

# Commentaries & Case Studies

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## Helping Friends: Archives Training for Public Historians

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The academic discipline of public history prepares history graduate students for careers as generalists in history-related areas. In contrast to traditional graduate programs in history, these programs do not prepare students for teaching careers. Typical places of employment for public historians are government agencies, historical societies and museums, the media, and private corporations. Because of its emphasis on careers

outside of the teaching profession, this discipline has also been referred to as "applied history," "practicing history," or "consulting history."<sup>1</sup>

Public history programs can be divided into two groups. The first of these emphasizes training in the research and formulation of public policy. Its students are trained to use social science research tools and study such subjects as urban development, public

<sup>1</sup>Editor's preface to *Public Historian*, 1 (Fall 1978): 6.

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finance, and education. The second group of programs emphasizes training for historical agency work. They focus on such courses as cultural resources management, historic preservation, historical editing and publication, museum studies, and archives and records management. Occasionally, a single public history program combines elements of public policy studies and historical agency studies.

In a recent article directed toward public historians, Richard Cox argues that similar problems and concerns require closer cooperation between archivists and public historians. These common interests include the promotion of the significance of archival records, protection of these records, maintenance of public education and lobbying programs, and development and utilization of appraisal strategies suited to the effective documentation of modern society.<sup>2</sup> These points are well taken and deserve consideration from the archival profession. Yet closer cooperation is also desirable in other areas of common concern, and Cox's admonition should be extended to include cooperation in providing an adequate level of training in archives administration to public history students.

Public historians have practiced their trade

in the United States for many generations.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, at least one writer has found the origins of public history in the roles played by clergy and lay officials during the colonial period.<sup>4</sup> The most recent wave of public history originated in 1976 in programs at the University of California-Santa Barbara and Carnegie-Mellon University in Pittsburgh.<sup>5</sup> These pioneering programs were followed by a flood of others; by 1986 public history programs or courses were offered by over eighty colleges and universities in the United States.<sup>6</sup> Typically, the stronger programs combine the academic study of history with courses specifically designed to cover history concerns.

Administrators' motives for launching these programs have varied. Some were begun in an honest effort to offer sound training for employment opportunities in culturally valuable, history-related careers.<sup>7</sup> It was no coincidence, however, that public history programs developed at a time when the number of positions for history professors in colleges and universities was shrinking toward the vanishing point.<sup>8</sup> Seeing opportunity in misfortune, many administrators began public history programs to maintain enrollment levels, with little regard to the soundness of their cre-

<sup>2</sup>Richard J. Cox, "Archivists and Public Historians in the United States," *Public Historian* 8 (Summer 1986): 29, 36-41.

<sup>3</sup>Joan Hoff Wilson, "Is the Historical Profession an 'Endangered Species'?" *Public Historian* 2 (Winter 1980): 5-8; Bruce Fraser, "Public Historians and State Humanities Councils: Toward a Shared Methodology," in "In My Opinion," *History News* 40 (February 1985): 28; Glenda Riley, "Organizing a Public History Course: An Alternative Approach," *History Teacher* 16 (November 1982): 37; Patrick Nolan, "The Public History Movement in the United States" (Paper presented at the Midwest Archives Conference, Columbus, Ohio, 4 October 1985).

<sup>4</sup>Riley, "Organizing a Public History Course," 37.

<sup>5</sup>The origins of the Santa Barbara program are discussed in Robert Kelley, "Public History: Its Origins, Nature, and Prospects," *Public Historian* 1 (Fall 1978): 19; see also Robert Kelley's letter to the editor, *American Archivist* 45 (Winter 1982): 5. The Carnegie-Mellon program is discussed in Peter N. Stearns and Joel A. Tarr, "Applied History: A New-Old Departure," *History Teacher* 14 (August 1981): 517-31.

<sup>6</sup>Noted in the National Council on Public History's *Public History Education in America: A Guide* (Indianapolis, 1986), 2, 4.

<sup>7</sup>Kelley, "Public History," 20; and Kelley's letter to the editor, 4.

