



## Recommended Readings for Public History Courses

### *Introduction to Public History*

Prepared by the NCPH Curriculum and Training Committee, November 2020

Note: Recommendations are for graduate level. Readings that are also suitable for undergraduate level are indicated by (UG) at the end of the annotation.

**Adair, Bill, Benjamin Filene, and Laura Koloski. *Letting Go?: Sharing Historical Authority in a User-Generated World*. New York: Routledge, 2011.**

*Letting Go?* investigates path-breaking public history practices at a time when the traditional expertise of museums seems challenged at every turn—by the Web and digital media, by community-based programming, by new trends in oral history, and by contemporary art. In this anthology of 19 thought pieces, case studies, conversations and commissioned art, almost 30 leading practitioners such as Michael Frisch, Jack Tchen, Liz Ševcenko, Kathleen McLean, Nina Simon, Otabenga Jones and Associates, and Fred Wilson explore the implications of letting audiences create, not just receive, historical content. This engaging collection serves as an introductory text for those newly grappling with a changing field and, for those already pursuing the goal of “letting go,” a tool for taking stock and pushing ahead.

**Ashton, Paul and Alex Trpeznik, eds. *What Is Public History Globally? Working with the Past in the Present*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019.**

This groundbreaking edited collection takes a comprehensive look at public history throughout the world. Divided into three sections—Background, Definitions and Issues; Approaches and Methods; and Sites of Public History—it contextualizes public history in eleven different countries, explores the main research skills and methods of the discipline, and illustrates public history research with a variety of global case studies. *What is Public History Globally?* provides an in-depth examination of the ways in which ordinary people become active participants in historical processes, and it will be an invaluable resource for advance undergraduates and postgraduates studying public history, museology, and heritage studies.

**Becker, Carl. “Everyman His Own Historian.” Annual Address of the President of the American Historical Association, 1931.**

Available at <https://www.historians.org/about-aha-and-membership/aha-history-and-archives/presidential-addresses/carl-i-becker> (UG)

**Colwell, Chip. *Plundered Skulls and Stolen Spirits: Inside the Fight to Reclaim Native America's Culture*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017.**

Who owns the past and the objects that physically connect us to history? And who has the right to decide this ownership, particularly when the objects are sacred or, in the case of skeletal remains, human? Is it the museums that care for the objects or the communities whose ancestors made them? These questions are at the heart of *Plundered Skulls and Stolen Spirits*, an

unflinching insider account by a leading curator who has spent years learning how to balance these controversial considerations.

**Conard, Rebecca. *Benjamin Shambaugh and the Intellectual Foundations of Public History*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2002.**

Using Shambaugh's distinguished career as a lens, Conard's seminal work is the first book to consider public history as an integral part of the intellectual development of the historical profession as a whole in the United States. Conard draws upon an unpublished, mid-1940s biography by research historian Jacob Swisher to trace the forces that shaped Shambaugh's early years, his administration of the State Historical Society of Iowa, his development of applied history and commonwealth history in the 1910s and 1920s, and the transformations in his thinking and career during the 1930s. Framing this intriguingly interwoven narrative are chapters that contextualize Shambaugh's professional development within the development of the historical profession as a whole in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and assess his career within the post-World War II emergence of the modern public history movement.

**Fink, Leon. "When Community Comes Home to Roost: The Southern Milltown as Lost Cause." *The Journal of Social History* 40 (Fall 2006): 119-145.**

This is a smart piece about the politics of doing public and oral history, which looks at the various stances and interests among different types of people doing history in public (in this case, a pair of local activists and community organizers who were doing public history type projects, and the author himself, an outsider and professional who was initially welcomed and then rejected by the activists when they realized he was going to include them in his study). It's a good piece for getting students talking about the politics of knowledge-making and the layers of insider/outsider politics in any community, as well as getting them to question the too-easy assumption of "community" as an entity or an unproblematic good.

