PUBLIC HISTORY:
An Introduction

edited by
Barbara J. Howe
Emory L. Kemp
West Virginia University

ROBERT E. KRIEGER PUBLISHING COMPANY
MALABAR, FLORIDA

1988

5. [R. Goodwin], *A Brief and True Report for the Traveller Concerning Williamsburg in Virginia* (Richmond: Colonial Williamsburg, Inc., 1936), 130. This book, written in eighteenth-century style, is itself a good example of the impulse to recreate the past.

6. Ibid., 126, 130.

7. Ibid., 149.


Douglas C. Dolan is executive director of the Bucks County Historical Society, Doylestown, Pennsylvania. The society owns and/or operates the Mercer Museum, Fonthill Museum, and the Sprague Library. Prior to his appointment in Bucks County, Dolan was the executive director of the Historical Society of York County [Pennsylvania] and, before that, Bicentennial coordinator at the University of Delaware.

Dolan is a member of the Board of Governors of the Mid-Atlantic Association of Museums, a regional branch of the American Association of Museums; a member of the Board of Directors of the Pennsylvania Federation of Historical Societies; and a member of the Bucks County Museums Council.

He is a graduate of the University of Delaware with a master's degree in American History and a certificate in Museum Studies. He is also a graduate of the Williamsburg Seminar in Historical Administration and the Museum Management Institute at the University of California at Berkeley. Dolan is active in numerous professional organizations and has served as a consultant to many small museums and historical organizations.

THE HISTORIAN IN THE LOCAL HISTORICAL MUSEUM

**Douglas C. Dolan**

The historian employed in a local historical museum may function as a director, curator, librarian, archivist, educator, or all of the above. Local historical museums range in size from one-person operations to large operations where duties and responsibilities are clearly delineated. By far, the small historical museum is the norm across the country. A recent survey conducted by the American Association for State and Local History noted that 62 percent of the historical institutions in America had operating budgets of $50,000 or less.1 However, local historical museums, regardless of size, share the common bond of making history real and meaningful to a diverse audience. Within the local historical museum, practicing public historians will find themselves actively engaged in historical resources management for a variety of "publics."

Traditionally, historians have gravitated to local historical museums and historical agencies as places of employment that utilized their skills as researchers and historians. From the outset, though, historians have had to develop new skills to augment their academic training and enable them to communicate a sense of the past to their audiences. These audiences may range from children to senior citizens, and they may
come in contact with the museum either individually or as part of an organized activity. Each audience brings along its own set of perceptions of history and time. The challenge for historians is to discover the key that will enable them to make the transition between history as an abstraction to history as a meaningful experience for each audience group.

By its very nature, the local historical museum is concerned with the history of ordinary people, events, and happenings within a definable geographic boundary. Its focus is on a study of grassroots history. It is a history of families and communities told through the photographs, documents, artifacts, and memorabilia of a region. In an age of computers and space shuttles, the local historical museum functions as the collector and preserver of a region's history and serves as a storehouse of its collective memory. Equally important, it becomes the medium through which the past becomes alive. The historian working in the local historical museum as director/curator must be the catalyst to inspire and stimulate people to comprehend the past and its impact on the present and the future.

The challenge confronting the historian in the local history museum is to develop the means to reach these diverse audiences. Through exhibits, workshops, lectures, and school programs, the local historical museum provides avenues to explore the past. Schoolchildren can be challenged to make the transition from today to yesterday through discovery programs that encourage identifying similarities between household objects of the past and items that they are familiar with from around their homes. Exhibits of maps and photographs can document the evolution of communities or serve as focal points for seminars and workshops that draw senior citizens into discussions about their past experiences. The local historical museum is on the front lines of the grassroots history movement. It is the institution most concerned with what has been termed "nearby history."