<sup>8</sup>During the 1970s over one thousand Ph.D.s in history were produced annually, while enrollments fell sharply. Cutbacks in the size of graduate history programs were slow to come, so the supply of new Ph.D.s far exceeded demand. Toward the end of the 1970s, projections showed that there would be no teaching positions available to historians between 1983 and 1989 (Wilson, "Endangered Species," 10-12). Also see Cox, "Archivists and Public Historians," 32.

ations or the welfare of the students enrolled in them.<sup>9</sup>

These public history programs often shared common weaknesses: faculty frequently lacked practical experience in the subjects they taught; there was inadequate interchange between the academic program and professional practitioners; and public history programs lacked ties to academic departments (such as architecture or fine arts) that could be valuable in public history training.<sup>10</sup> Further, promotional materials have not always given prospective students an accurate picture of course offerings or realistic expectations for their future employability.<sup>11</sup> These circumstances help explain why a substantial proportion of students in one of the best public history programs in the country "seemed to one degree or another to feel as if they . . . had been sold a bill of goods."<sup>12</sup>

Archives administration courses soon became an accepted part of many public history programs. This occurred partly because archives administration was perceived by administrators as a growth field, and partly because college and university archivists could be enticed or pressured into offering a course. These courses generally attempted through lectures and readings to cover the basics of archives theory, appraisal and acquisition, security and storage, reference services, arrangement and description, nonpaper formats, and preservation and conservation. A major shortcoming of many public history programs is

the lack of substantial internship opportunities in archival repositories.<sup>13</sup>

Archivists generally have been uninformed about public history and public history programs.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, archivists who are informed often have expressed hostility toward the presence of archives courses in these programs. There is some justification for this hostility. It is reasonable to resent public history program administrators who have shoved their way into established areas of expertise. The academic isolation in which these courses are often presented to students is suspicious. And archivists should be wary of academics who seem to believe that all skills can be learned by reading books and articles.

Archivists are not the only professionals concerned about the wave of public history programs. Some historians working for public agencies dislike the label "public historian" that has recently been attached to their profession by campus-bound academics.<sup>15</sup> Other historical agency workers resent the way public history administrators ignored the historical agency work already being done at the state and local levels when they set up their own programs.<sup>16</sup> The American Association for State and Local History (AASLH), the national organization to which a large portion of historical agency staff belong, formulated its "Standards for Historical Agency Training Programs" in 1981 largely as a response to the spread of inadequate public history programs. The preface to these standards noted

<sup>9</sup>David Clary, "Trouble Is My Business: A Private View of Public History," *American Archivist* 44 (Spring 1981): 109.

<sup>10</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup>Quoted from Charles Phillips, "Gayle Clark Olson: History Entrepreneur," *History News* 27 (October 1982): 31.

<sup>13</sup>A lack of substantial internship opportunities is common in public history curricula, regardless of the specific courses offered. In answer to a questionnaire from the National Council on Public History, only fifty-two of seventy-nine respondents indicated that their public history programs required internships. The vast majority of these internships run for only one semester or less. See *Public History Education in America*, 3, 6-44.

<sup>14</sup>When I proposed a session on this subject for the Midwest Archives Conference in 1985, I found that the program committee did not know to what the term "public history" referred.

<sup>15</sup>Clary, "Trouble Is My Business," 106; and Nolan, "Public History Movement," unnumbered pages.

<sup>16</sup>Fraser, "Public Historians," 28; and Ronald J. Grele, "Whose Public? Whose History? What Is the Goal of the Public Historian?" *Public Historian* 3 (Winter 1981): 45.

with concern "how little understanding seemed to be going into the development of some college programs purporting to train students for the (historical) agency field."<sup>17</sup>

Despite shortcomings, there are some encouraging recent developments in public history. After a decade of existence, the movement has produced a considerable body of literature,<sup>18</sup> thereby reinforcing its claims to professional legitimacy. Some public history programs are also responding to the real needs of historical agencies, and the placement of their graduates has made possible a noticeable professionalization of historical agency staffs during the last decade.<sup>19</sup> After several years of acrimony, historical agency professionals and academic public history instructors are better understanding each other's needs and objectives. As part of this rapprochement, in 1985 the AASLH selected a "scholar-in-residence" whose assignment was "to determine how the Association can help universities prepare their students for employment in the state and local history field."<sup>20</sup> A rapprochement is also needed between the archives and public history professions. To its credit, the latter has taken the initiative. The summer 1986 issue of the *Public Historian* was devoted to exploring the relationship between the two professions. The issue, titled "Archives and Public History: Issues, Problems, and Prospects" and guest-edited by Bruce Dearstyne of the New York State Archives, was published with the intention of increasing communication and opening avenues of cooperation.<sup>21</sup>

