

HISTORIANS SHARING A LIFE OF LEARNING

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Over the next five years, the Pennsylvania Humanities Council will provide historians with opportunities to reinvent the idea of public history as they have known it. The PHC will be asking scholars *not* to impart their knowledge to the public, nor to shed light on the historical ignorance of the populace. The PHC is not trying to make citizens better informed. Instead, it is asking scholars to share their lives of learning, and to speak with adults in a way that inspires them to enjoy learning. The PHC believes that the civic value of the humanities lies not in information imparted by authorities, but in learning that empowers individuals and connects people to each other.

For the PHC, the humanities essentially involve the sharing of stories: stories of struggle and success, conflict and community, from human experience across time and around the world. Historians can share such stories with others by drawing upon their field of knowledge and opening up dialogues. Thinking along with members of the public, they can tell stories in such a

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way that individuals from the past come alive in the present. Historical consciousness in itself would be a fabulous gift to civic life in the 2000s, and would remind Americans that the human experience is broader than the national boundaries.

Historians share a journey in life with the people seated in the hall. Figures from the past have already made their journey. Famous or obscure, human beings travel through experience toward knowledge or wisdom, or at least what they accept for it. Along the way, they search for connections to other people, particularly to those immediately around them. Some think about the generations that will come after them. Perhaps fewer think about those who came before them. In trying to connect the present to the past, even through a major figure like Abraham Lincoln, for example, historians have a challenge. With Lincoln, we also have a case where too much familiarity as an icon has made him almost invisible as a man. A standard public history approach would be to review, carefully, an important aspect of his career, or give a nuanced appreciation of his greatness and limitations. But suppose an historian were to put aside the lecture habit, speak more personally, and explore, as a fellow human being, this famous figure from the past as a person. Posing a few questions might make Lincoln seem contemporary. How do a person's relationships with others, across a racial divide for example, change in a lifetime? How can a person's beliefs be shaped in relation to past generations, to the Founding Fathers, for example, but yet produce radical change and continuity? How do personal ambition and the desire for fame fuel someone's altruistic contribution to the world? How is wisdom not a simple matter of accumulated experiences, but of reflection and reading? An historian could bring to life not only Lincoln, but the paradoxical nature of history—that each person in the past is so different from us in the present, and so similar.

Sparkling learning, getting people in the room interacting with each other as well as with the expert in a question-and-answer session, encouraging individuals to read more about it after they leave are all elements of a robust public history. Equally important are innovative program formats, such as participatory programs, mixing history and the arts, storytelling, memoir-writing workshops, and role-playing.

Sharing one's life of learning, rather than providing historical information, also is a new step toward, not away from, applying the critical perspectives of humanistic scholarship. It means asking the big questions, the ones most missing from public discourse today, but to which the public is eager to respond. "Why did the Civil War begin?" leads to contemplation of why wars

begin. "What did the soldiers believe they were fighting for?" leads to reflection on soldiers today. Sometimes the biggest questions are hidden in the smallest words, such as the "we" in "We the People." Much of what historians do is describe how human beings have defined "we" and "they," and what people and nations have done based on their definitions.

Sharing learning means sharing questions and doubts, sharing the value of uncertainty. In the words of Learned Hand, "The spirit of liberty is the spirit which is not too sure that it is right." This kind of public history may take some courage at a time when speaking for intellectual virtues can be seen as a sign of weakness. Yet it is a great opportunity to exemplify some scholarly habits that civilization depends on: distinguishing fact from opinion, facing facts even when they upset our pet theories and challenge our convictions, detecting fallacies, and making distinctions.

Sharing learning also means rediscovering the power of the classics. Millennia ago, the Greeks offered a valuable gift that historians might help all of us accept and share: the idea that human dignity is such that no topic should be proscribed outside the realm of thought. There is excitement in believing that "the unexamined life is not worth living," and applying it to various orthodoxies, historiographical and other, with participants who know less history than an historian but are delighted to share in an exploration. Bring back again the ironic smile of Voltaire, observing that "this agglomeration, which was called ... the Holy Roman Empire was neither holy, nor Roman, nor an empire." Or, share the dark commentary of Montaigne, written during the European wars of religion: "Two things have always gone together: supercelestial thoughts and subterranean conduct."

