

CHAPTER ONE

Complicating Origin Stories: The Making of Public History into an Academic Field in the United States¹

REBECCA CONARD

What's in a name?

In the inaugural issue of *The Public Historian*, the late Robert Kelley, who coined the term “public history,” offered a brief account of “Its Origins, Nature, and Prospects” (1978). Actually, he skirted the matter of origins, as if this were obvious, and opened with a straightforward definition of public history as “the employment of historians and the historical method outside academia” (Kelley 1978: 16). The phrase “and the historical method” soon disappeared from what became the fallback definition of public history in the United States, but Kelley had a more complex idea in mind when he and Wesley Johnson conceived the idea of a graduate program in Public Historical Studies at UC Santa Barbara (UCSB). In venues “outside academia,” public historians would “work in the decision-making process as *historians* [emphasis his], bringing their particular method of analysis and explanation to bear upon points at issue, just as public administrators, economists ... and other professionals have brought their expertise into policy making.” As a corollary, public history would “have the result of greatly expanding professional employment for historians,” which was a real concern in the 1970s, when the academic job market for history PhDs contracted (Kelley 1978: 20).

Forty years later, Wesley Johnson, reflecting on the early history of the National Council on Public History, expanded on the nature of the new academic field that he and Kelley conceptualized. Their vision – which might be described as one-third public intellectual, one-third public policy specialist, and one-third community historian or oral historian – was born from their particular experiences as historians. As a graduate student at Harvard and then Columbia, Johnson had studied under luminaries such as William Yandell Elliott and Zbigniew Brzezinski, brilliant scholars who served as advisers to presidents and high government officials. Quite understandably, they became role models for him. The idea that one could become a public intellectual was reinforced during the 18 months he spent in Paris conducting research in French archives for his

dissertation. There, the daily press exposed him to “the many people ... who wrote for *Le Monde* and ... various magazines and newspapers who were public intellectuals. Maybe they were technically a historian, a political scientist, an economist, a gadfly who was bright. ‘Public intellectual’ was in view, and that’s what I had in my life” (Johnson 2015, interview: 12). After joining the UCSB faculty in 1972, Johnson secured a large grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) for a community and oral history project with the City of Phoenix, Arizona. This project, he states, “was very fortuitous because that’s where my public history career started.” Robert Kelley’s route to public history was quite different. After publishing *Gold Versus Grain: The Hydraulic Mining Controversy in California’s Sacramento Valley* (1959), Kelley found that he was in demand as an expert witness in water litigation cases. After awhile, “he then began teaching some of his students about how history, historian[s], could be helpful to the law in litigation as expert witnesses ... and so Bob got the idea ... [for] some kind of program in public history” (Johnson 2015, interview: 17–18).

This tripartite vision was the foundation for the UCSB program that began training master’s and doctoral students in fall 1976. The invited participants who assembled in Montecito, California, for the First National Symposium on Public History in 1979 also reflected this vision. Fully half of them held academic positions but also were involved in some activity to reach wider, nonacademic audiences. The other half represented an impressive array of doctorate-holding historians who worked in the business and corporate world, in federal or state agencies, for historical organizations, for professional organizations, for philanthropic foundations, or as consultants. A few managed large oral history projects. Many held administrative positions with considerable responsibility and authority (First National Symposium on Public History 1979: 73–81).

Missing from this assembly were the leaders of four well-established professional organizations that represented an even wider world of historical enterprise: the American Association (now Alliance) of Museums, founded in 1906 (AAM), the Society of American Archivists (SAA, 1936), the American Association for State and Local History (AASLH, 1940), and the National Trust for Historic Preservation (NTHP, 1949). Nor were they invited to a follow-up meeting in Washington, DC, where a steering committee laid plans to form the National Council on Public History. Johnson (2015, interview: 44) explains that “we were very insistent ... on creating something new,” meaning a new field of history, firmly based in the methods of historical research and analysis, and not just promoting alternative careers for historians who could not find academic positions. Even so, it was an omission that soon revealed a deep divide between academicians and the world of historical practice in nonacademic settings. On the one hand, many academic historians dismissed public history as a fad or a fool’s errand. On the other, professional organizations were already involved in graduate-level training for professional work in museums, archives, government agencies, and other organizations engaged in history-based activities. As a result, the upstart public history movement was greeted with irritation, even hostility, among academics and professional practitioners alike.²

This essay aims to complicate the origin story, although it does not purport to be “the” history of public history, which would require a more sweeping inquiry. Among other things, I ignore the long tradition of historians who have served as public intellectuals as well as the historians who entered government service. Nor do I address the legions of amateur historians who have participated in the processes of history making since time immemorial. Rather, the aim is a more complete understanding of public history as an academic field, albeit one for which a clear definition is still elusive. Thus,

this essay sketches the role of professional organizations in shaping graduate training. It also addresses a competing concept of public history as people's history, which challenged the notion that public history was simply nonacademic history. As a corollary, I consider the ways in which scholars working in new social history – and other disciplines – helped shape public history into an academic field. The ultimate goal is a better understanding of why public history, which was variously contested and dismissed in the crucial period of the mid-1970s to mid-1980s, nonetheless had the power to coalesce a disparate aggregation of historians into a movement that could sustain a new scholarly journal, a new professional association, and, ultimately, a new academic field.