Though many feelings about archives

courses taught in public history programs appear to be justified, fears that newly trained public historians will compete with archivists for entry-level jobs, or that their relatively superficial archives training will deprofessionalize archives work, rest on misunderstandings that deserve exploration.<sup>22</sup> In a rational employment market, successful job applicants are selected because they are best qualified to carry out the responsibilities of a position. Such a market presupposes informed employers whose decisions are guided by such criteria as the quality and extensiveness of an applicant's training and/or work experience, the strength of professional recommendations, and the suitability of personal traits. In a rational employment market, students trained in sound archives programs have nothing to fear from public history programs. The former programs are intended to produce professional archivists capable of working in large institutions or directing one-person shops, in both cases on a full-time basis. They consist of multicourse offerings taught by experienced archivists that include a practicum and lead to a graduate degree.<sup>23</sup> Archives training in public history programs is suitable for a different set of needs.

As the beneficiaries of a single archives course, public historians have a relatively superficial knowledge of archives administration and lack substantial experience in the application of archival principles. Their lack of extensive archives coursework and substantial intern experience would be grave disadvantages should they compete for ar-

<sup>17</sup>"Standards for Historical Agency Training Programs," *History News* 6 (July 1981): attached brochure.

<sup>18</sup>Much of this body of literature has been collected. David F. Trask and Robert W. Pomeroy, III, eds., *The Craft of Public History: An Annotated Select Bibliography* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1983).

<sup>19</sup>Charles Phillips and Patricia Hogan, *The Wages of History: The AASLH Employment Trends and Salary Survey* (Nashville, Tenn.: American Association for State and Local History, 1983), 29.

<sup>20</sup>*History News* 40 (January 1985): 31.

<sup>21</sup>The publisher's intentions for this issue are noted in Bruce Dearstyne's introduction (*Public Historian* 8 [Summer 1986]: 8).

<sup>22</sup>These fears are easy to sense but difficult to document. They are natural responses from a small occupational group that is concerned with both its employability and its professionalism.

<sup>23</sup>Such programs are prescribed in the Society of American Archivists' "Guidelines for Graduate Archival Education Programs." See the Society's 1986 *Education Directory*, 2-3.

chives jobs with applicants trained in full-scale archives programs. Yet an elementary level of archives training could be sufficient to meet the needs of many institutions. When properly done, archives training offered as part of a public history program can help prepare students for careers as generalists in county historical societies and smaller public libraries and museums, where responsibilities may include the part-time processing and maintenance of small archives and manuscripts collections along with other historical agency or library responsibilities. Or this training can help prepare students for historical agency positions in which they will come into contact with archivists and curators and utilize their services. These positions might involve research, historical editing, or agency outreach.

Public historians with part-time archives responsibilities complement the archives profession; they do not compete with it and do not deprofessionalize it. This is not to suggest that the issue of deprofessionalization is not current, but that many archivists misunderstand its origins. An adequate system of education and the mastery of specialized knowledge are essential to the well-being of any profession or skilled occupation.<sup>24</sup> The real threat of deprofessionalization in the archives field comes from within, from the continuing existence of weak archives programs that do not meet reasonable educational standards, that are not taught by qualified staff, or that do not provide adequate opportunities for practical experience. It is unclear whether the advent of certification of individual archivists will

improve what one archival educator recently called "the malformed nature" of archives education.<sup>25</sup> It is also too early to know whether institutions hiring archivists will give preference to certified candidates, and whether they will require the attainment of certification in awarding tenure or permanent status.<sup>26</sup> Nor can the effects, if any, of certification of archivists upon the public history profession be foreseen. It seems unlikely that public historians would be interested in being certified as archivists. Public historians perform archives work on a part-time basis, the knowledge required to meet limited archives responsibilities is relatively superficial, and efforts at professional development will more likely be encouraged in other areas. Certification of archivists may, however, help public history program administrators identify archivists qualified to teach archives administration courses in public history programs.

Public historians with a modicum of archives training can fill an important niche in the operations of many smaller historical agencies, a niche for which professional archivists generally are unsuited. A recent study has shown that approximately three-quarters of all historical agencies collect local public records and photographic images, and nearly one-half of all historical agencies possess manuscript collections.<sup>27</sup> For the most part, these local history institutions are inadequately funded and therefore inadequately staffed. About 44 percent of them have annual budgets of less than \$20,000 and depend on volunteers to staff their operations. Another 30 percent oper-

<sup>24</sup>Cox, "Archivists and Public Historians," 41.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid., 42.

