

ADVICE

Changing History



Brian Taylor

By Alexandra M. Lord and Michelle L. McClellan |

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When we met 15 years ago, we knew where we were headed. Although the academic job market was in free fall, we, like many doctoral students before our time and after, ignored the conditions around us and blithely assumed that we would be the exceptions. Our Ph.D.'s would translate directly into tenure-track jobs, tenure,

and a career like that of our advisers.

Not quite. One of us, Lexi, found the holy grail, a tenure-track job with a light teaching load, but it came at the cost of her personal life. Single, she found herself living in a beautiful but rural and isolated community—away from her family as well as from the museums, archives, and urban life she loved. Michelle, meanwhile, found herself married to another historian. Her job search was complicated by the need to find two teaching positions in the same area, no easy task even in a good job market.

Within five years of receiving our Ph.D.'s, we had both reached a crossroads. The academic careers we had expected no longer seemed attainable or desirable. Lexi left her tenure-track job to become a public historian in a city on the East Coast (where she met her husband, a nonacademic who also prefers large cities).

Michelle created a hybrid career that included adjunct teaching, working in a museum, and becoming involved in historic preservation. After several years, that mix of interests developed into a tenure-track job at the University of Michigan, which, to her delight, included a substantial component of public-history work. Although we both fell into doing "public history"—the catch-all term used to describe historical work done outside

of academe—it became a shared passion. Having received our Ph.D.'s from traditional academic departments (the University of Wisconsin at Madison and Stanford University), we had been trained to teach in college classrooms and produce academic monographs. But as we found ourselves doing history in different venues, we could not rely on the conventions or even the vocabulary we shared with other specialists.

We had to learn new ways to convey complex ideas, whether through a museum exhibit, a documentary film, or a 30-minute tour of a historic house. Audiences for those efforts can be quite discerning. If the U.S. surgeon general's office asks for an analysis of a historic event, the briefing must be succinct, clear to physicians who are not historians, and extremely accurate as well as nuanced. Most important, the briefing must respond to the questions and concerns of the surgeon general. Similarly, when working to preserve a neighborhood, the pitch to civic and business leaders must convey the historical importance of various buildings but also demonstrate how restoring them could help revitalize the surrounding community.

Our career trajectories and our experiences doing public history have convinced us that the division between academic and public history is both artificial and limiting. Having seen firsthand how one realm can enrich the other, we believe that all historians, regardless of their expertise or employment, should be exposed to, and encouraged to think about, public history.

Graduate students, in particular, should be provided opportunities to work on public-history projects, just as they must gain experience teaching and writing monographs. Given the poor academic job market, the complexities that dual-career couples face, the family responsibilities many people shoulder, and the desire of some Ph.D.'s to build a career in a location of their choosing, graduate students need to think as broadly as possible about what it means to be a professional historian. Exposure to the many settings in which professional historians practice their craft—museums and historic sites, federal and state governments, corporations and technical fields, colleges and universities—should be a routine part of a history education.

In our shaky economic climate, academic departments will need to hire historians with multiple skills who can teach a range of courses. History departments will increasingly require faculty members who can explain to parents facing hefty tuition bills how and why majoring in history is a good choice. Departments will want historians who can sell a service-learning project to a dean who is determining budget allocations in a tight fiscal year.

In other words, even in an academic setting, historians need to be able to communicate the importance of history to nonspecialists, to collaborate, and to understand wider institutional goals. Participation in public history builds all of those skills.

Even as the academic job market in history has contracted, Americans remain passionate about the subject. They visit historic sites and museums, watch documentaries, read historic fiction, and investigate their own family or local histories. They visit Ellis Island, hunting for shipping records. They travel to federal historic landmarks such as the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory, seeking insight into how and why a fire there changed history and made their working lives different from that of their great-grandmothers'. They visit a slave cabin at Evergreen Plantation and feel their breath catch as they imagine a life within its narrow confines.

Overcoming the gap between academic and public history would mean that the considerable accomplishments of enthusiastic amateurs—"popular historymakers," in the words of Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen—could be contextualized in a more sophisticated and nuanced fashion. While the reward structure of academe currently mitigates against the involvement of academic historians in many public-history activities, much is at stake here. Surely we would all benefit if academics brought their considerable expertise to bear on public discussions about history.

Removing the artificial wall between academic and public history is long overdue.

We are beginning with a simple step, a graduate course that Michelle will teach this fall at the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor with help from Lexi and her colleagues at the National Park Service. The course combines readings on historical memory and the

theory and practice of historic preservation with doing research, writing, and submitting a nomination to the National Historic Landmarks program.

Properties achieve that federal status through a complex process that involves an article-length, peer-reviewed scholarly assessment. Students in the course will participate in all aspects of nominating a property—from the initial letter of inquiry to the official presentation before the Landmarks Committee, a panel of scholars drawn from across the United States. Students might learn about that process in a vocationally oriented preservation department, but most historians, especially those in traditional history departments, are not exposed to that type of work.

As in any graduate research seminar, students will use primary materials to formulate a persuasive historical argument. Unlike the typical research seminar, they will collaborate in producing the final document, a nomination that will be submitted to the National Park Service staff for evaluation and for external scholarly review (as is standard for these nominations).

Students will then present their findings to an audience of leading scholars and government officials. Designation as a National Historic Landmark is an honor shared by properties ranging from the Stonewall Inn, the site of an infamous police raid and the spark of the gay-rights movement, to Camp Rabideau, one of the few remaining camps created by the Civilian Conservation Corps during the New Deal. The rarity with which the designation is bestowed means that students in the course will have an opportunity to play a significant role in shaping how Americans see and understand their history.

For the National Park Service, the class will ensure that students being trained in one of the nation's top history programs will learn about federal-preservation programs. It will also help those budding historians understand how historic sites educate Americans about history. Indirectly, the course will encourage future faculty members to use historic sites in their teaching.

For the students, the class will provide concrete skills with implications both inside and outside the academy. Nominations for landmark status are often written for pay, and students with experience writing them will be well positioned to develop a full-time

professional career or find work as consultants. The course will also enrich their teaching and scholarship by demonstrating how place can shape historical events and helping them to see how historic sites themselves influence what Americans learn about our history.

Through this course, we hope to create a model partnership that broadens graduate education in history, demonstrates the value of alliances among historians regardless of institutional location, and breaks down the artificial distinction between public and academic history.

Alexandra M. Lord and Michelle L. McClellan met in 1996 while Lord was a postdoctoral fellow in the San Francisco Bay Area, where McClellan was a graduate student. Today, Lord is branch chief for the National Historic Landmarks Program; she also runs Beyond Academe, a Web site to assist historians looking for nonacademic work. McClellan is an assistant professor of history at the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor and a preservationist in her community and her home state of Michigan.

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