

Call for Papers

The Public Historian

Special Issue: Labor and Public History

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As laborers at historic sites and museums, public historians are economic actors whose work is essential to presenting, interpreting, and preserving the past. Like many other workers, public historians struggle to achieve job security in a field that is often defined by gig work, seasonality, and contingency. At colleges and universities, how public history is taught and structured as a profession and field of academic study raises important issues as well, with public historians often expressing concerns about exploitation and the field's viability as a career. All the while, plenty of commentators insist that low pay, poor working conditions, and financial insecurity represent "passion taxes" that nonprofit workers must pay to take on jobs that allow them to do intellectual work and contribute to a vaguely defined public good.

In the past fifty years public history has seen tremendous change. The 1970s and 1980s provided both a cultural turn that made history more personable and relatable, and introduced neoliberal economic practices that pushed historical institutions into the competitive capitalist marketplace, monetizing history and the past as commodities that could generate revenues. Scholars of the 1990s noticed the commercialization of history, but few pieces considered the worker as a serious agent, or point of resistance, to these transformations. Scholarship in the past two decades have framed public history as emotional labor, and examined how interpretations of slavery, trauma, and other difficult pasts take a toll on frontline workers. Recently, more historians have become vocal about the field's high entrance costs, how universities try to profit off graduate programs, unpaid internships, and the aforementioned "passion tax" that rationalizes low pay and inconsistent work, making survival difficult. We have observed and participated in the labor movement in museums and academia and have come to realize that we are service workers, united in many cities with restaurant and hotel workers as well as with other teachers and non-profit professionals.

This special issue of *The Public Historian* builds on the 2023 and 2024 NCPH Working Groups "Empowering the Public History Workplace." For this issue, we seek articles that consider how the shift away from "charitable" benefactors and state funding has shaped the work of public history. How has entertainment influenced public history practices? How can professors and mentors better prepare students for the constant tensions of the public history workplace? What should we all read? What should we all do? What role have executive boards, trustees, and partners played in structuring managerial practices and antiunionism in public history workplaces? What are the tensions between public history practitioners and scholars of public history, and how can we strengthen the mutual respect and solidarities that make our field strong? How can we seize the means of interpretation? How should we talk about/commemorate labor in public history and labor as public historians?

We aim to do some new things with this issue of *TPH*. While proposals for articles addressing these topics are welcome, so are alternative formats and creative products. Possible formats include reports from the field from the point of view of interpreters, museum store clerks, interns, and beyond; interviews, roundtable discussions, and review essays that connect a group of museums, historic sites, films, or other works of public history in discussion; proposed and imagined

exhibitions and monuments for the future; and, explorations of public art's relationship to labor and history will all be welcomed in this issue.

Proposals, which should be no longer than one double-spaced page, should be submitted to *The Public Historian* at shcase@ucsb.edu, and address: 1) the proposed contribution; 2) if it involves research, fieldwork, site visits, etc., a timeline for completion; and 3) how the contribution will possibly connect to the issue as a whole.

For more details on publication requirements, please consult *The Public Historian's* [guidelines](#). The deadline for submission of proposals is September 1, 2024. Selected authors will be notified by October 1, 2024, with initial draft submissions due to the editors by no later than March 1, 2025. Publication of the special issue of *The Public Historian* is scheduled for February or May 2026.