Finally, sharing learning means seeking common ground. Interpreting stories that are meaningful to us, accepting a critical spirit that examines everything, can enable historians and the public to transcend tired political colors of blue and red. Here, the presence of texts can have extraordinary effect. Texts give people in a group a center and a focus—a way to suspend, or put aside for a time, opinions they brought with them into the room. In a program on the Constitution, for example, reading not analyses of constitutional history but the text of the document itself, or excerpts from Supreme Court cases, allows program participants to grapple with difficult ideas and conflicting values to arrive at their own judgments. Disagreements about the causes of the Civil War might be changed not by reviewing the consensus of historians, but by reading the actual words of participants, such as what

Jefferson Davis or John Moseby said. Short original texts with long discussion are not a bad way to move people toward historical understanding.

There is one extra benefit. Exciting learning experiences may draw new participants to public history, and to the compelling stories of history rather than to facts as part of national heritage. Young people, in particular, need to be inspired, not preached to or lectured. Also, a concern with heritage has, in the past, alienated people who are central to our history but have, for generations, not felt included in it. For people who see the past largely as tragic, even the best traditional public history will not be attractive. It will seem the concern of people to whom history is very interesting but not quite real. They may find more truth in Lord Byron's saying that "History is the devil's scripture," or in the line that James Joyce gave his young fictional Irishman, Stephen Daedalus: "History is a nightmare from which I am trying to awake." In public programs on the Civil War era, it is still very possible to have no African Americans and no Mexican Americans in attendance, even in heavily populated areas. It would be a shame for historians to acquiesce to this through their unchanging behavior. One way not to acquiesce would be to work with the new "Pennsylvania Quest for Freedom" project on Underground Railroad history, coordinated by the Office of Cultural and Heritage Tourism, Department of Community and Economic Development. A statewide network of organizations has begun to explore "a legendary human system of action that links 19th-century advocacy to 20th-century social change and the Civil War to Civil Rights."

Where else might historians go to do this new kind of public history? There are many venues rich in potential. A number of cultural institutions, such as historical sites and organizations, are competing to be community learning spaces as well as tourist attractions. Important for civic life, they need programming that pulls in local people for return visits, as well as special events for travelers. Eckley Miners Village, for example, provides a variety of programming, for adults and families, not only on mining, but on ethnicity and folklife. Public libraries are eager for high-quality adult programming to complement traditional strengths in children's programming. In the aftermath of September 11, 2001, the public rushed to libraries to learn more about Islam and the Middle East. As places where the human experience across the globe is evident in collections, libraries are ideal venues to host programs providing historical perspectives on contemporary events and on world history. Arts organizations such as Bloomsburg Theatre Ensemble and Touchstone Theater (Bethlehem) are creatively producing original dramas on

community history, weaving scripts from documents such as letters and newspaper articles, as well as oral histories. Community organizations such as senior centers want programs for people who often are, for the first time in their lives, wanting humanities discussions about what it all means, particularly the history of the past 75 years.

