


RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Birth and the Unanticipated Evolution of the Public History Movement

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Abstract

The public history movement in North America that was born amid the academic job crisis of the late 1970s aspired to a radical reformation of professional history's audience from an inward focused conversation among professionals to one working with government and corporate institutions and in dialogue with the public. This essay focuses on the institutional evolution of the National Council on Public History (NCPH) to illustrate the unexpected, but not entirely unpropitious outcome that flowed from the failure of the organization's original goals. How that movement failed and what it succeeded in creating may hold useful lessons for the contemporary public humanities campaign. In the late twentieth century, the public history movement failed to bring about a major reorientation of professional and academic history. In the attempt, however, it created an off shot of public history as one of a number of new but distinctly separate fields of academic historical practice. Unexpectedly, public history became a new academic specialty alongside other new fields from that era: native American history, environmental history, and gender history.

Keywords: public history; government; consulting; profession; applied; scholarship

For nearly a half century a small facet of the historical profession has explored the opportunities and implications of practicing scholarship for and with the public. Today public history is a recognized field of practice in the private sector and in universities in the Americas, Europe, Asia, and Australia. The National Council on Public History is a vibrant membership organization that represents North American practitioners, while the International Federation For Public History boasts members from every continent save Antarctica. On one level, these organizations, the journals they publish and the discussion boards they host as well as nearly one hundred university public history programs in the United States all are proof of the success of public history. This essay is a reflection on the late twentieth-century development of a public history movement through the lens of an organization critical in the field's development, the National Council on Public History (NCPH) by someone who was involved at its beginning. Hence, some of my observations may be colored by the vagaries of personal memory. Despite the obvious success of public history, it is important to recall that the movement has become something very different than many of its founders envisioned. The lesson for public humanities that emerges from the evolution of public history is, as Heraclitus observed centuries ago, to expect the unexpected.

In the fall of 1978 G. Wesley Johnson announced, “the birth of a new field of history.” Writing in the inaugural issue of the journal *The Public Historian*, Johnson contrasted this new field with traditional scholarship focused on an academic dialogue among professionals of like background, to the public historian who would be oriented to engagement “outside of the academy.” Johnson recognized that in late twentieth-century America, “a new type of professional person is needed, the Public Historian.” Two years before Robert Kelly, Johnson’s colleague at the University of California, Santa Barbara had coined the term public history to describe a new graduate program designed to train young historians to do history outside the university. Kelly was a historian of American water policy who had experience in applying his expertise to the frequent litigation over water rights that occurred in Western America. At the same time, on the other side of the country, two distinguished historians Peter Sterns and Joel Tar at Pittsburgh’s Carnegie-Mellon University created a PhD program in “applied history and social science.” Like Kelly in-California what they envisioned was producing professionals who would apply in-depth historical knowledge to a host of public policy issues.¹

While Wesley Johnson referred to public history as a “new field” of history many others saw something bigger afoot. Two trends in the 1970s United States combined to catapult public history onto the national stage. One was the academic job crisis that emerged in the mid-1970s that for the first time since the end of World War II left large numbers of history PhDs without tenure-track teaching positions. This was a crisis exasperated by the unwillingness of elite graduate programs to reduce the size of their programs resulting in an ever-growing surplus of newly minted scholars stranded on the shoals of a shrinking job market. Robert Kelly’s public history was one response to this situation. The other trend was post-Vietnam America’s crisis of confidence in government and institutions. This was something Wesley Johnson picked up on in the first issue of *The Public Historian*. A divided and dispirited nation was “sending signals to the historical profession, asking for help.” Yet, the bulk of the historical profession had “retreated into the proverbial ivory tower.” His critique of historians was equally as valid for scholars in the humanities and social sciences.²

Critical support for public history in its infancy came from other historians who were already doing policy history, including scholars employed by the U.S. State Department, the Department of Agriculture, and the Department of Energy. These programs had roots in the so-called progressive movement of the early twentieth century. At that time bourgeois reformers sought to render government more efficient by harnessing professional expertise. A handful of historians, most notably Benjamin Shambaugh at the State Historical Society of Iowa conducted historical studies of contemporary problems from tax policy to road construction. Shambaugh labeled this work “applied history,” which he defined in the positivist language of the era as “the use of the scientific knowledge of history and experience in efforts to solve present problems of human betterment.” In addition to historians working in governmental agencies, the early movement also included historians working in major corporate settings such as Coca Cola, John Hancock Insurance, Cities Service Company, the New York Stock Exchange, and Wells Fargo Bank.³

¹ Johnson 1978; To be fair both Johnson and Kelly foresaw a need for historians to be involved in community heritage activities, but working with public and private agencies was emphasis at the beginning; Stearns and Tarr 1981.

² Johnson 1978.

³ Schambaugh 1916, v, also see Conard 2013; for Lists of Early NCPH Board Members n.d. An influential article at this time was Smith and Steadman 1981. The 1982 NCPH meeting in Chicago featured a special program titled “Corporate History: The Future of the Past.”

