



Recommended Readings for Public History Courses *Controversies*

Prepared by the NCPH Curriculum and Training Committee, July 2011

Burg, Steven. "From Troubled Ground to Common Ground: The Locust Grove African-American Cemetery Restoration Project: A Case Study of Service-Learning and Community History." *The Public Historian*, 30 (May 2008): 51-82.

In this article, Burg examines the challenges facing the preservation of a deteriorating, historic African-American cemetery in the small town of Shippensburg, Pennsylvania. The article details how efforts to restore and preserve the cemetery required public historians and community activists to address the community's long history of segregation and racial tension. This case study underscores the ability of public history to help communities negotiate through difficult issues in their past, as well as ways public history programs may use service-learning to assist their communities. At the article's end, there is a discussion of how the site should be described on a state historical marker.

Glassberg, David. *A Sense of History: The Place of the Past in American Life*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2001.

Glassberg's collection of essays explores the ways that public understanding of the past is socially constructed, and often connected to competing interpretations of physical places. The collection contains both theoretical essays and several case studies. While public history educators may find the entire collection useful for helping students to understand popular attitudes toward the past, there are several essays that detail public history controversies that may be particularly well suited to generating classroom discussions. The second essay about the changing meanings of an anti-war monument erected after World War One in the community of Orange, Massachusetts is particularly valuable for showing how the meanings of sites and memorials may be interpreted and appropriated by new groups and causes over time.

Greenspan, Anders. *Creating Colonial Williamsburg*. 2nd Edition. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009.

A historical study of the creation and historical development of Colonial Williamsburg that emphasizes the role taken by the Rockefeller family in promoting the democratic virtues of eighteenth century Williamsburg while largely ignoring the issues of slavery and class divisions within colonial Virginia's capital. Greenspan effectively demonstrates how the interpretation of Virginia has changed over time to reflect both financial concerns of operating the site and new approaches to both tourism and historical scholarship. Less provocative than Handler and Gabler's *Creating the Past*, it nevertheless provides a useful work for studying the development of one of the nation's most influential historical sites.

Henderson, Amy. *Exhibiting Dilemmas: Issues of Representation at the Smithsonian*. Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Books, 1999.

A collection of essays presenting the perspective of multiple curators offering viewpoints on how interpret challenging topics and materials. The book provides wonderful case studies ready-made for engaging students in discussions of interpretative strategies.

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."

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 implications of their scholarship and advocacy (particularly as paid consultants) on contemporary Indian topics.

Kohn, Richard. "History and the Culture Wars: The Case of the Smithsonian Institution's *Enola Gay* Exhibit." *Journal of American History* 82 (December 1995): 1036-1063.

A concise, highly readable, and clear overview of the controversy that erupted surrounding the planned exhibit of the *Enola Gay* at the Smithsonian's National Air and Space Museum on the 50th anniversary of the end of World War Two. This piece explains the competing historical and political interests and perspectives that transformed an exhibit on the end of World War II into the quintessential public history controversy. Kohn is critical of the original exhibit concept, but is relatively balanced in explaining the basis of his concerns. An edited version of Kohn's essay appears in Edward Linenthal's *History Wars: The Enola Gay and Other Battles for the American Past*.

Linenthal, Edward. *Sacred Ground: Americans and their Battlefields*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993.

Linenthal examines the changing interpretations and historical meanings at five battlefields: Lexington and Concord, the Alamo, Gettysburg, Little Big Horn, and Pearl Harbor. The book seeks to examine what happened to each site after the battle was over and how the meaning of each battle has changed over time. A useful study for exploring the uses and abuses of historical memory and the struggles that have occurred to interpret and define these sites of conflict in American history. The study is particularly useful for showing how the work of academic historians has led to new interpretations of sites, such as the Little Big Horn. Because chapters often echo similar themes, public history educators may find it useful to assign individual chapters rather than the entire work.

Linenthal, Edward and Tom Engelhardt. *History Wars: The Enola Gay and Other Battles for the American Past*. New York: Holt Paperbacks, 1996.

Eight historians provide essays on the controversy that erupted at the Smithsonian's National Air and Space museum over the exhibiting of the Enola Gay, the B-29 Bomber that dropped the atomic bomb on Hiroshima the end of World War Two. Written soon after the controversy, the work captures the intensity of the emotions that surfaced in the mid-1990s. The essays provide a range of viewpoints (though most are critical that opposition led to the cancellation of the original exhibit concept), and several could be used on their own, such as Paul Boyer's "Whose History is it Anyway: Memory, Politics, and Historical Scholarship." The essay by Richard Kohn, Former Air Force Historian, "History at Risk: The Case of the Enola Gay," provides a fine overview of the exhibit that skillfully examines the different perspectives and interests at stake in the exhibit (though he is critical of the original exhibit concept). That article was printed in a fuller form in *Journal of American History*, and that article also serves as a useful source for studying the controversy (see entry above).