Exciting work also is being done by long-standing cultural institutions that are connecting with surrounding communities in unprecedented ways. The Historical Society of Pennsylvania, for example, which began in 1824, sparked by the visit of Lafayette, recently organized "Latino Philadelphia: Our Journeys, Our Communities," a multi-faceted, bi-lingual project that discarded the traditional model of projects for ethnic groups—do a program on ethnics and hope they come—and engaged the community in planning and implementation. The American Philosophical Society, founded by Benjamin Franklin in 1743, is using its new museum for innovative projects that combine the arts, sciences, and humanities. For one of its programs for the "Franklin 300" commemorations in 2006, APS drew inspiration from "The Morals of Chess" and the eighteenth-century chess-playing automaton called "The Turk," who challenged and defeated such notables as Franklin and Voltaire and sparked controversy over the capacity of machines to replicate human faculties. Artist Brett Keyser, dressed as "Turkomaton," gave unannounced street performances, engaging passersby in chess; improvised performances for public school students; and presented a longer dramatic piece at the APS. As a result, the APS reached new audiences in the alternative arts community, schoolchildren, and regional chess aficionados. The Civil War and Underground Railroad Museum (1888), an institution which just a few years ago was on the verge of closing down, developed an exceptional project off-site entitled "Faith and Freedom," on the history of the African-American church in Philadelphia during the nineteenth century. The project involved chautauqua presentations at several churches.

Public television stations are exploring ways to use new digital channels for programs that showcase the talents and interests of local historians. In one experimental collaboration beginning in 2007, WHYY-TV and the Pennsylvania Humanities Council are producing *Humanities Live*, which will provide historical perspectives on topics of strong popular interest. Pilot programs this year embrace sports (Connie Mack and the Philadelphia A's) and popular culture (Mario Lanza). Future programs, aired across state via Pennsylvania Public Television Network, will be rich in Pennsylvania content.

Universities are trying to engage more historians, and humanities faculty generally, in programs that re-invent the idea of “outreach.” At Penn State, for example, the Institute for the Arts and Humanities, again in collaboration with the Pennsylvania Humanities Council, has been providing incentives to historians to participate in Public Humanities Scholars, offering stipends for work in helping groups in mid-central Pennsylvania both to plan and conduct public programs. At times historians serve as presenters; at others, solely as advisers, offering their perspectives to program producers. Projects have included an Underground Railroad history project sponsored by the Centre County Office of Aging, and the centennial of the town of Portage, Cambria County.

New public history rooted in the Pennsylvania experience will benefit from the strong *Partners in History* collaboration between the Pennsylvania Humanities Council and the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission. The PHC and the PHMC share a commitment to Pennsylvania history of the highest intellectual standards. In public programming, since the 1980s the PHC has led the way in fostering projects drawing upon the latest scholarship in the state’s social history. Today, when the history of African Americans, Native Americans, ethnic populations, and women is no longer new in academe, it is still relatively new, and at times remarkably new, in public programming around the state. There is much new work to be done in all geographical areas, including in the supposedly sophisticated suburbs of large metropolitan areas. Such work will build upon the success of “Raising Our Sites,” a special PHC project in the 1990s that sparked new interpretations at historic sites and museums, incorporating such topics as slavery in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (at Pennsbury Manor and Hope Lodge) and labor history, such as the story of workers in the Hershey Chocolate factory, once missing from, but now interpreted, at the Hershey Museum.

Understanding the American experience in Pennsylvania will frame high-quality public programming supported by both the PHMC and the PHC for the Sesquicentennial of the Civil War. The major effort will be to make absolutely sure that the story of slavery and freedom is central to anniversary programming, as present in 2011–2015 as it was absent in 1961–1965. Certainly the battle of Gettysburg and Lincoln’s address will provide the focus for anniversary events in July and November 2013. The Gettysburg Address is, in fact, an ideal short humanities text for long discussion in 2011–2015. However, collections-based and placed-based programming will broaden interpretation

and programming beyond battles, ranging from the story of slavery and freedom to, among other themes, women and the homefront, the different experiences of local communities (including dissent and draft resistance), and Civil War memory and commemoration. Rich thematic programming will occur throughout the state and up through the anniversary years and beyond.

Such public history will exist side by side with battle reenactments and the perennial programming of Civil War buffs. But it will resist the pull of historical information into an escape from the present. It will resist, too, the mega-narrative that history is war and war is glorious. The PHC, in particular, will invite historians to participate through its three major channels: grants, speakers bureau (*Commonwealth Speakers*), and book discussions for public libraries.