The early landscape of professional training

Historians were key players in founding three of the four professional associations named above – SAA, AASLH, and NTHP – and continued to play leadership roles for many decades. Although historians were not involved in AAM's founding, eventually they joined the fold and assumed leadership positions in that organization, too. Importantly, because advanced degrees were considered essential, or at least desirable, for managing larger archives, museums, and historical organizations, professional associations monitored, nurtured, and then sought to order graduate training for professional practice.

Professional training for museum work came first. Between 1910 and 1940, several museums initiated in-house training programs and apprenticeships, and a few universities began to offer courses in museum methods. These early course offerings and programs were allied with the disciplines of natural history, art, and art history, reflecting the way museums professionalized along disciplinary lines (Coleman 1939; Teather 1991).³ Even though the vast majority of museums in the United States were (and still are) history museums, training programs did not begin to address the needs of history museums until the late 1940s. From 1949 into the 1950s, the National Park Service (NPS) ran in-service training course in museum methods, both curatorial and interpretive, for its growing inventory of history and natural history museums (*NCHSB Quarterly Report* March 1950; Lewis October 1941). In 1948, the New York State Historical Association (NYSHA) began offering summer seminars on American social history and folk culture for museum interpretation and the restoration of historic buildings (*NCHSB Quarterly Report* March 1949). As museum-training programs proliferated, AAM took stock and in 1965 published a 30-page booklet on *Museum Training Courses in the United States and Canada*. At that time, only the Winterthur program at the University of Delaware and the Cooperstown Graduate Program in Museum Studies at the State University of New York, Oneonta, offered museum training that specifically addressed the needs of historic house museums and historic sites.

The SAA began to lay the groundwork for professional education immediately after it organized in 1936. A committee established to examine the training of archivists recommended an approach that privileged history. Having borrowed archival theory from European sources, American historian-archivists also sought to model training programs after European practices, with administrators and managers “recruited from the level of training required for the degree of doctor of philosophy in American history.” But librarians also exerted influence in the professionalization process, which the committee back-handedly acknowledged by recommending training for a second class of archivists – those who wanted to prepare for jobs in business or local archives – at a level “equal to that of the Master's degree in the social sciences, with a support in library technique” (Bemis 1939: 157–159).

During the next three decades, archival education emerged with one foot planted in history and the other in librarianship. The early landscape included a mix of short courses, summer institutes, and graduate programs. The latter included a collaborative program between the National Archives and American University, which began in 1939, and another collaborative undertaking, launched in 1952, between the Colorado State Archives and the University of Denver's School of Librarianship and Department of History. In a slightly different vein, Philip Mason, Director of the Labor History Archives at Wayne State University, teamed up with the History Department in the early 1960s to create an archival administration specialization for the master's degree (Jones 1968). By the late 1960s, four universities were offering graduate programs in archival administration, while ten others were offering short courses or summer institutes.⁴

Professional training for work in historic preservation has a shorter history. In 1949, American University, in cooperation with the NPS and Colonial Williamsburg (CW), began offering an intensive summer Institute in the Preservation and Interpretation of Historic Sites and Buildings. It was hailed as "the only special course now being offered in this country" (*NCHSB Quarterly Report* March 1949; December 1949; December 1950). In 1962, when historical architect Charles Peterson retired from the NPS – after directing the Historic American Building Survey for nearly 30 years – he took his expertise to Columbia University. There, he worked with the School of Architecture to develop the first graduate program in historic preservation, anchored in architectural design, not history (Peterson 1982, interview: 20–22).

By the early 1960s, graduate education for professional work in institutions that preserved, managed, and interpreted history had begun to gain traction. Interdisciplinary and collaborative ventures characterized the advance guard. The most ambitious initiative was the Seminar in Historical Administration, which warrants special attention because it involved three of the four professional associations, and it persists to the present day.

