



Recommended Readings for Public History Courses From *The Public Historian*

Prepared by the NCPH Curriculum and Training Committee, November 2020

All are suitable for graduate and undergraduate students.

Articles

Bemis, Bethanee. "Mirror, Mirror for Us All: Disney Theme Parks and the Collective Memory of the American National Narrative." *The Public Historian*, Vol 42, No. 1 (February 2020): 54-79.

Love them or hate them, Disney theme parks have become some of the most culturally significant locations of collective memory of the American experience. Rather than focus, as most discussion has, on whether this should be viewed as "good" or "bad," this essay seeks to lay a groundwork for understanding *how* Disney parks gained their cultural authority. In doing so it will suggest that public historians could benefit from framing the interaction between history and the public at Disney parks as a location-specific process by which the public and a corporation are engaged in a cultural ritual of transforming historical fact into the national narrative.

Carson, Cary. "Colonial Williamsburg and the Practice of Interpretive Planning in American History Museums." *The Public Historian*, Vol. 20, No. 3 (July 1998): 11– 51.

An exploration of interpretive planning at Colonial Williamsburg in the aftermath of the site's 1994 slave auction re-enactment.

Carson, Cary. "The End of History Museums: What's Plan B?" *The Public Historian*, Vol. 30, No. 4 (November 2008): 9-27.

Are historic sites and house museums destined to go the way of Oldsmobiles and floppy disks? Visitation has trended downwards for thirty years. Theories abound, but no one really knows why. To launch a discussion of the problem in the pages of *The Public Historian*, Cary Carson cautions against the pessimistic view that the past is simply passé. Instead he offers a "Plan B" that takes account of the new way that learners today organize information to make history meaningful.

Corbett, Katharine and Howard Miller. "Shared Inquiry into Shared Inquiry." *The Public Historian*, Vol. 28, No. 1 (February 2006): 15-38.

Shared inquiry is a key component of reflective public history practice. All good historical practice is reflective, but public history requires a special commitment to collaborate, to respond, to share both inquiry and authority. Because trained practitioners and lay people often seek different pasts for different purposes, public historians may find themselves poised between advocacy and mediation, monitoring and adjusting their own behavior through the

process of shared inquiry. Since public history is inherently situational, there is no one-size-fits-all methodology. Drawing on thirty years of shared public history experience, the authors reflect on situations in which they strove to share both inquiry and authority.

Dickey, Jennifer. "Public History and the Big Tent Theory." *The Public Historian*, Vol. 40, No. 4 (November 2018): 37-41.

A short essay about the definition and meaning of public history.

Filene, Benjamin. "Passionate Histories: 'Outsider' History Makers and What They Teach Us." *The Public Historian*, Vol. 34, No. 1 (February 2012): 11-33.

Even as museums and sites struggle to attract audiences and bemoan the public's lack of interest in history, people working *outside* museums and universities, without professional training, and often without funding, are approaching history in ways that fire the enthusiasm of thousands. Unmoored by institutional expectations, they are what we might call "outsider history-makers": genealogists, heritage tourism developers, and re-enactors, among others. They establish emotional connections to the past that operate on the level of instinct more than intellect. As public history professionalizes, the field seems increasingly at odds with this approach. The efforts of the outsiders, however, suggest new strategies for drawing passionate audiences to museums and point to new sets of skills that public history training programs should be teaching their students.

Gardner, James. "Contested Terrain: History, Museums, and the Public." *The Public Historian*, Vol. 26, No. 4 (September 2004): 11-21.

How does the public understand and use the past? What role should historians and historical scholarship play in the public's understanding of the past? How do we as historians address our responsibilities to the public and still remain advocates for history and scholarly integrity? How do we make the difficult choices that are our responsibility to make? This essay argues that historians working in museums must be advocates for both history and our visitors, negotiating the gap between our understanding of the past as historians and the public's.

Halifax, Shawn. "McLeod Plantation Historic Site: Showing Truth and Change." *The Public Historian*, Vol 40, No. 3 (August 2018): 252-277.

In 2015, the Charleston County Park and Recreation Commission opened McLeod Plantation Historic Site. What remains of the former 1,693-acre Sea Island cotton plantation is 37 acres, 14 historic structures, and an African American cemetery. Interpretation of the former plantation is focused on the African American struggle to achieve freedom, justice, and equality from 1851 through 1990. The cultural history interpretation coordinator and co-author of the National Association for Interpretation award winning exhibits at the site explores the development, implementation, and adjustments made to interpretation since the opening and comments on the current state of Black museums in America.

