is used to produce history and not propaganda. The WWB has often been compared to the Wild West. It is an apt analogy. With this in mind, public historians have a duty at times to play Wyatt Earp in ensuring that the potential of the digital world is protected from those who refuse to live up to the standards required to impart historical truths.

(compensations should Authority?)

## (3) 9. The Mount Vernon Ladies Association

Some see the beginnings of the "Public History" movement in the United States as starting in the early 1980's. But on a slightly different level, one could make the case that at least partially, the foundations of public history in America were laid in 1858 when a group of dedicated women, known as the Mount Vernon Ladies' Association of the Union made the seminal decision to acquire Washington's Mount Vernon. Due largely to the hard work of the group's leader, Ann Pamela Cunningham, the organization was able to save the mansion and ground from destruction and to begin a process that would preserve it for generations to come. ✓

However, as the historian Patricia West notes in her 1999 book *Domesticating History: The Political Origins of America's House Museums*. The saving of historic homes and sites is only half the battle. As noted, historical memories can be pleasant but also exceedingly painful. Public historians have a duty to ensure that all portions of the historical narrative concerning a site be discussed and examined. West notes that those who preside over places like Mount Vernon or any house museum must take into account that historic structures often times, "reflect less the lives and times of their famous inhabitants than the political pressures of the eras during while they transformed in museums." Indeed, while the Mount Vernon group was interested in preserving Washington's home they also sought to use the site to promote unity in a nation that

good quote

was slowly coming apart. Thus for public historians, the saving and preservation of an historic site is only the beginning of what can be a challenging process.

#### (4) 2. The Culture Wars

The so-called culture wars of the 1<sup>st</sup> decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century are nothing new. Since its inception, the United States has seen a series of ongoing cultural conflicts between various groups. Those who make their living in the historical realm, particularly public historians have not been immune from these conflicts. In 1997 Gary B. Nash, Charlotte Crabtree, and Ross E. Dunn, published their important book *History on Trial: Culture Wars and the Teaching of the Past* (1997) dealing with the latest and greatest history related battle in the culture war. . ✓

The authors tell the story of the struggles they faced in valiantly trying to craft a series of National History Standards. Those on the conservative side of the aisle roundly condemned their efforts. Prominent reactionaries such as Lynn Cheney railed against the standards, believing that they concentrated far too much on women and minorities, were too critical of our nation's history and failed to instill patriotic values and attitudes in students. Ultimately, the standards were condemned by the U.S Senate 99-1.

But, as noted, the condemnation of the standards in late 1990's was but one example of the many battles that will continue to be fought over who controls the historical narrative in the United States. Public historians like it or not, cannot ignore these conflicts. As noted in previous essays, they must find a way to engage, negotiate and dialog with the warring factions to ensue that they do not throw out the "historical baby with the ideological bathwater." Who is more important to our nation's history George Washington or Betty Friedan? Some would say the answer is obvious, others would not agree. It has been and will continue to be the job of public historians everywhere to deal with these kinds of compelling issues. Like it or not public historians have been drafted as soldiers to fight in the culture wars. ✓

By hell?

comparisons  
to other  
standards ✓

#### (5) 4. Heritage Tourism

Heritage tourism involves visiting historical or industrial sites that may include old factories, canals, battle sites etc. The purpose, as in any historical endeavor, is to develop a respect and gain an appreciation of the past. In 2009, the anthropologist Cathy Stanton wrote *The Lowell Experiment: Public History in a Postindustrial City*. The book described the effort of the city of Lowell Massachusetts to reinvent itself by using "Heritage Tourism" to reinvent itself in the postindustrial age. She notes in the book that the public historians play "a crucial yet ambiguous role in that efforts like Lowell are a " part of an interlocking set of cultural production within the overall project for rejuvenating an old industrial place. Such larger projects often come under the rubric of heritage." (page?) ✓

But to Stanton "heritage is not simply an unproblematic legacy from the past but rather a complex mode of present day cultural production in which local places and memories are displayed -often with the aid of professional interpreters for a range of purposes that usually included stimulation local pride and economic growth through tourism... Heritage is not the same

as history. Heritage is history processed through mythology ideology, nationalism local pride, romantic ideas or just plain marketing "pages?"

✓  
Thus as is the case with slavery and other controversial historical issues, public historians who find themselves as custodians of sites predicated on "Heritage Tourism" have their work cut out for them. Often times in places like Lowell there are contentious and raucous debates concerning not only the historical narrative, but also the "cultural one was well, and as Stanton notes history combined with culture can be stimulating and educational but also at the same time extremely controversial and contentious.

A ✓

Author: Patrick Weadon

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1. Jane Levey and Hari Jones are in many ways model public historians. Why? What professional qualities and skills do they possess that are essential to being successful in the field of public history?

Both are indeed model historians because both individuals exhibit the qualities needed to impart history to the masses in interesting and stimulating ways. Among these are knowledge, passion for their subject, and the ability to deal with a wide range of people. Max Page and Randall Mason's, Giving Preservation a History makes the point that preservation movements have taken a leading role in shaping American urban space and urban development. ✓

The U Street Corridor Heritage Trail is an excellent example of this trend. However, while the buildings and artifacts in many ways speak for themselves, they become even more fascinating when a competent public historian is able to provide the stories behind them. If a public historian in their effort to impart a story or background on a subject is doing their job properly, they will usually leave their audience wanting more information. This was certainly the case with Ms. Levey and Mr. Jones.

2. What are your general reflections on and reactions to the U Street Heritage trail and our tour as a window onto cultural tourism? How does the work of Cultural Tourism DC exemplify some of the key ideas in our readings on the topic?

I grew up in Bethesda Maryland and was 13 years old at the time of the DC riots. Growing up in the suburbs one came to associate U Street in the District with crime, poverty and urban blight. The tour opened my eyes to the fact that U Street and its environs have an incredibly rich cultural legacy that for far too long remained unknown to many people due to fear and racism.

U Street has become indispensable to telling the story of the African American experience in the nation's capital city. This did not happen by accident. Books such as, A Sense of History, History on Trial, Preserving Memory and The Lowell Experiment, make the point that while it is indeed important to preserve history, it is equally important to determine what stories are going to be told, and who is going to tell them. ✓

With this in mind, at some point, historians, preservationists, interested citizens and the community at large had to come to a consensus on what buildings and places in the area should be preserved, what stories should be told and the most effective way to tell them. Like the old TV show, the Naked City, we learned on Monday night that there are a thousand and one stories on U Street and thankfully, public historians such as Jane Levy and Hari Jones to tell them.



Author: Patrick Weadon

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First off I must admit to a mild aversion to the concept of “public history” (I may perhaps have a different perspective by semester’s end). I believe that historians of all stripes, whether they make their home in the halls of academe or in the museum office have an duty to ensure that the “usable past” is made known to as many groups and individuals as is humanely possible.

The ideal situation to my mind is one where academic historians through their research develop facts and the truth as they see it and then work with professionals such as curators, museum directors, journalists, and artists etc to present their work to the general public in interesting ways. This relationship to my mind is symbiotic. One cannot have good public history unless the information being presented is credible. Academic historians usually don’t have time to design and bring to fruition museum exhibits. Conversely those who work in museums are not in a position to do the kind of scholarly research required to provide exhibits the credibility the need attract the intelligentsia’s as well as the general public’s attention.

So in short, I hope to learn new and innovative ways to get the two aforementioned groups to work together to help present history in ways that can have positives effects on society. It probably has been said before, but the fact is that all history is “public” and the more historians realize this the better they will be able to practice their craft.