The seminar in historical administration

Shortly after New Year's Day in 1957, historian Edward P. Alexander, then vice president and director of interpretation at CW, sat down and drafted a proposal for an eight-week "historical preservation seminar," which he shared with a few staff members and close academic colleagues, including historian Richard McCormick of Rutgers University. "We were all a little worried in the historical agency field," he later recalled, "because so many poorly trained people were going into historical society and museum work." While waiting for replies to his letters, he had lunch with Richard Howland, president of the NTHP, to discuss "setting up this Seminar on a cooperative basis." Anxious to secure the approval if not cooperation of leading universities, because he envisioned a dozen or so hand-selected doctoral students taking this seminar, Alexander also met personally with Wesley Frank Craven of Princeton and Oscar Handlin of Harvard (Alexander memoranda 1957, 11 January and 4 February; Alexander 1985 interview: 131–137).

As a result of these early discussions, Alexander revised the "historical preservation seminar" into a more formal proposal for a "historical interpretation seminar." He invited the AASLH to join as a third co-sponsor and solicited the cooperation of prominent scholars at "foremost" universities as a strategy for attracting "high-quality" graduate students. Citing the "magnitude of the movement to 'bring history to life' ... [at] state and local historical societies, the national historical parks, and the scores of restorations and 'outdoor museums' that are now interpreting our nation's history," Alexander's revised draft

proposal noted that, “there exist no formal programs for training the personnel required to staff these enterprises” (Alexander Memorandum 1957, 6 May; Alexander 1957, Training Interpreters of America’s Heritage). Backing up his assertion was a 1956 report by the AASLH Committee on Attracting Competent Personnel, which called for “training college people in the work of historical agencies as a means of meeting the increasing demand.” If historical institutions were to “retain their integrity,” the proposal intoned, “they must rest on a solid foundation of authenticity,” and it was up to historians, both scholars and practitioners, “to assure an adequate supply of personnel equipped with both sound scholarly training and an understanding of the problems, techniques, and potentialities of presenting history through other media than the book and the lecture” (AASLH 1956, “Attracting Competent Personnel in the Field of Local History”).

For a variety of reasons, the planned launch was delayed until summer 1959. This gave Alexander, Howland, and McCormick time to work on content and logistics with William Murtagh, Howland’s assistant at the NTHP who was tapped to serve as seminar coordinator. During this period, the seminar focus shifted again; by September 1958, the planners were calling it a “seminar for historical administrators” (Colonial Williamsburg 1958, Revised Minutes March 13, Minutes September 4). The inaugural six-week seminar took place at CW from June to July 1959, with 17 graduate students from several prestigious universities. Coursework addressed the philosophy of historical interpretation; evaluation and analysis of historic resources for restoration and reconstruction; planning and development of interpretive programs; interacting with the public; and the basic components of administration: management, finance, public relations, and membership. Participants spent mornings in classroom sessions and devoted afternoons to “laboratory work” at CW or nearby historic sites. Faculty members, primarily professionals from the NTHP, AASLH, CW, and several historic sites and historical organizations, represented state-of-the-art historic site preservation, interpretation, and administration as of the mid-1950s (Colonial Williamsburg 1959, Tentative Schedule and Press Release; 1959 *Colonial Williamsburg News*).

In 1960, AASLH joined CW and the NTHP as a financial partner and co-sponsor. The timing was important for AASLH, which had grown rapidly in the late 1950s and was beginning to assert authority in the disorderly world of state and local historical agencies. As a case in point, in 1956 president Christopher Crittenden called for long-range planning and the development of new initiatives. Raising the standards for preserving and producing local history and creating professional jobs for college graduates emerged as high priorities of the council, which consisted largely of men who held graduate degrees in history. It is worth noting, then, that the AASLH council voted to become a Seminar in Historical Administration (SHA) co-sponsor as part of its policy “to recruit new talent to this field” (AASLH Annual Report 1960).

In 1962, the American Association of Museums joined as the fourth financial partner and co-sponsor, and the seminar title settled into the “Seminar for Historical Administration.” A circa 1980 status check of SHA’s effectiveness tallied a total of 388 graduates through 1979, with 245 of them deemed to be in professional positions in “the field” (Colonial Williamsburg circa 1980). The figures revealed a success rate of more than 60%. However, in about 1975, the SHA stopped recruiting graduate students because more universities were starting museum studies programs and, in Alexander’s words, there were “plenty of well-trained young students coming into the field” (1985, interview: 135). Thus, the SHA switched to training young professionals, which, in turn, boosted its success rate. Even so, by this time, the SHA had established a reputation as a

prestigious program. Today, well past its golden anniversary, the SHA continues to provide professional training for the administration of public history institutions.⁵