**Frisch, Michael. *A Shared Authority: Essays on the Craft and Meaning of Oral and Public History*. Albany: State University of New York, 1990.**

Frisch's essays penetrate the historical consciousness of the nation and expose its distortions. He is not afraid to 'depart from the usual academic form.' This volume ranges from insightful essays and interviews to book and film reviews, but despite its sweep of subjects and form, its pieces build coherently upon each other. This is an entertaining, illuminating, and provocative body of work. (UG)

**Hayden, Dolores. *The Power of Place: Urban Landscapes in Public History*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1995.**

Based on her extensive experience in the urban communities of Los Angeles, historian and architect Dolores Hayden proposes new perspectives on gender, race, and ethnicity to broaden the practice of public history and public art, enlarge urban preservation, and reorient the writing of urban history to spatial struggles.

**Horton, James Oliver and Lois E. Horton. *Slavery and Public History: The Tough Stuff of American Memory*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006.**

This collection of essays provides an excellent work for exploring the difficulties public historians face in interpreting slavery to public audiences. The collection works well as a whole, providing ample context for understanding the changing nature of slavery in American history and then seeing how discussions and representations of slavery have led to controversy in diverse settings. Many of the essays could be assigned on their own, particularly James Horton's "Slavery in American History: An Uncomfortable Dialogue" (an earlier version appeared as an article in *The Public Historian*); John Michael Vlach's "The Last Taboo Subject: Exhibiting Slavery at the Library of Congress;" Gary B. Nash's "For Whom Will the Liberty Bell Toll: From Controversy to Cooperation;" and Lois E Horton's "Avoiding History: Thomas Jefferson, Sally Hemings, and the Uncomfortable Public Conversation on Slavery." (UG)

**Horwitz, Tony. *A Voyage Long and Strange: On the Trail of Vikings, Conquistadors, Lost Colonists, and Other Adventurers in Early America*. New York: Picador, 2008.**

Horwitz embarks on a quest to discover what happened in North America between Columbus's sail in 1492 and the Pilgrims' arrival in 1620. His account of his trek across the continent mixes historical accounts with present-day adventures with a hefty dose of myth busting along the way. (UG)

**Hurtado, Alfred. "Public History and the Native America." *Montana: The Magazine of Western History* 40 (Spring 1990): 58-69.**

Hurtado demonstrates how public historians and historical research has impacted a range of issues affecting American Indians over the twentieth century, including issues of land ownership, water rights, and federal recognition of tribes. As Hurtado notes, "virtually all historical writing on Indian topics has the potential to affect contemporary Indian life, whatever the intentions of the authors who write on such topics," requiring historians to consider the wider implication of their scholarship and advocacy (particularly as paid consultants) on contemporary Indian topics.

**Linenthal, Edward T. *Preserving Memory: The Struggle to Create America's Holocaust Museum*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2001.**

Linenthal's detailed examination of the decision-making process leading up to the creation of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum provides a powerful case study for discussing issues related to authority and museums in public history interpretation.

**Lyon, Cherstin M., Elizabeth M. Nix, and Rebecca K. Shrum. *Introduction to Public History: Interpreting the Past, Engaging Audiences*. New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017.**

*Introduction to Public History: Interpreting the Past, Engaging Audiences* is a brief foundational textbook for public history. It is organized around the questions and ethical dilemmas that drive public history in a variety of settings, from local community-based projects to international case studies. This book is designed for use in undergraduate and graduate classrooms with future public historians, teachers, and consumers of history in mind. (UG)

**Matos Rodriguez, Felix V. "The 'Browncoats' Are Coming': Latino Public History in Boston." *The Public Historian*, 23 (Fall 2001): 15-28.**

Using the dedication of Boston's first historical marker dedicated to a Latino topic in August 2000, Felix V. Matos Rodriguez explores "why it has taken so long for city, state, and public history organizations in Boston to embrace the heritage of its Latino communities in public history projects." The essay examines early public history efforts in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, and the changes that occurred in the 1990s that spurred new interest in Boston's Latino history. The piece also examines how issues of "representation, power, and participation" were addressed in several public history programs in the 1990s (p.16). A useful piece for educators considering ways to effectively represent ethnic minorities' histories in public history projects.

**Meringolo, Denise. *Museums, Monuments, and National Parks: Toward a New Genealogy of Public History*. Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2012.**

The rapid expansion of the field of public history since the 1970s has led many to believe that it is a relatively new profession. In this book, Denise D. Meringolo shows that the roots of public history actually reach back to the nineteenth century, when the federal government entered into the work of collecting and preserving the nation's natural and cultural resources. Scientists conducting research and gathering specimens became key figures in a broader effort to protect and interpret the nation's landscape. Their collaboration with entrepreneurs, academics, curators, and bureaucrats alike helped pave the way for other governmental initiatives, from the Smithsonian Institution to the parks and monuments today managed by the National Park Service.