Holl, Jack. "Cultures in Conflict: An Argument Against 'Common Ground' Between Practicing Professional Historians and Academics." *The Public Historian*, Vol. 30, No. 2 (May 2008): 29-50.

There is a fundamental distinction between practicing professional historians and academics, and any celebration of a "common ground" tradition masks the fundamental cultural differences between historians who practice and historians who teach. Over the past three decades, since the founding of the Society for History in the Federal Government and the National Council on Public History, practicing professional historians have struggled with definitions of public history. "Struggling with our own identity," the author states, "many federal historians did not want to be labeled public historians, the professor's euphemism for non-academic historians." Rather, federal historians belonged to a "cadre of professionals who practiced their specialties in the public sector." With extensive knowledge of the federal history sector (with particular attention given to the historical office of the Department of Energy) as well as academic history departments and policies, the author argues that "professional historians [should] be defined by what they do, rather than by where they work." The historical profession must acknowledge that federal and other professional historians "occupy their own solid ground, perhaps not adequately mapped," and represent more than a "middle ground" between the public and the academy.

Mancuso, Rebecca. "The Finger Saga: One Museum's Quest to Turn the Macabre into the Meaningful." *The Public Historian*, Vol. 40, No. 2 (May 2018): 23-42.

The Wood County (Ohio) Historical Center and Museum has struggled with how to treat a controversial artifact a long time in its possession: a set of severed human fingers in a jar. Collected from a murder scene in 1881, "The Fingers in the Jar" have become a popular piece of the museum's collection but for problematic reasons. This article traces the artifact's life from creation to lurid objectification and proposes a new interpretation that recognizes its profound moral value. Such provocative exhibits can generate critical moral reflection and thus the museum is exploring ways to present these controversial human remains despite ethical concerns. Displaying them in a humanizing, pedagogically sound way fits squarely within the museum's updated mission to promote social justice. The museum can offer a pathway toward public education on domestic homicide in all its brutality, historically and today.

Miles, Tiya. "'Showplace of the Cherokee Nation': Race and the Making of a Southern House Museum." *The Public Historian*, Vol. 33, No. 4 (November 2011): 11-34.

This article traces the restoration history of the Chief Vann House State Historic Site, a former Cherokee plantation owned and operated by the state of Georgia. The article explores the make-up of the restoration community in the 1950s and identifies aspects of convergence and divergence among this white, elite group in terms of both their visions for the site and their notions of how best to represent Native Americans. It argues that restorers used the restoration process as a route for personal and community identity enhancement, identifying with the storied Cherokee peoples and claiming "Indian" characteristics and the historical experience of Indian removal for themselves.

Monteiro, Lyra. "Review Essay: Race-Conscious Casting and the Erasure of the Black Past in Lin-Manuel Miranda's *Hamilton*." *The Public Historian*, Vol. 38, No. 1 (February 2016): 89-98.

A review essay of Miranda's Broadway sensation.

Plaster, Joseph. "Safe for Whom? And Whose Families? Narrative, Urban Neoliberalism, and Queer Oral History on San Francisco's Polk Street." *The Public Historian*, Vol. 42, No. 3 (August 2020): 86-113.

In this essay, Plaster reflects on his experience as director of *Polk Street: Lives in Transition*, a project that drew on oral histories to intervene in debates about gentrification, homelessness, sex work, queer politics, and public safety in the highly polarized setting of gentrifying San Francisco. From 2008–10, he recorded more than seventy oral histories from people experiencing the transformation of the city's Polk Street from a working-class queer commercial district to a gentrified entertainment destination serving the city's growing elite. Oral histories enabled Plaster to document a local past rich in non-biological family structures, which he interpreted through public "listening parties," professionally mediated neighborhood dialogues, a traveling multimedia exhibit, and radio documentaries. The project challenged gentrifiers' claims to be promoting "safety" and "family" by positing alternative understandings of both concepts drawn from oral histories with transgender women, queer homeless youth, sex workers, and working-class gay men who had made Polk Street their home.

Rosenthal, Gregory. "Make Roanoke Queer Again: Community History and Urban Change in a Southern City." *The Public Historian*, Vol 39, No. 1 (February 2017): 35-60.

