

Public History: Theory, Method, and Practice
HIST 506: 301 (3 credits) – Spring 2018

Mondays, 1:10-4:10pm

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Van Dyck 213C

Course Description

How do the histories that we learn in the classroom differ from those we learn on the street, in the museum, and in government documents? How do public historians grapple with the Confederate monument debate? What does it mean to 'preserve our history' or our heritage? How does one explain the history of the women's suffrage movement in a 100-word statement on a plaque in a town square in a way that could be understood by an eight year old? Does the public consume historical information differently than scholars and students? Who controls the narratives of our histories, and what does that mean for who is and is not included in our retellings of the past? How should we account for power and absences in history?

Studying public history involves considering these questions and exploring a variety of possible answers through the lens of the theory and practice of the field. By investigating a variety of public history institutions, from archives to museums to websites to parks and beyond, we consider different methodologies for sharing historical information, how various practitioners craft and disseminate historical narratives, and why. This course will explore a variety of definitions of the term "histories" as they exist within and without academia. Learning the intellectual and practical tools for creating and sharing history enhances community and civic engagement and shapes shared cultural memory. Students will have numerous hands-on opportunities to do public history work inside and outside of the classroom, in site visits, curatorial practice, and, this Spring, create an interpretive plan for historical markers across the New Brunswick campus.

Theory & Method: In this course, students will read academic, professional, and popular discussions of history and public history that will allow us to explore what it means to disseminate historical knowledge in different forums and mediums, and how to identify different constituencies and take into consideration the audiences receiving that knowledge. In this course, students will be challenged to think critically about what sorts of histories they've internalized as participants in public discourse, how those narratives were constructed, and how that construction and impact can deepen our understanding of historical facts and fictions. In doing so, students will engage with public dialogues surrounding complex and challenging histories in order to identify how historical knowledge on these subjects has been created, disseminated, and received.

Practice: This course provides an opportunity to utilize the narrative-creation and analytical skills students will have acquired in other humanities courses in application in a public setting, as many graduates in history and related disciplines go on to do. Students in this course will take on the role of aspiring public historian in order to

explore the variety of communication styles, analytical approaches, and research directions that make it possible to disseminate historical information in a wide variety of contexts. Through class projects and hands-on experience, including methodological training and site visits, this course serves as a window into public history as a profession as well as a discipline, and will provide an overview of different methods utilized in a variety of public history careers – from archives to digital production to museums and libraries. For students completing the certificate in public history, this course serves as the core methodological and theoretical training to support entrance into the discipline.

Students in this course will actively consider, and by the end of this course, be able to discuss answers to, the following questions:

Theory

- What is public history? Where does public history happen? Why does it exist? Whose narratives create it? Who is its audience? What are the challenges to presenting difficult and/or contended histories?

Method

- How is public history presented? In what forms is it consumed? What skills do archivists, curators, conservators, interpreters, and other public historians cultivate in their work?

Practice

- How are these theories and methodologies implemented through the practice of public history? What can be learned about power, truth, history, and audience, by completing the tasks of constructing public history projects yourselves?

Required Texts

- *Introduction to Public History: Interpreting the Past, Engaging Audiences*, eds Nix, Lyon, and Shrum (Rowman/AASLH, 2017; any format)
- *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*, Michel-Rolph Trouillot (Beacon Press: Boston, 1995; any edition/any format)

Additional readings, podcasts, websites, etc. will be assigned periodically; in these cases, links or pdfs will be uploaded to Sakai under Resources.

Please note: This syllabus is subject to change, and may evolve with the direction of the course. If/when changes are made, students will be made aware of adjustments in a timely fashion.

Assignment and Grading Overview

Additional information about each assignment will be provided throughout the course.

- **Two Site Visit Responses (On visits to local history sites)** - 20 points each
- **Applied Public History Project** -100 points
- **Blog Post** (Case study, exhibit review, etc.) (20 points)
- **Final Essay** (20 points)
- **Class Participation and Attendance** (20 points)