The “job crisis” of the 1970s brought together historians who were already doing policy history with academic historians who saw a future in publicly oriented scholarship. Thus, a vision of creating something bigger than simply a new field of history was born. As early as 1977 people began to use the phrase “public history movement.” In 1980 the decision was made to create a new organization dedicated to reforming the practice of professional history. On the table was the issue of what to call a reformed approach to history. At this point, what both the folks in Santa Barbara and Pittsburgh as well as the federal bureau historians were doing was essentially a reprise of Shambaugh’s applied history. Applied history was the term that was preferred by the Carnegie-Mellon historians while Kelly and Johnson were committed to the term they had coined, “public history.” A meeting of like-minded historians was called in Washington, DC to file articles of incorporation for a new organization. The term “public history” won over “applied history” when a plane delay meant the Carnegie-Mellon historians arrived after the name of the National Council on Public History (NCPH) had been decided upon. The difference between applied and public would later prove formative.⁴

The aspirations of the founders of the NCPH are revealed in the name they chose. They created a “national council” because they did not see the need for a discrete “public history society.” Rather they planned to bring together representatives of various historical interest groups and through engagement spread the gospel of what they thought of as the “public history movement.” In that sense, the triumph of the term public history over applied history suggested broader aspirations. A publicly engaged history would be in stark contrast to the inside academe conversation that had become the rule among university-based scholars. As opposed to the readily grasped term “applied history,” public history was—as would later become apparent, in the words of Paul Ashton—“elastic,” capable of being “stretched over almost anything.” The National Council on Public History was founded specifically not be a membership organization like the Western History Association or the Southern History Association, but instead as a vehicle to spread a gospel of reform.⁵

Alas, a broad reformation never occurred. The founding of NCPH amid a job crisis resulted in an early emphasis on careers for historians and a focus on supporting the establishment of a new model of graduate programs. In this sense, the practical won out over the theoretical. Eventually, public history graduate programs spread across the USA and into Canada so that by 2023 there were eighty-six operating on the MA level and a handful offering PhDs. They were viewed as the “answer” to the job crisis and were left to the management of one or two faculty hired to staff that program, leaving the remainder of the department to pursue their traditional bliss. This led to two developments largely unanticipated by most of the founders of NCPH. First, the academic programs that were founded in the 1980s and 1990s did not follow the policy model originally envisioned by Robert Kelly. The Master of Arts programs could not develop the depth of specific knowledge required to be a policy expert. What they could do is develop a suite of skills that could be applied in museums, archives, and historic preservation. These fields of practice were all but neglected by public history’s founders although they were rapidly developing in the wake of the 1976 Bicentennial of the U.S. This sparked the evolution of a new curriculum very different in both style and content from traditional history graduate programs. Second, the National Council gradually forsook its

⁴ Howe 1989. There are many other strands of publicly oriented history that influence the field today but did not play a role in the creation of NCPH. These include the large number of institutions represented by the American Association for State and Local History and the pioneers of social justice history who contributed to the *Radical History Review*. For more on this, see Meringolo 2021.

⁵ Ashton 2023.

mission to be a unifying “council” that would influence professional practice across the country. Despite goodwill expressed by leaders of the American Historical Association and the National Endowment for the Humanities, academic historians were by and large uninterested in engagement outside the university. Far from sparking a reformation of historical practice, four decades after the creation of NCPH few elite university history programs seriously engaged with the field. By default, the NCPH evolved into what it never intended to be – a membership organization serving the interests of the heritage-oriented graduate programs and the students they produced. Policy-oriented history was never completely abandoned, but it was a decidedly fringe element in NCPH.⁶

Another unexpected evolution in the career of public history emerged in the 1990s and has continued into the present, audience-centered practice. When the term public history was first coined the founders of the field emphasized the need to create “a new class of professionals, the Public Historian.” However, as the field developed, its basic concepts increasingly placed the accent on the “public” rather than the “professional.” A “shared authority” between the historian and their audience represented an altered dynamic from the top-down academic model as well as that of the policy historian working within a bureaucratic structure. Historian Na Li perfectly characterized the contemporary approach in her preface to the Chinese language journal *Public History*: “I define public history as an audience-centered historical practice, that focuses on the issues and demands of the public in the contemporary world. In public history, historians work with the public to build the past into history.”⁷

The original aspiration of public history’s founders was to produce policy experts who would work at the elbow of public officials and corporate leaders. A half-century later public history is defined as an audience-centered practice with the public historian adopting the more democratic role of a facilitator. This evolution reflects where individuals trained in public history have developed their careers. Museums, historic sites, and organizations committed to the preservation of material culture and written and oral records thrive through cooperative engagement with the community. Public history today is a vibrant participatory field and through its dynamic relationship with the public—it will continue to evolve.

What does this brief review of the National Council on Public History’s evolution suggest about the burgeoning interest in the broader movement of public humanities? Certainly, there is a common point of origin in a “job crisis.” The last two decades have rocked all humanities departments as students are directed toward “practical” and what are perceived to be economically rewarding fields of study. As universities redeploy faculty assets to business and science there are fewer and fewer jobs for the graduates from even what had been the most prestigious PhD programs. If humanities departments are attracted to public engagement to save graduate programs, they will need a new curriculum oriented to existing or emerging workplaces. If on the other hand, public humanities is a movement

⁶ An indication of the early orientation of the NCPH was the publication by Trask and Pomeroy III 1983. This was an attempt to define the field. It included chapters on history and business, historical editing, Policy History, and Media History. History museums, which eventually became the most important field of public history was not even included in the original plan for the volume. It is also worth noting that the American Association for State and Local History which then as now represents local history museums and societies was conspicuous by its absence from early discussions of public history. “Guide to Public History Graduate Programs” n.d.

⁷ Johnson 1978, 5; An important influence in the developed of public history theory in the 1990s Frisch 1990; Li 2024.

that envisions a new relationship between the scholar and the community, will it be embraced and supported enough by traditionally structured departments to truly flourish? Of course, public history's evolution also suggests that public humanities will develop in unexpected ways. To paraphrase old Heraclitus again, perhaps, that is what we should expect.⁸

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⁸ For other sources on the evolution of public history, see Conard 2015; Meringolo 2012; Cauvin 2016, 2018.

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