

Training Public Historians: Academy and Reality

BY: BENJAMIN FILENE

Filene, B. "Training Public Historians: Academy and Reality." *History News* 61 (winter 2006): 13-15.

Made available courtesy of American Association for State and Local History:
<http://www.aaslh.org/historynews.htm>

*****Note: Figures may be missing from this format of the document**

Professionalization builds structure that solidifies a discipline; professionalization erects walls that bar outsiders. Professionalization elevates understanding to a higher plane; professionalization draws practitioners into rarefied air that precludes rough and tumble engagement. Professionalization clarifies a discipline's voice, allowing it to stand out among competitors; professionalization creates an arcane language that blocks shared conversation. Professionalization codifies a set of tools; professionalization discourages thinking outside the (tool)box.

Choose your metaphor, but there can be no doubt that as the training of public historians has become professionalized—with an explosion of public history programs at universities—the process has raised questions to which shared answers are in short supply. How well do public history programs prepare students for the jobs they will eventually hold? Will all public history practitioners one day come through these academic programs? Should they? Do academic public historians speak for the field of public history as a whole? Or do we need less talking in public history anyway and more doing?

I believe we are at a tipping point in this process of professionalizing public history. Twenty years from now, academia and public history institutions may be fully integrated and we will look back on this period as a time of transition toward the fulfillment of that alliance. Or academics may be frozen out of public history institutions and we may wonder about missed opportunities.

Usually, your stance on these issues depends on your own experience—how you were trained, what you do now, and where you do it. Keenly aware of the limitations of our own perspectives, five people with different educational backgrounds and different jobs from different kinds of institutions held a roundtable session at the AASLH annual meeting in Pittsburgh to discuss the thorny issues around training public historians today. The panelists included: Rebecca Conard, director of the Public History Program at Middle Tennessee State University; John Dichtl, then deputy director of the Organization of American Historians; Kathy Dummer, director of Historic Murphy's Landing in Shakopee, Minnesota; and Melanie Sturgeon, director of the History and Archives Division at the Arizona State Library.

What do people need to know to succeed in a public history job? All of us agreed that anyone working as a public practitioner uses skills every day that reach far beyond the research, writing, and argument-building training one gets in the academy. Academic history programs do not directly prepare you to build a marketing plan, paint a catalogue number on an artifact, come to the point in a seventy-word exhibit label, make a pitch to a politician, choose a design for a handicapped-accessible bathroom, or appease a disgruntled employee. Some kinds of public history and museum studies programs set out to fill that gap. They offer courses in which students write mission statements, collections-management plans, and press releases and learn the theories behind exhibition labels, diversity-hiring programs, and board-management strategies. Here's the dilemma: Is the academy the best place to acquire these sorts of skills? Or would they be better acquired on the job? Dummer advises young people looking to enter the field that "experience is everything." To succeed in these sorts of jobs, she feels, you have to be able to think on your feet, adapt, imagine multiple solutions—skills forged through managing a series of on-the-job challenges, not sitting in the classroom. Perhaps instead of trying to prepare students for the full range of potential job situations, we should be encouraging them to stretch their creativity, to soak in experiences from a range of disciplines and life encounters. "In truth," says Sturgeon, "how much does any graduate program prepare you for work in the 'real world'? It is one thing to develop a 'mission statement' in class and quite another to try to develop a mission statement for an institution that has a board with competing interests."

To address the need for this sort of "real world" learning, public history programs usually include internship components. Most students agree that these in-the-field opportunities enable them to put their learning into practice, gain experiences they can write on their resumes, and make face-to-face contacts with potential employers. But if the most meaningful part of public history programs lies outside the university, what distinguishes the programs from career counseling offices? What should be the intellectual core of public history training?

"History," is the obvious answer. Public history is a sub-field that trains students for a different set of career options, but it is still (or still should be) a sub-discipline of history. Academic programs need to train students in the art and craft of sifting through mountains of primary source evidence, interrogating texts, noting patterns and tensions, forming judicious opinions, and building sustained arguments that draw meaningful links between past and present. "Public history is a scholarly field of history with all the disciplinary rigor this implies," says Conard. "[O]ne must acquire substantial historical knowledge in order to be a good practitioner."

For many, here is where public history programs need most to push themselves—to become not just so much vocational nuts and bolts but sites of legitimate intellectual work: "The perception is still widely held in our profession," says Conard, "that public historians are less well trained and do not take scholarship seriously. Colleges and universities that offer a course in public history, but no serious training, actually exacerbate this situation." By setting their intellectual sights low, Conard feels, public history programs abdicate leadership to outsiders: "[H]aving focused graduate education almost exclusively on the master's level, very few public historians hold senior positions in academic institutions, and this is precisely where public historians must be positioned in order to guide, not just influence, change in the culture of the discipline."

But if we commit public history to disciplinary rigor, will we exclude some of its most creative would-be practitioners? Dummer is transforming Historic Murphy's Landing, armed with her degrees in mass communication, environmental education, and creative writing. What about the education program developers who bring museums to life for schoolchildren? Will they find their way into the field if a graduate degree in the discipline is required? What about the theatre designers who have become exhibit developers, skilled at crafting historical experiences in three dimensions? For that matter, what about the directors of public history institutions, who increasingly come with management and fund-raising expertise rather than history degrees? Are none of these people "public historians"?