**Moyer, Theresa and Paul Shackel. *A Devil, Two Rivers and a Dream: The Making of Harper's Ferry National Historical Park*. Lanham, MD: Alta Mira Press, 2007.**

This book can be divided into two classroom discussions. The first portion of the book lends itself well to a discussion about the complicated history of historic places. Even the most sophisticated students often have not given much thought to the construction of place, and this book provides a window into the cultural geography of Harper's Ferry. The second portion of the book frames a discussion about the ways in which interpretation evolves over time. The book demonstrates the ways in which specific social and cultural conditions can make the concerns of some stakeholders appear more valid than others. It's a good touchstone throughout the semester for talking about reflexive learning, collaborative inquiry, and collaborative interpretation.

**Ogline, Jill. "'Creating Dissonance for the Visitor': The Heart of the Liberty Bell Controversy." *The Public Historian* 26 (Summer 2004): 49-57.**

This paper examines the controversy surrounding the location and proposed interpretive plan for Independence National Historical Park's (NHP's) new pavilion for the Liberty Bell. Written from the perspective of a graduate student and former Independence NHP employee, it attempts to help historians and Park Service employees to better understand each other's positions, and to penetrate to the heart of the issue at stake—the park's own sense of self-understanding and mission. It then moves on to show the relevance of this specific controversy

to questions of broader significance, such as the fundamental character of American history, the post-September 11 responsibility of historic sites, the strength of national mythology, and the vital importance of critical public history. (Abstract from *The Public Historian*). Educators might also consider Gary Nash's essay "For Whom Will the Liberty Bell Toll: From Controversy to Cooperation" in Horton's *Slavery and Public History* (listed above).

**Redford, Dorothy Spruill. *Somerset Homecoming: Recovering a Lost Heritage*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000.**

*Somerset Homecoming*, first published in 1989, is the story of one woman's unflagging efforts to recover the history of her ancestors, enslaved Blacks who had lived and worked at Somerset Place. Traveling down winding southern roads, through county courthouses and state archives, and onto the front porches of people willing to share tales handed down through generations, Dorothy Spruill Redford spent ten years tracing the lives of Somerset's enslaved and their descendants. Her endeavors culminated in the joyous, nationally publicized homecoming she organized that brought together more than 2,000 descendants of the plantation's enslaved and enslavers and marked the beginning of a campaign to turn Somerset Place into a remarkable resource for learning about the history of both African Americans and whites in the region.

**Rosenzweig, Roy and David Thelen. *The Presence of the Past*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2000.**

While the past is omnipresent to Americans, "history" as it is usually defined in textbooks leaves many people cold. Rosenzweig and Thelen found that history as taught in school does not inspire a strong connection to the past. And they reveal how race and ethnicity affects how Americans perceive the past: while most white Americans tend to think of it as something personal, African Americans and American Indians are more likely to think in terms of broadly shared experiences—like slavery, the Civil Rights Movement, and the violation of Indian treaties. Rosenzweig and Thelen's conclusions about the ways people use their personal, family, and national stories have profound implications for anyone involved in researching or presenting history, as well as for all those who struggle to engage with the past in a meaningful way.

**Stanton, Cathy. *The Lowell Experiment: Public History in a Post-Industrial City*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2006.**

This book challenges public history students in two directions. First, it asks them to engage in cross-disciplinary learning, viewing public history practice through the eyes of an anthropologist. We spend at least part of one seminar discussion breaking down the disciplinary boundaries they have been encouraged to build up. Second, the book challenges them to recognize the ramifications of reflexive practice, examining their own role in the practice of public history and breaking out of the comfortable binary between "professional" and "audience."

**Swigger, Jessica. *History is Bunk: Assembling the Past at Henry Ford's Greenfield Village*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2014.**

Jessica Swigger analyzes the dialogue between museum administrators and their audiences by considering the many contexts that have shaped Greenfield Village. The result is a book that

simultaneously provides the most complete extant history of the site and an intimate look at how the past is assembled and constructed at history museums.