The AASLH education program, 1967 – circa 1985

Co-sponsoring the SHA was just AASLH's first foray into professional education. In 1961, the AASLH council, well satisfied with the SHA model, discussed the feasibility of establishing a second summer program but concluded that the demand was not yet sufficient (AASLH 1961, Minutes 29 August). Four years later, a way forward opened when Congress passed the National Foundation on the Arts and the Humanities Act of 1965, which has been called "the most ambitious piece of cultural legislation in American history" (Zainaldin 2013: 30). The act marked the advent of federal funding to support research, education, preservation, and public programs in the humanities and cultural arts. AASLH was quick to see the fit, and in 1967 received two grants from the new agency charged with disbursing federal grants in the humanities: the NEH. One grant funded a statistical profile of American historical societies, and a second, larger grant underwrote two, two-week regional seminars for historical administrators and a one-week institute on historical publications (AASLH Annual Report 1967). AASLH received two more NEH grants in 1968, which enabled it to finish its analysis of more than 3,000 historical societies, offer a second institute on historical publications, a third regional seminar on historical administration, and, in cooperation with the NPS, two new seminars: "Historical Museum Exhibit Design Techniques" and "Administration of Historical Properties." With additional NEH funding in 1969 and 1970, AASLH began to build a professional education program that soon dwarfed the SHA at CW, although AASLH continued to co-sponsor it. But, whereas the SHA recruited graduate students, at least until the mid-1970s, AASLH seminars targeted directors of small historical organizations and new professional staff members at larger institutions. By the end of 1970, NEH funding had enabled AASLH "to provide professional training to nearly 300 people actively engaged in historical agency work" (AASLH Annual Reports 1967, 1968, 1970).

For the next decade, federal grants enabled AASLH to expand the range of seminar topics and extend benefits to all members. In 1970, for instance, AASLH began to transcribe and edit selected seminar presentations for publication as technical leaflets or bulletins. In 1972, two-day workshops were added, designed to bring volunteers and paid staff members together to work on more effective programming and interpretation. Beginning in 1977, NEH also supported the development of independent study courses for professionals who could not take time from work to pursue college coursework. NEH also supported the AASLH Bicentennial State History (Book) Series, an ambitious multiyear project to publish scholarly but "well-written" brief histories of all 50 states, and the *American Issues Forum* (1976), a series of essays published in the bicentennial year, each written by a "distinguished American historian." AASLH also tapped federal funding available under the National Museum Act (1966), administered by the Smithsonian Institution, to support specialized seminars for managers and administrators of larger organizations, consultant services to small museums, and the creation of audiovisual training materials. Grants from the National Endowment for the Arts and the National Historical Publications and Records Commission helped AASLH expand its publications program. With funding through the Department of the Interior, AASLH collaborated with the NPS to research and prepare reports on potential National Historic

Landmarks. The steady flow of federal funds was not the only thing driving AASLH's growth and momentum during the 1970s – which grew from about 3,500 members in 1970 to nearly 7,000 in 1980 – but by 1975 federal funding supplied more than half of the organization's annual million-dollar budget, and the staff had swelled to a peak of 32 full-time employees (AASLH Annual Reports, 1971–1980).

During president Ronald Reagan's administration (1981–1989), severe budget cuts began to undermine AASLH's educational program. Consequently, AASLH began transitioning to self-supporting seminars and workshops and stepped up its efforts to secure grants from private philanthropic sources. Although AASLH continued to seek, and receive, substantial grants from NEH and other federal sources, which kept the education program strong through 1984, federal funding dropped by more than one-third in 1985. Coupled with other financial losses that hit in 1985, AASLH was forced to trim its staff from 30 to 23 and adopt other belt-tightening measures (AASLH Annual Reports 1981, 1982, 1983, 1986). Nevertheless, between 1967 and the early 1980s, federal grants enabled AASLH to build a comprehensive professional training program designed to raise the standards of practice and the level of professionalism at historical organizations across the nation.

Merging practice and scholarship

A few historians who pioneered careers in historical practice outside academia also sought ways, and perhaps felt an obligation, to incorporate professional education into graduate degree programs. Not only could institutions of higher learning provide more stability, but they were necessary in order to forge the link between scholarship and practice. Two of these pioneers deserve special mention: Edward P. Alexander and Frederick Rath. Their careers suggest the professional and interpersonal dynamics that were in play from the 1930s through the 1970s as practicing historians outside academia sought ways to influence graduate education in American universities.