David E. Kyvig and Myron A. Marry in their publication Nearby History: Exploring the Past Around You that "the territory of nearby history is, obviously, both a training ground and a principal workplace for public historians. In exploring the past of subjects close at hand, a person learns to identify, collect, organize, and exhibit historical materials, to analyze complex factors, to examine the relationship of the inner concentric circles of nearby situation to the outer circles of national and international development." Nearby history involves interpreting history not as an abstraction but rather through tangible artifacts and documents. Within the local historical museum, the historian focuses not on the effects of great historical movements on a national scale but rather on their impact on the local community. In doing so, the historian is presented with the unique opportunity to study and interpret complex historical developments in terms of the daily lives of ordinary people. Within this context, the historian will function both as manager and researcher. As manager, he/she will be involved in organizing and caring for historical materials. As researcher, he/she will actively utilize histori-
THE HISTORIAN IN THE LOCAL HISTORICAL MUSEUM

period displays, period rooms, period houses and period environments."

The advent of "public history" and its acceptance by academics as a legitimate pursuit for the history scholar provide an important opportunity to explore ways to incorporate current historical thinking into the development of exhibits, programs, and publications of local historical museum interpretation. In fulfilling their function as researchers, historians in the local historical museum are confronted with the very difficult problem of blending subtle, complex historical trends into the museum's educational programs in a manner that encourages participants to think about the larger issues. In doing so, the historians need to familiarize themselves with the current level of interpretive thinking by academic historians and to incorporate those historical theories into the museum's interpretive efforts. The historians involved in the local historical museum should avail themselves of the same primary historical resources and proven research methodologies as their academic counterparts. On the other hand, academic historians need to respect the important role that tangible objects can play in focusing an individual's or group's attention on historical trends and their meaning.

Academic historians and teachers are by no means the only professionals that one deals with in the position of director/curator of the local historical museum. The museum's professional staff often find themselves called upon as the history experts for comment on projects ranging from building restorations to the development of community identity and image for marketing efforts. Urban planners, architects, economic development specialists, tourism promoters, and even politicians recognize local history as an economic asset. One needs only to look at the tremendous impact of the Bicentennial upon communities, big and small, all across this nation to see graphic proof of this fact. Unfortunately, recognizing the economic advantage of history and being able to use history in a sensitive, accurate manner do not always occur at the same time. Nonhistory professionals and politicians may sympathize with the historical aspects of any issue but should not be expected to be the chief advocates of these aspects. This is a role that the local historical museum can fulfill.

The history professional from the local historical museum is a valuable partner to any professional team addressing issues that impact on the community. In small communities, where limited resources preclude the hiring of a history specialist directly, the local historical museum professional can provide valuable insights into the cultural and social forces that are at the heart of the historical background of any issue. In cases dealing with the recycling and restoration of old buildings, many times the staff of the local historical museum may be called upon to provide input on historical questions. Even the development of tourism brochures promoting the local region might necessitate the involvement of the local historical museum in defining the area's historical image that is to be projected. Many a local tourism agency has had to be educated to understand that their "colonial" image does not describe the historical

collecting policies should recognize the continuum of local history in a region. With a focus oriented toward local history, it is only natural that an individual working as a director/curator of a local historical museum will on many occasions come into contact with professionals throughout the community in matters dealing with local history. Of course, the museum professional often will be dealing with teachers of history and social studies on the local elementary, secondary, and college levels in the development of educational and historical research projects. In some cases, it will be easy to develop projects out of the needs and interests of both parties. At other times, however, the museum professional will be challenged to find ways to utilize historical artifacts to complement classroom teaching. Cooperative projects between schools and the museum that allow students to work with primary historical materials and artifacts as the basis for research projects can provide a tangible link between broad historical concepts and the realities of the past. For example, students, working with museum staff, can be utilized to survey historical inventories and vendue lists to develop a composite representative list of household furnishings in a particular region during a specific time period. The museum, through its historical collections, provides the evidence for students to better comprehend the historical theories taught in the classroom. It can turn the two-dimensional pages of a historical textbook into a three-dimensional experience.

In addition to teachers and students, the director/curator of the local historical museum will have dealings with professional researchers working on historical projects. Often these projects will extend far beyond the scope of the local historical museum and its collections, but they provide important opportunities for a better understanding of the effects of large-scale historical trends in the local historical museum. Indeed the professional researcher will often find that within the local historical museum's collections are the artifacts and documents that provide the best illustrations in human terms of the realities of the great historical movements on the local scene. Neither the professional researcher nor the academic historian should overlook the treasures housed within the local historical museum.