Lonetree, Amy and Amanda J. Cobb, eds. *The National Museum of the American Indian: Critical Conversations*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2008.

This collection provides a discussion of the issues raised by the creation of the National Museum of the American Indian, the first national museum designed through a unique collaboration between indigenous people and the Smithsonian Institution. The seventeen essays in this collection provide a wide array of perspectives, and individual essays could be assigned in place of the complete collection, such as Aldona Jonaitis and Janet Catherine Berlo, "'Indian Country' on the National Mall: The Mainstream Press versus the National Museum of the American Indian." Individual essays might also be paired with selections from "Review Roundtable: The National Museum of the American Indian" featured in *The Public Historian*, Vol. 28 (Spring 2006), pp. 47-90; or such provocative pieces as Jacki Thompson Rand's "Why I Can't Visit the National Museum of the American Indian," *Common-place* 7, No. 4 (July 2007).

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 the 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 then 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.

Nash, Gary, Charlotte Crabtree, and Ross Dunn. *History on Trial: Culture Wars and the Teaching of the Past*. New York: Vintage Books, 2000.

The attempt by the National Endowment for the Humanities to create a set of National History Standards in the early 1990s led to an extraordinary clash between academic historians and conservative commentators and politicians who aggressively attacked the standards even before they became public. Nash, Crabtree, and Dunn, all of whom helped to develop the proposed history standards, describe their process and goals in developing a set of national standards, and also what they viewed as the politicization and misrepresentation of their work that occurred as part of the larger "culture wars" of the 1990s. A very useful work for that raises questions about what Americans should know about history, how history should be taught, and the different understanding of history held by academic historians and the public.

Nash, Gary. *First City: Philadelphia and the Forging of Historical Memory*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001.

Nash seeks to explore how the rich and diverse history of Philadelphia has been preserved and interpreted to the public, with special insights into the traditional narrative has made way for a more complex history that includes more fully the story of racial minorities, working class residents, and women. Nash effectively describes the intensely political process that has determined what will be preserved, and what aspects of the city's complex history will be interpreted to the public.

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 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 11th 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).

Savage, Kirk. *Monument Wars: Washington, D.C., the National Mall, and the Transformation of the Memorial Landscape*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009.

Architectural historian Kirk Savage provides a historical overview of both the changing style of historical monuments as well as the political forces and historical memory those monuments have embodied across time as various interest groups have sought representation on the National Mall. Savage's book effectively connects the history of the monuments to the history of Washington—noting the way that the city's sense of itself as well as its role as a tourist destination interconnected with its profusion of monuments. Savage effectively brings to light the fierce debates that surrounded the creation of some of the mall's most popular monuments—including the Lincoln, Jefferson, and Vietnam Veteran's memorials. Savage examines how the competing forces of planning, politics, and design shaped the commemorative landscape of the nation's capital.

Tyrrell, Ian. *Historians in Public: The Practice of American History, 1890-1970*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005.

This history of the history profession's efforts to reach larger public over the course of the twentieth century raises important issues about the efforts of historians to influence the public through such venues as public school curricula, mass media, government programs, and the national parks. Not only does this book put the contemporary efforts of public historians into historical context and detail a century of experimentation and controversy, but it raises provocative questions about the most effective way for historians to have an impact on American society.

Wallace, Mike. *Mickey Mouse History and Other Essays on American Memory*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996.

This collection of essays, many of which Wallace wrote in the 1980s and 1990s for the *Radical History Review*, offers perspectives on a wide array of topics including urban history museums, museums of science and technology, the presentation of history at Colonial Williamsburg, a history of the historic preservation movement in the United States, the Enola Gay controversy,

and the Disney Corporation's uses of history in its theme parks and its failed effort to create an American history theme park. This work is useful for gaining insights into some of the major controversies facing public historians at the end of the twentieth century. Wallace expresses a strong liberal viewpoint and is often highly critical of choices made by institutions and corporation—and especially the policies of Ronald Reagan—making it useful for sparking classroom discussions about the state of public history in the 1980s and 1990s. Some of the essays are period pieces, so public history educators might want to assign individual essays rather than the entire collection.

Weyeneth, Robert R. "History, He Wrote: Murder, Politics, and the Challenges of Public History in a Community with a Secret." *The Public Historian* 16 (Spring 1994): 51-73.

Weyeneth details his discovery that the community of Centralia, Washington, intentionally sought to obfuscate the public memory of a major labor history event that occurred in the town—the Centralia Massacre of 1919. He then discusses his efforts to bring the hidden history into view through the process of nominating historic sites connected with the events to the National Register of Historic Places. An intriguing study that suggests the power that public historians hold for helping communities address difficult issues in their past.

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.