Edward Alexander spent nearly his entire career in historical administration, and from the beginning he sought to infuse practice with scholarship. In large part, this was because he received his PhD from Columbia University, where he studied under Dixon Ryan Fox, a leader in the emerging field of social history. Fox is best known for co-editing the 13-volume *History of American Life* series (1928–1943) with Arthur Schlesinger, another prominent social historian, and for serving as president of NYSHA from 1929 until his death in 1945. When historian Julian Boyd resigned as the director of NYSHA in 1934, Alexander was just finishing at Columbia. Fox persuaded Alexander to take Boyd's place. That easily, in the depths of the Great Depression, Alexander's career was launched. He stayed at NYSHA until 1942, during which time he oversaw development of the Farmer's Museum at Cooperstown, then became director of the prestigious Wisconsin State Historical Society. His tenure at Wisconsin was short, however, because in 1945 CW began pursuing him to direct a new division of education. John D. Rockefeller III, CW's benefactor, "thought enough had been done with architecture and authenticity ... and he wanted to see more historical interpretation" in the restored colonial village (Alexander 1985, interview: 3–8). From 1946 until 1972, Alexander built education and interpretive programs that were based in scholarly research, admired by many but, with the advent of "new" social history, increasingly criticized by others because CW adhered to the conventions of segregation in the South and marginalized the history of free and enslaved African Americans in colonial Virginia. Even so,

Alexander's stature as a historical administrator made him an influential figure in professional organizations. In addition to initiating the Seminar in Historical Administration, he was a co-founder and one-time president of AASLH, reorganized the American Association of Museums during his presidency of that organization (1957–1960), and helped organize the Virginia Historic Landmarks Commission in 1966. When Alexander retired from CW in 1972, he took his vast experience to the University of Delaware where, as the first Director of Museum Studies, he melded existing training programs in curating material culture and managing historic gardens into an interdisciplinary graduate certificate program in museum studies (Alexander 1981, interview: 41–42). In subsequent years, AASLH published his *Museums in Motion* (1979) and *Museum Masters* (1983), books that became classics in the field.

Frederick Rath, Jr. (ABD, Brown University) also spent his career forging practice and scholarship. He was among the many historians who found employment with the NPS during the 1930s, when federal work-relief spending enabled the NPS to establish a commanding presence in historic preservation and the interpretation of historic sites and house museums. Rath proved his credentials working on a number of high-profile NPS projects, so much so that NPS Chief Historian Ronald Lee tapped him to coordinate the work of the National Council for Historic Sites and Buildings, formed in 1947 under the auspices of the NPS as part of a larger public-private effort to mobilize a nationwide historic preservation movement. After Congress passed legislation in 1949 authorizing the creation of the NTHP (modeled after the British National Trust), Lee paved the way for Rath to become the NTHP's first executive director. In these back-to-back positions, Rath and Lee played key roles in transferring NPS professional standards for historic preservation, developed during the 1930s and 1940s, to the NTHP, which was to serve as the conduit for promulgating those standards to a nationwide network of preservation activists (National Council for Historic Sites and Buildings circa 1948; Rath 1988). At least that was the broad vision. Influential members of the NTHP, however, were not as wedded to history and research-based interpretation at historic sites.

While Rath was directing the NTHP, he established a fortuitous relationship with folklorist Louis Jones, director of the New York State Historical Association. In 1948, Jones began organizing summer seminars on the restoration and interpretation of historic buildings, which took place at NYSHA's headquarters in Cooperstown, and he sought assistance from the National Council on Historic Sites and Buildings (*NCHSB Quarterly Report* March 1949). Then, in 1952, Rath and Jones both began serving terms on the AASLH Council, which deepened their professional working relationship. As Rath tells the story, in 1954, shortly after he and his wife, Ann, returned from attending the third summer school on English Architecture, Art and Social History at Attingham Park, co-sponsored by the British National Trust and the Shropshire County Council, he bumped into Jones. The two struck up a conversation about the Cooperstown and Attingham Park summer programs. Before they parted, they "agreed ... that we would go to our respective boards and ask from each \$1,000, so that we could put together what turned out to be [the] first Historic House-keeping course," designed for curators and administrators of house museums. Rath subsequently left the NTHP to assist Jones in developing NYSHA's summer programs into the Cooperstown Graduate Program in Museum Studies, launched in 1964 and jointly administered by NYSHA and the State University of New York at Oneonta. The Cooperstown program initially focused on history museum administration and American folk culture so as not to cross into the territory of the Winterthur Program at Delaware, which was curatorial in focus. Jones and Rath

approached Oneonta, a small campus in the state system, as a partner institution because they “felt we could do it our way. And at that stage we didn’t want academicians telling us what our field was. ... [B]y this time, the middle ’60s, we were professionals, and we didn’t want the head of the history department telling us ... how to do it.” Rath stayed at Cooperstown until 1972, at which time he assumed the position of Deputy Commissioner for Historic Preservation with the New York State Office of Parks, Recreation, and Historic Preservation. In that post, he completed the circle by hiring “dozens” of Cooperstown graduates to fill positions at New York State historic sites: “they [we]re part of the new professional corps” (Rath 1982, interview: 45–72, 86–90; Rath 1975; Rath 1987; Rath 1996).