This essay explores intersections among urban history, queer history, and public history in a gentrifying southern city. Rosenthal shows how queer cultures flourished in Roanoke, Virginia, in the 1960s and 1970s only to be displaced by a combination of police repression, urban planning, and gentrification starting in the late 1970s and 1980s. Seeking to "Make Roanoke Queer Again," the Southwest Virginia LGBTQ+ History Project is a community-based history initiative committed to researching and interpreting the region's LGBTQ history. This essay argues that queer community history projects can be a form of resistance to gentrification and a means to preserve our history from "queer erasure."

Weyeneth, Robert R. "The Risks of Professionalizing Local History: The Campaign to Suppress My Book." *Public History News* 24 (Fall 2003): 1-2.

In this short article (less than two pages long), Robert Weyeneth describes the threat of legal action brought against a seemingly innocuous study he wrote about a public park in Hawaii. The piece quickly reveals the passions generated by local histories, particularly when historians challenge long-held myths about local communities. The piece opens great opportunities for exploring the challenges which historians face when doing public history and local history. Because the piece is so concise, instructors could have students read it in class, or during a short class break, as the lead-in to a class discussion on the power of local history and the special challenges historians face when doing public history or community history. Note this piece comes from the *Public History News* newsletter, rather than the journal.

Weyeneth, Robert R. "The Architecture of Racial Segregation: The Challenges of Preserving the Problematical Past." *The Public Historian*, Vol. 27, No. 4 (November 2005): 11-44.

The article examines racial segregation as a spatial system and proposes a conceptual framework for assessing its significance. It analyzes how the ideology of white supremacy influenced design form in the United States and how Jim Crow architecture appeared on the landscape. For African Americans, the settings for everyday life were not simply the confines of this imposed architecture; the article analyzes responses such as the construction of alternative spaces. The discussion concludes by considering the architecture of segregation from the perspective of historic preservation.

Young, James E. "Germany's Holocaust Problem—and Mine." *The Public Historian*, Vol 24, No. 4 (November 2002): 65-80.

Young tells the story of Germany's national Holocaust memorial and his own role in it, his evolution from a highly skeptical critic on the outside of the process to one of the arbiters on the inside. He finds that as the line between his role as critic and arbiter began to collapse, the issues at the heart of Germany's memorial conundrum came into ever sharper, more painful relief.

Notable Special Issues and Roundtables

Universities Studying Slavery Roundtable. Vol. 42, No. 4, November 2020.

With an introduction by Tiya Miles, this collection of essays from Chana Kai Lee, Hilary Green, Rhondda Robinson Thomas, and Leslie Harris provides a virtual tour of "four southern campuses with deep roots in slavery and/or histories of racialized labor exploitation." The campuses include the University of Georgia, the University of Alabama, Clemson University, and Emory University.

Queering Public History. Vol. 41, No. 2, May 2019.

This issue, timed to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the Stonewall uprising in New York City, provides a collection of essays on LGBTQ Public History.

Black Museums. Vol. 40, No. 3, August 2018.

This issue commemorates the fortieth anniversary (1978-2018) of the African American Museum Association (AAMA, known today as the Association of African American Museums).

A Centennial History: The National Park Service. Vol. 38, No. 4, November 2016.

This issue commemorates the founding of the National Park Service in August 1916.

Auditory History. Vol. 37, No. 4, November 2015.

A collection of seven essays that "discuss the relevance of auditory history for researching, writing, and staging history for a wide audience."

Historic House Museums. Vol. 37, No. 2, May 2015.

An issue devoted to that most ubiquitous of museums, the historic house museum.

Historians as Expert Witnesses. Vol. 37, No. 1, February 2015.

This special issue of *The Public Historian* examines the nature and scope of the historian's role as a consultant and expert witness in natural resource litigation.

State and Local History, focused on NY State. Vol. 33, No. 3, August 2011.

This special issue of *The Public Historian* explores issues relating to the management of public history programs in New York State. State history is something that continues to be worthy of preservation, management, study, and analysis because of the distinctive historical development and traits of each state and the role of state history as a portal to national history.

State Involvement in Death. Vol. 32, No. 1, February 2010.

This special issue of *The Public Historian* examines a pressing, pervasive, traumatic, and very public contemporary issue in which history and historians are heavily involved in many countries around the globe as six authors investigate a range of issues around the state involvement in death.

The Public and Private History of Eugenics: An Introduction. Vol. 29, No. 3, Summer 2007.

Inspired by our experience addressing the legacy of eugenics at California State University, Sacramento, this special issue presents an array of articles representative of diverse approaches to the historical investigation of eugenics. This article provides an introduction to the history of eugenics and explores the ways in which public history is particularly well suited to shape the historical memory of eugenics and encourage dialogue about contemporary biotechnologies.