<sup>26</sup>On 9 May 1987 at a session at the Midwest Archives Conference titled "Hiring an Archivist," I asked the three panelists if they foresaw that the impending certification of individual archivists would have any impact on job descriptions or professional requirements for new employees at their institutions. All three agreed that they foresaw no short-term impact, and that it would be necessary to see how well certification of individual archivists works before they would favor making any changes in current job descriptions or professional requirements.

<sup>27</sup>Charles Phillips and Patricia Hogan, *A Culture at Risk: Who Cares for America's Heritage?* (Nashville, Tenn.: American Association for State and Local History, 1984), 53, 55.



ate on budgets of between \$20,000 and \$100,000 annually.<sup>28</sup> The availability of public historians with some archives training is potentially significant to this latter group of institutions. The archives and manuscript collections they hold are often uncared for, unprocessed, and inaccessible to researchers. These collections desperately require work and proper care, but lack sufficient volume to warrant a full-time professional archivist, even if the agency had the funds to hire one.<sup>29</sup> Rather, these local history collections require only a few hours of attention each week. Perhaps the best way to assure their acceptable arrangement and description is to place them under the administration of a public historian or librarian who has taken a sound archives and manuscript course. This consideration alone should lead archivists to reexamine their aloofness from the public history profession.

The archives profession as a whole should support the stronger, sounder public history programs for other reasons as well. In so doing, archivists meet some of the recommendations recently formulated by the SAA Task Force on Goals and Priorities, including the promotion of the profession as a whole, the pursuit of effective outreach, and cooperation with allied professions.<sup>30</sup> The existence of public history programs offers special opportunities to archivists employed at colleges and universities and can be very rewarding. Teaching a course in archives administration to public history or library science students can help bring administrative and faculty support for an archives's operations. It will also raise the archivist's status within the academic community, may provide access to public history advisory and oversight committees, and,

of course, might also help fill the public service requirements of academic employment, thus reinforcing a case for faculty status, tenure, or increased merit pay. Beyond these internal advantages, a broad range of archivists might also benefit from public history programs that are offered in their vicinity. If the archives component is sound, these programs can be a source of partially trained, goal-oriented graduate student assistants or interns. Their developing skills can be utilized in both public and technical service work and can provide archivists with more time for supervisory activities. Should funds for such an arrangement be unavailable, unpaid assistantships or internships might be offered as a means of fulfilling course requirements for practical experience.

During an archives career, one can expect to work with public historians in a number of situations where their brief archives training will be mutually beneficial. Perhaps one meets them as collaborators on such interinstitutional projects as the creation of a local archives and manuscripts directory or the writing of a disaster prevention plan. Or they may become patrons in an archives while doing their own research. Typically, staff from other types of historical agencies lack an understanding of archival services or resources. These deficiencies make it difficult and time-consuming for archivists to provide the assistance required. This no longer need be so. Public historians acquainted with archives operations will be more self-sufficient in their own projects and more understanding in the requests they make of archivists and archival resources. These potential benefits are real, if less tangible than the others enumerated, and should not be overlooked.

<sup>28</sup>Phillips and Hogan, *Wages of History*, 9, 11.

<sup>29</sup>Phillips and Hogan, *Culture at Risk*, 74, note that nearly 80 percent of the historical agencies they surveyed reported there were no separate cash allocations for their archives. Another 10 percent reported allocations of less than \$1,000 annually.

<sup>30</sup>*Planning for the Archival Profession: A Report of the SAA Task Force on Goals and Priorities* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 1986), esp. pp. 17–24.

How then, should archivists regard the discipline of public history? The public history profession is a complement, not a rival to the archives profession, with its own particular niche. How ought archivists respond to the archives courses that are offered in public history programs? When properly taught, archives courses in public history programs can provide a number of benefits to the archives profession as a whole, and archivists should greet them with approval. And how should archivists re-

spond to the request that they teach such a course? Archivists have no alternative but to accept. To refuse to teach archival courses in public history programs is to leave the field open to amateurs, to the detriment of both the archival and public history professions. It is now time to close the gap that has heretofore existed between archivists and public historians. In helping public historians, archivists are also helping themselves.



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