By 1970, the landscape of professional education for careers in history was dotted with a variety of programs. During the 1970s, the landscape became busier and more varied. Growth in the early 1970s can be attributed to gradually increasing awareness among universities that there were opportunities for professional education in the humanities. Growth in the latter 1970s can, in part, be attributed to UCSB’s bold assertion that public history was a new field of academic study. This assertion, coming from a respected research university launching a new graduate degree program with backing from two prestigious funders, NEH and the Rockefeller Foundation, conferred a measure of respectability on professional education. For the first time, not every PhD in history was expected to seek an academic job. Perhaps more important, professional careers in history did not necessarily require a doctorate.

Two surveys of colleges and universities offering some form of public history education – a 1978 survey conducted by the National Coordinating Committee for the Promotion of History (NCCPH) and a 1979 survey published under the auspices of *The Public Historian* – revealed more clearly the magnitude of what became known as the public history movement. The 1978 NCC survey, which canvassed more than 1,800 departments of history, identified 48 departments as being engaged in “curriculum change,” meaning that the information submitted “described a new course of study, whether as part of an already established program or as an entirely new degree” (Jones 1979). The 1979 survey captured more detailed information on 35 graduate programs and another 10 colleges and universities with undergraduate offerings. The titles of these programs – applied history, preservation studies, historical editing and publishing, historic resources management, historic preservation, historic preservation and historic site archaeology, folk studies and historic preservation, archival administration, archival studies and information management, library science and history, archival management and historical editing, archival and records management administration, museum studies, museology, museum and preservation studies, historical administration, historical services, history and political science, history and law, and business, industrial, and technological history – indicate not only the various professional career paths that were being gathered under the umbrella of public history as the decade closed, but also the extent to which universities were crossing disciplinary boundaries to make degree programs more responsive to the job market (Anonymous, Public History in the Academy 1979b).

The tremendous growth in degree programs, which continued until the mid-1980s, came during the 1970’s job crisis. AASLH, which also functioned as a sort of clearinghouse for job placement in historical agencies, noted, in 1973, that an “unfortunate employment situation ... coexists with the present surge in professional training.” That year brought a record number of job inquiries, 223, many of them “from people whose vocational goal is teaching rather than historical society work, but many others ... from

highly motivated young people with good seminar and college training.” In the following year, AASLH “aided institutions” in hiring employees for more than 100 positions, but the number of job inquiries rose to 375. Job prospects continued to decline through 1977, when approximately 1,100 individuals sent inquiries to AASLH seeking positions in a job market that remained essentially static. The disparity was amplified by a lack of preparation among job seekers, many of whom had “trained for academic careers and [were] without training or experience for agency work” (AASLH Annual Reports 1973, 1974, 1977). Beginning in 1978, when the public history movement really got under way, the job market began to improve, but only slightly. A 1982 survey of state historical agencies revealed a mixed picture as state legislatures grappled with an unstable economy (Richmond and George). In this climate, employers benefited from an increasing number of job seekers who were equipped with college degrees but, in the estimation of established professional organizations, lacked meaningful experience.

Forging public history into an academic field

Declaring public history to be a new academic field was one thing. Making it so was quite another. There still are many who question whether public history even rises to that status, or whether it is best viewed as a different “approach” to doing history. Nevertheless, if one accepts public history as a legitimate field of academic study, two parallel currents had the effect of shaping it. One is the promulgation of standards for graduate education, which came from professional associations. The other is a bundle of concepts and ideas that emerged from the intellectual community.

As academic degree programs began to multiply, the professional associations representing avenues of historical practice moved to establish standards for the content and quality of graduate education. In 1973, the American Association of Museums created a Museum Studies Curriculum Committee. This led to the development of “Minimum Standards for Professional Museum Training Programs,” published in 1978. AAM standards called for two-year graduate programs “based on a relevant academic discipline,” offered “in concert with one or more accredited museums,” directed by a faculty member possessing “substantial museum work experience,” and requiring students to serve a supervised internship (AAM 1978, 1983). Following AAM’s lead, AASLH created a committee to establish standards for programs training graduate students for work in historical agencies. Chaired by former AASLH director William Alderson, this committee decried “the proliferation of a great many college courses and ‘programs’ that claim to provide preparation for people who will go to work in historical agencies.” More to the point, courses too often were “taught by people who are not experienced in the field ... [and] without reference to or involvement of quality historical agencies” (Bigelow 1979, pers. comm., October 4; Alderson 1980, pers. comm., January 14). Reporting in mid-1980, the committee submitted recommendations similar to those adopted by AAM, except that history was specified as the most relevant academic discipline and the internship component carried a lengthy list of “principles.” The committee also recommended that AASLH develop and publish a list of programs that met its standards, although the organization did not take that step (AASLH 1980).⁶