To some, the answer simply is no. At a professional training seminar that I attended, an academic public historian suggested that one couldn't be a public historian unless one has had graduate training in history or public history. Pressed to clarify, he said, "You can be still doing good work, but you're not a public historian." This is a stance familiar to anyone acquainted with the debates about professionalization in disciplines such as education or folklore. Professionalizing involves drawing boundaries. Benjamin A. Botkin, a best-selling popularizer of yarns and tall tales—a practitioner reviled by those who built folklore into a respectable academic discipline—wrote ruefully that folklore "has become the possession of the few who study it rather than the many who make use of it."

If training in historical scholarship defines the core of worthy public history training, what distinguishes a public history program from academic history? Several of us on the panel answered that public history holds a different conception of its audience. Yes, one needs fluency with historical materials and methods, but public historians are always exercising these skills with diverse audiences in their mind's eye. What artifact or anecdote will spark a conversation between grandparent and grandchild? Between husband and wife? What truth-fixing detail will bring the point home to a sixth-grade class on a tour? Public history is the realm of free-choice, informal learning. People bring their own concerns, interests, and issues to the learning situation. Public history has to meet them where they are and engage them in an experience that is personally meaningful on their own terms.

Here is where the push to codify public-history training in academia causes me concern. The culture of academia is founded on peer review and personal academic freedom. Scholarship that furthers a national conversation among experts is privileged as an end in itself. Those who meaningfully advance that conversation, primarily through monographs and journal articles, are rewarded with tenure; those who don't are asked to move on. Dichtl recalled that the assumptions embedded in his graduate training in history discouraged public engagement: "Public history training, other than journal or historical editing, was implicitly discouraged in my graduate program and was discussed in hushed tones among most Ph.D. students. To talk about veering from the professoriate trajectory was to be seen as being 'not very serious.'"

When public history professors enter this world, they have to play by its rules. Charged with building public history programs, their jobs depend on generating written scholarship. Only a few programs nationwide, slowly growing, count exhibits and other such public products as "scholarship" not "service" on the tenure scales.

Is this system equipped to train students to understand the needs of broad public audiences? The situation seems ripe for a disconnect, where the people training future public historians don't have their minds on the public. To prove themselves "serious," will public historians in the academy end up replicating the academic discourse, the internal debates, the journal articles to nowhere that led so many public practitioners to work outside of academia in the first place? Will the term "public historian" come to denote someone who produces a strain of academic work about the public, while public practitioners go on about the business of doing the work of public history? Indeed, several people whom I spoke with in advance of the roundtable—people whom I would have labeled "public historians" without a thought—felt no engagement with the issues our session was trying to address. "Public historian" wasn't a term they felt spurned by because it wasn't one they were trying to embrace: "I'm not a public historian," said one, director of an historic house museum. "I'm a museum professional." Some public practitioners, it seems, have internalized the standards that adherents of more rigorous academic programs are preaching. But although these practitioners hesitate to declare themselves public historians, they have no qualms about doing public work nor, seemingly, a lack of ability to do so successfully. As "public history" becomes an academic discipline, will it cease to matter to the world of public practice?

Despite these warning signs that the academy and public practice are in danger of becoming irrelevant to each other, other trends suggest they may be moving in the same direction. Both the academy and public history institutions are reaching tentatively for a new sense of mission. In doing so, they may find each other on the same playing field after all. Here is where the ground is shifting around us at this very moment. Faced with a funding crisis, many public history institutions have been re-thinking the public purpose of their work. "History Matters," proclaims a public-relations campaign at the Minnesota Historical Society. It's a slogan that we, like many other institutions, are trying to demonstrate in practice with programs and exhibits that engage live issues in our communities and that depend on community collaboration for implementation. Many universities also are embracing a turn to civic engagement. Again pushed in part by funding pressures, university leaders are looking to demonstrate that academic study matters, too. Legislators want to see proof that these expensive institutions can have impact outside the ivy-covered gates.

The movement in the academy seems to be surfacing most strongly outside of both history departments and public history programs. Provosts and presidents are enrolling their schools, big and small, in *Imagining America* or *Project Pericles*, consortiums of civic-minded institutions (www.ia.umich.edu and www.projectpericles.org). They are working to transform service learning from an extra-curricular activity into a fundamental approach integrated into the heart of the curriculum. Organizations such as *Campus Compact* (www.compact.org) are playing more central roles on campus and are beefing up the intellectual underpinnings of their pedagogy. Students are embracing the chance to put their learning to work, to prove to their parents and themselves that the skills they are acquiring in the library translate beyond it. Professors, some of whom have felt impotent in the face of recent national crises, are looking to see how they can make a difference, too.

If this energy does coalesce into a movement, could it bear fruit in the world of history? Why not? History does matter, right? On this point academic historians and public practitioners agree. Perhaps this shared spirit will enable the creation of public history programs that have rigorous intellectual groundings but are truly community-minded, programs that blur the boundaries separating "inside" from "outside" the university, programs whose professors are rewarded for work that reaches beyond the monograph to move broader audiences, programs from which students emerge not only with a set of skills and a body of knowledge but a sense of purpose.

All of us who participated in the Pittsburgh roundtable hope that one day the terms in our subtitle—"academy" and "reality"—will suggest synthesis not tension. Then public historians of all stripes will be on firm ground together.