It should be noted that the bond of understanding between the public historian and the academic historian is weak at times. Traditionally, the academics have perceived "public historians" as less than scholarly in their pursuits. In some respects, this criticism has been justified as museum curators and exhibit designers have tried to take historical concepts and themes and neatly package them in concise museum exhibits and interpretive publications. A problem that museums must confront is the real tendency of oversimplification and strict periodization. Noted historian Thomas J. Schlereth states, "Rigid periodization in museums and textbooks provokes historical truncation in the mind of the visitor or the reader . . . The use of the decade or the century . . . as the only parcels of human history has induced us to divide the American past into artificial vacuous categories of period settings,
realities of the town or region that may, in fact, be a post-Civil War Victorian town. The local historical museum staff can and should be involved in dispelling historical myths and providing accurate historical information.

The local historical museum staff performs an important function for community leaders and activists. Staff members can work with interested parties in understanding historical trends and their relationship to current and future events. Further, they can help bring the history of the community into the decision-making process of planners and political bodies. Thus, history can be at the very foundation of understanding the impact of larger events upon the community or region. Historical consideration can affect economic issues on the local level. In fact, the local historical museum may be called upon to provide the stamp of approval—the mark of historical authenticity—to nonmuseum projects and ideas. When called upon in these situations, the museum staff members will find themselves dealing with individuals whose concept of history may be a mix of myth and reality that will require the skills of a historian and a diplomat to unwind.

A student who is interested in working in a historical museum would do well to read G. Ellis Burn's *Introduction to Museum Work* (Nashville: American Association for State and Local History, 1975) and Edward P. Alexander's *Museums in Motion: An Introduction to the History and Functions of Museums* (Nashville: American Association for State and Local History, 1979). Both publications provide valuable insights into museums and the museum profession. Together, they give not only a historical perspective but also an understanding of the complex issues involved in the daily operation of a museum, large or small.

One simple way that a student can explore the museum profession and, at the same time, gain some valuable experience, is by becoming a volunteer at a local historical museum. Volunteers are the backbone of the small historical museum. A recent survey by the American Association for State and Local History noted that almost 40 percent of America's historical organizations have no paid staff whatsoever and another 11 percent have only one paid employee. Obviously, the work being done by these organizations is largely dependent upon volunteers. The museum field is one profession in which volunteer experience can count equally as well as a paid position in terms of acceptable work experience. Students should identify the volunteer opportunities available in their own local historical museums and take advantage of them. This step not only provides valuable hands-on experience but also, perhaps, a foot in the door for future employment.

Another technique that will help students learn about career opportunities in museum work is to conduct a series of informational interviews with persons already employed in the museum field. By this method, students can get first-hand information on the nature of professional duties and responsibilities along with some personal insights into the museum field. Museum professionals are like anyone else and will be flattered that someone is interested enough to seek their opinion. A good interviewer may be able to draw out some very candid observations and comments on museum work. This information could prove very helpful in defining career goals.

One important consideration for anyone thinking about a museum career is that compensation levels are low. In the small historical museum, director and curator salaries are often at or below the level of a college instructor or assistant professor, with entry-level professional salaries often below the level of beginning school teachers. Combined with benefit packages that are virtually “no-frills,” the museum profession is not a fast track to riches. In fairness, it should be noted that salaries are rising, albeit slowly, but it is an underpaid profession.

The other important trend a student should be aware of is the rising educational level of professionals in the field. For many years, historical museums were the bastion of the interested layman and amateur historian. Not so today. Even in the small historical museum, an undergraduate degree is virtually essential, and more and more beginning professionals are coming to the field with master's or doctoral degrees in history or a related academic specialty. Students should realize that the job market in the museum profession is very competitive. It would be in their best interest to pursue graduate work in their chosen academic field. Indeed, many employers will look for a candidate with a master’s degree, and a doctorate is highly recommended for a curator position. There is always a large pool of candidates for any opening in the museum profession. Students who can arm themselves with a graduate degree and some practical experience, either through volunteer work or an internship, will be better prepared to compete successfully for that all-important first job.