The SAA, mindful of its professional border with library science, took a more studied approach to developing guidelines. In the mid-1960s, a multifaceted discussion about archival education developed among archivists and librarians, which led SAA to establish a Committee on Education and Training. After several years of data gathering and a lot

of talking, the committee convened a special meeting of teachers of archival courses, which produced “Minimum Curricular Guidelines for Archival Training Programs.”⁷ The proposed guidelines were announced to the membership in the June 1973 issue of the *SAA Newsletter*, but formal adoption did not immediately follow. Instead, American and Canadian archivists continued to discuss, at conferences and in the pages of their respective journals, the need for, merits of, and best approach to setting guidelines. Incrementally, SAA issued guidelines in 1978 and 1988 before finally adopting comprehensive guidelines in 2002 (Peterson et al. 1977; SAA 1988; SAA website).

Guidelines for historic preservation education also developed a bit later, and they came not from the NTHP but from an allied association: the National Council for Preservation Education (NCPE). Formed in 1980, NCPE was, and is, a coalition of educational institutions that offer historic preservation education at the undergraduate and graduate levels. Unlike AAM, AASLH, and SAA, which draw their leadership primarily from practitioners in the field, NCPE’s leadership, then and now, is composed of faculty associated with academic programs. Thus, NCPE approached the problem of setting guidelines differently, and, in some ways, with more authority. Essentially, a score of academics, representing the historic preservation education programs in existence in the early 1980s, set curriculum standards as a qualification for membership. NCPE (1984) also issued tenure and promotion guidelines for preservation educators. By the mid-1980s, NCPE’s charter members had set the bar for developing, and improving, historic preservation education in the United States.

Regardless of the effort each of these associations put into developing standards for graduate education, the common bond was that all of them advocated parity between scholarship and essential skill sets for practice, and provided blueprints for curriculum change. Professional associations thus gave direction to the movement for curriculum change revealed in NCCPH’s 1978 survey. The culminating effect drove a wedge into the traditional curricula of academic institutions.

While professional associations wrestled with curriculum matters, historians of a more philosophical bent pondered the meaning of “public” and “history” combined. In 1981, Ronald Grele, then director of the Center for Oral History Research at Columbia University, challenged academics and practitioners alike to think more deeply about the potential of public history:

By its name, public history implies a major redefinition of the role of the historian. It promises us a society in which a broad public participates in the construction of its own history. The name conjures up images of a new group of historical workers interpreting the past of heretofore ignored classes of people. It seems to answer the question of whose public? whose history? with a democratic declaration of a faith in members of the public at large to become their own historians and to advance their knowledge of themselves (*Grele 1981: 48*).

Grele’s challenge harkened back to questions about the purpose of history raised by a previous generation of historians in the early decades of the twentieth century. His essay also called attention to a new generation of social historians, influenced by the civil rights, anti-war, and feminist movements at home and the History Workshop established by Raphael Samuel at Ruskin College in Oxford, who took a fresh perspective on the relevance question. In the pages of *Radical History Review*, founded in 1975, “new left” or “radical” historians championed public history as “people’s history.” This definition appealed to a segment of those who gravitated to public history, and the recent trend to

associate public history with social activism speaks to its enduring magnetism. But in the 1970s and 1980s, new social history, which was not confined to the United States, inspired paths of inquiry that drilled into the role of history and historians in contemporary society. As a result, public history began to acquire a more legitimate claim to field status among academicians.

The intertwined growth of new social history and oral history fed one path of inquiry into the relationship between memory and history: how people remember the past as opposed to how historians methodically attempt to reconstruct the past. A related path of inquiry wandered into the mists of how people popularize and traditionalize the past through commemoration, performance, and other forms of representation. Much of the resulting literature was not aimed specifically at public history, but in juxtaposing the processes of history making among the populace with those schooled in the research and analytic methods of history, these streams of scholarship led to insights that public history educators used to shape the academic field. One of them is the concept of “shared authority” in the production of history, which Michael Frisch (1990) initially applied to the process of creating oral history. Scholarly inquiry into memory-history and heritage-history also raised questions about power relationships: who determines what becomes codified as history? What is the interplay between “agency” and “authority” in history making? “Shared authority” and “historical agency” are now key concepts in the discourse of public history. Both are based on the premise that history in the public realm is produced through complex, dynamic processes, far different from the stereotype of the lone historian hunched behind a desk overflowing with books and paper. Public historians also began to understand audiences not as passive receptacles but as quirky users or consumers of history who exercise agency idiosyncratically. The professional literature associated with museum practice opened eyes, but Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen drove the point home in *Presence of the Past: Popular Uses of American History in Everyday Life* (1998), a staple in the core literature of public history.