During the next five years the PHC will have special responsibilities and opportunities as it continues to represent Pennsylvania in the Federal-State Partnership of the National Endowment for the Humanities, the mainstay funder of state councils. After a new presidential administration takes office in January 2009, new NEH leadership will articulate priorities different from its predecessors', perhaps adding a new international dimension. However, the core humanities discipline of history will remain central to NEH-supported programming. Moreover, a primary concern with the national experience will endure, given the agency's strong successes as a grant maker in this content area since the 1960s and also the belief, by individuals on both sides of the congressional aisle, that knowledge of American history is an asset in the present, and historical amnesia is a risk.

Depending on who the new President is, the interplay of American diversity and unity may be at the center of the story. During President Clinton's first term, a national conversation on American pluralism and identity, led by Sheldon Hackney, encouraged civic dialogues on the contemporary meaning of *E Pluribus Unum*. In the second term, under the leadership of Bill Ferris, the NEH encouraged a different framework for understanding diversity and unity through a special initiative on regional cultures across the United States, and another on genealogy and family history entitled *My History Is America's History*. Alternatively, the NEH focus may be on founding principles and national heritage. This would mean some continuity with President Bush's administration, during which the *We the People* initiative, led by Bruce Cole, aimed to revive the study of American history, reacting to surveys of student and adult ignorance of basic knowledge.

The *We the People* initiative has come at a time when increased historical scholarship, publisher interest, and media attention have been devoted to the founding period and biographies of major figures in U.S. history. Whatever administration takes office in January 2009, the future of public history might build upon the recent popularity of the genre of biography, which has produced remarkable sales successes for books on major figures like John Adams, Andrew Carnegie, Alexander Hamilton, Abraham Lincoln, and Martin Luther King. Biography, along with new studies of religion in the American life, has provided new historiography for public programming. Historian-led book groups on biographies seem a natural public history venture, having a special appeal to libraries. There, face-to-face discussions could be combined with demonstrations of online research and use of video from the PBS's "The American Experience" and other programs. Public librarians would welcome more males participating in book groups, learning more about library resources, and then becoming active supporters of libraries. It is difficult to imagine any interested historian not being able to do some public history locally in this way, or working with teachers through in-service days or special seminars and institutes. With biographies in particular, historians might also connect with businesspeople, who often read the new books on major figures—sometimes relating them to management texts on "leadership secrets." With some imagination and flexibility in scheduling, historians could develop small discussion groups for business leaders and middle managers, on site at companies or at business associations or chambers of commerce.

For the NEH, the core elements of public history will remain the scholarship of the historian and the quality of the individual program. For state humanities councils, the core considerations will be the program's impact, on the individuals participating (including the scholar), on the sponsoring organization, and on the surrounding community. The Pennsylvania Humanities Council already has moved very far in this direction. The PHC strives to have the individuals involved in its programs affirm the value of the humanities in their lives. It asks, first, whether participants discover ways to know, to nurture, and to use their gifts, talents, and opportunities through humanities learning. Second, it assesses whether programming is supporting institutions in becoming more valuable to their communities by creating meaningful learning experiences for individuals, connecting cultural resources to citizens, and sparking civic participation and leadership. Finally, it looks to see if local communities are improving in the quality of civic life.

This concern with impact, and with new audience development for the humanities, is the PHC's response to the challenge in NEH founding language from 1965: "Democracy demands vision and wisdom from its citizens." It is also the basis for its humanities advocacy to Congress.

Historians certainly deserve to be recognized by the public for the value of their scholarship. This would be good for historians, for the institutions of higher learning or culture many of them represent, and the individuals who gain knowledge of history from them. For Pennsylvania and the nation, excellent public history would mean a gain in the dissemination of knowledge and progress toward the humanistic goal of making conventional wisdom less conventional and a little wiser. This very traditional goal can be attained, however, only by recognizing that the authority of historians has eroded, as has the authority of all experts and all institutions in society. Only by stepping toward the public, toward the diverse communities around them, can historians speak in ways that are acknowledged, deemed persuasive, and found compelling.