In addition to a sound background in history, the individual seeking a career in the historical museum field should have other personal and technical skills. An individual should be a skilful manager with good organizational skills. Whether managing the collections, education projects, volunteers, or the entire museum, familiarity and knowledge of management theory and techniques will serve the historian well. The characteristics of management situations within a not-for-profit environment are unique and affect all facets of operations. Classroom exposure to the fundamentals of management theory would provide a solid foundation.

Another equally essential asset for any individual contemplating a career in the historical museum field is to develop the skills necessary for working with people. Interpersonal relationships are at the heart of any endeavor within this field. By its nature, the museum profession is very labor intensive. One needs to have an ability to work with people of diverse ages, backgrounds, and interests. From trustees to volunteers to schoolchildren and the general public, one deals with a variety of people on a daily basis. Whether through written or spoken means, an individual must develop the skills to communicate ideas and concepts clearly. Further, the communication process also requires an individual to listen attentively. Feedback from various audiences, whether visitors to an
groups as new ideas and projects are put forward. However, the frustrations are easily forgotten in the joys of successful projects that make history a personal and real experience. And, of course, the best antidote for frustration that anyone can have is to maintain a good sense of humor! This asset may be the most beneficial one for any individual who works in a nonprofit organization.

The historian employed as director/curator in the local historical museum will wear many hats. Functioning as manager and researcher, historians will have the opportunity to guide the growth and development of a nonprofit organization dedicated to preserving the heritage of a local area while at the same time utilizing their knowledge of history and research techniques in the design and implementation of educational programs. Although resources are traditionally limited, the local historical museum provides the perfect environment for the creative, imaginative historian who wants a "hands-on" approach to making history come alive. In the local historical museum, history is not an abstraction. It is very real and always "nearby."

NOTES


SUGGESTED READING


For a biographical sketch of Gerald W. George, see his essay, "The Perils of 'Public' History," elsewhere in this book.

THE AMERICAN ASSOCIATION FOR STATE AND LOCAL HISTORY: THE PUBLIC HISTORIAN'S HOME?

Gerald George

If you are contemplating a career in public history, you will, sooner or later, run onto—or up against—the American Association for State and Local History (AASLH).

The first encounter may come on your very first day in class, if you happen to be handed an assigned reading list that includes G. Ellis Burczaw’s *Introduction to Museum Work*, or Kenneth W. Duckett’s *Modern Manuscripts: A Practical Manual for Their Management, Care, and Use*, or *Ordinary People and Everyday Life: Perspectives on the New Social History*, edited by James B. Gardner and George Rollick Adams—all among the standard texts published by the AASLH Press. But the diversity of that booklist itself, and its apparent lack of relation to state and local history per se, may well make you wonder just what, exactly, AASLH is.

Your bewilderment likely will grow as the semester or quarter progresses. On a day when you discover that the slide-tape program shown by the professor in class is one of a series available from AASLH on historic house conservation, you may conclude that the association serves primarily historic houses. But the next week your professor may show an AASLH videotape on something such as "Interpreting History Through Pictorial Documents.” And the following week there may be a class exercise using material in an AASLH independent study kit on, say, “School Programs and the Museum.” At that point you may well start to wonder—does AASLH itself know what it is?

On and off through your university program, you probably also will encounter scores of AASLH technical leaflets, which offer advice on everything from accounting practices for historical societies to methods for detecting and preventing wood deterioration. Included is a leaflet that you as a public history student may especially want to read, on “Using Consultants Effectively,” because you are likely to be debating whether to seek a history job in a public institution or to set up as a consulting historian on your own. However, many of the leaflets will seem so restricted to beginner-level fundamentals—"Methods of Research for the Amateur Historian," for example—that you may begin to think of AASLH as chiefly for amateurs; after all, much local history and historical society work has been the province of history buffs.