Much of the scholarship that influences public history education has come from historians. But the environment of public history practice is interdisciplinary. Historic preservation, for instance, has been greatly influenced by the scholarly tributaries of cultural landscape studies, place studies, and historical archaeology. In many ways, this interdisciplinary stream of scholarship has helped to put history and culture back into historic preservation. And, of course, the professional literature on the specific principles and methods of archival management, museum management, historical administration, cultural resources management, historical editing, and other areas of practice is vital to public history education. From the professional literature also comes the model of reflective practice, a set of observed behaviors that exemplify the ways in which professionals in general integrate knowledge and experience in navigating real-world situations (Schön 1983).

Summing up

The spate of public history programs established from the mid-1970s to the mid-1980s proved to be only the first wave. There have been periodic pulses of growth since then. The current pulse, perhaps the strongest yet, seems to reflect widespread academic acceptance of public history as a field, with a corresponding tendency to shoehorn public history into the traditional understanding of a field as an area of academic study defined by a body of historiography. Indeed, public history is now energized by a rich

body of intellectual thought, but it would be quite unfortunate if critical academic discourse were to overwhelm or, worse yet, become detached from the equally critical element of professional development for practice.

For this reason, it is worth considering how the audacious act of pronouncing the creation of a new field of history led to its actualization. Surely the early establishment of a journal bearing the name “public historian” offered a new kind of professional identity, one that linked history to something other than teaching. Just as surely, establishing a new professional association created a forum for exchanging ideas and experiences. But neither of these steps, important as they were, could force an academic field to materialize. The 1978 and 1979 surveys demonstrated the variety of ways in which educational institutions were experimenting with curriculum change during the initial wave. At the same time that academic departments were reaching out to meld scholarship with practice, professional associations were setting guidelines and standards for graduate education. Not only did these guidelines provide direction for curriculum change; importantly, they advocated parity between scholarly content knowledge and the theory, principles, and best practices associated with professional development. Finally, new intellectual currents, many of them tied to new social history, produced critical ideas that have been immensely useful for integrating scholarship and practice.

To present the making of public history into an academic field in this way, so neatly, implies that there is discernible order in public history education. Nothing could be further from the truth. Programs grow organically, drawing on existing faculty strengths and taking advantage of opportunities to partner with nearby institutions to assist with professional development. No program can do everything; thus, within the field of public history, programs develop specialties. If public history was hard to define in the beginning, the evolution of public history education may have clouded rather than clarified meaning. Public history, in many ways, is the big-tent field of history. Still, there is general agreement that public history is where scholarship and practice for real-world needs meet. On equal terms.

Notes

- 1 My thanks to Gerald George, Wesley Johnson, Barbara Howe, and Patricia Mooney-Melvin for valuable feedback on the initial draft of this essay.
- 2 Johnson talks about the backlash from academics in his oral history interview, but few published sources document the storm that brewed over public history for a few years. For good insight, see Gerald George, 1986, “The American Association for State and Local History: The Public Historian’s Home?” in Barbara J. Howe and Emory L. Kemp, eds., pp. 251–263, *Public History: An Introduction* (Malabar, FL: Krieger Publishing Co.)
- 3 A notable exception was the path-breaking library school at Hampton Institute, established in 1925, which worked closely with the Hampton Museum to provide professional training for African American women; see Ashley N. Bouknight, *Black Museology: Reevaluating African American Material Culture*. PhD dissertation, Middle Tennessee State University, 2016.
- 4 The four universities offering graduate archival courses in schools of liberal arts and sciences were American University, University of Denver, Wayne State University, and North Carolina State University. Universities whose library departments or schools offered short courses and summer institutes included University of Texas, University of Washington, Columbia University, University of Illinois, Syracuse University, University of Oregon, Emory University, University of Wisconsin, Drexel Institute of Technology, and University of Chicago.

- 5 Since 2004, the SHA has been administered by Indiana University-Purdue University at Indianapolis. For more on the history of the SHA, see Dennis A. O'Toole, "The Seminar for Historical Administration: Déjà vu All Over Again," *History News* 59 (Winter 2004): 21–25.
- 6 Reflecting on the authoritative stance that AASLH took, it chose to call its recommendations "standards" rather than "guidelines." See "Standards for Historical Agency Training Programs," *History News* 36 (July 1981). The committee files contain an interesting mix of correspondence from program directors who found fault with the standards and others who were eager for the programs to be approved. Records of the American Association for State and Local History, Box 66.
- 7 The work of the SAA Committee on Education and Training can be followed through correspondence in the papers of successive SAA presidents, located in SAA Records, Subgroup 200/01, especially the Records of Presidents Everett O. Alldredge (1963–64), Clifford J. Shipton (1967–68), Houston G. Jones (1968–69), Charles E. Lee (1971–72), Wilfred I. Smith (1972–73), and F. Gerald Ham (1973–74), SAA Records, University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee.