

A FUTURE IN HISTORY
CAREER OPTIONS FOR THE GRADUATE HISTORY STUDENT

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I have some good news and some bad news! The good news is that there is a future in history for hundreds of today's present history students. The bad news is that you will be among the fortunate only if you are creative about, not only the history you write, but also your own life as a historian. The baby boom, which brought us out of the market place and into the warm womb of academia, is over. The baby boom is now a bust. There are more good people than good jobs. But now many in the profession are beginning to discover the possibilities of "non-traditional" or "non-academic" or "alternative" careers for historians. Suddenly historians are finding that they are needed in museum work, archives, preservation, and even in the business world.

To begin, let me define some terms. Historians who teach should be called "academic historians," which is what they are, and "traditional historians" should refer to all other historians who are employed as historians. The latter term is proper because the historian as a teacher is a recent (late Middle Ages) innovation, and the historian as government chronicler, researcher, collector, preserver, and writer has traditional role models dating back more than two millennia to the time of Caesar.¹

Settling what to call ourselves would be an initial step toward solving one of the major problems of the historical profession today. That problem is not a job crisis, but instead an identity crisis. So much of graduate history training is directed toward the production of history professors, and yet the need for such is diminishing, while at the same time hundreds of historians are employed as historians outside of academia. As Richard G. Hewlett, Chief Historian, Historian's Office, U.S. Department of Energy, has pointed out, historians expend much time and energy worrying about alternative career opportunities. What is it about the structure of our profession that makes this necessary? Consider the legal profession. Has anyone ever heard of a lawyer talking about the need for alternative careers? Why is it that lawyers, as well as physicians, economists, scientists, and other professionals can adapt their skills to the needs of academia, or corporations, or governments, while historians find much difficulty in doing so? All of this says volumes about the state of the profession today and our academic training programs.²

David A. Clary, for several years the head of the History Section of the Forest Service, stated the problem of the historian's "job crisis" rather succinctly in an address at the 1978 Public Studies Program at Santa Barbara:

In refusing to respond to the needs of the real world beyond the specialized circles of their discipline, historians not only acquiesce in the possible deterioration of our national patrimony, but may be writing their own professional epitaph. The present "job crisis" in the profession is due not so much to an absence of need for historians, nor to an over-population of them, nor even to the vicissitudes of the economy, as it is to the fact that most historians have been brainwashed into believing that they are fit only to be college professors. It is only the academic field, not the historical one, that is on the wane. Historians will prosper if they can but learn to work elsewhere than on sinking ships.³

This paper was delivered at the twenty-third annual meeting of the Missouri Valley History Conference in Omaha, Nebraska, March 7, 1980.

More recently, Clary has noted that there are positions for historians in industry and government, although businessmen, government leaders, and historians do not appreciate this yet. There are few, if any, positions, however, that require only "pure historical research and writing."⁴

There are jobs in teaching for the Ph.D. in history. But unless something is done soon, their number will continue to dwindle. One of the truly bizarre traits of our profession is that graduate history students are so often trained with only the goal of becoming clones of their mentors. Those of us who were trained in the traditional graduate school can all remember that frightening experience of walking out of the dusty archives and into the sterile atmosphere of the classroom. At that moment, we realized that we had not been trained to be teachers. We knew little if anything about counseling, curriculum design, course planning, and administrative techniques.⁵ We were trained to be teachers and scholars. However, teacher training was non-existent, and, as far as the scholarly life was concerned, we knew how to research esoteric topics, but how to submit articles for publication and the like was never or rarely mentioned.

Recent American Historical Association statistics on available teaching positions are revealing. During the 1980-81 academic year⁶ the AHA Employment Information Bulletin advertised 195 permanent teaching openings. The editors of the AHA-EIB wishfully stated in June 1980 that if "the number of history doctorates granted continues to decrease, the excess of new Ph.D.'s over job vacancies will probably be lower than at any time in the past ten years."⁷ Such was not to be in 1980-81, however, for American universities granted 583 doctorates, a 9% increase over the previous year.⁸

College and university history teachers must begin to counsel their students better, by advising them that there are a multitude of job possibilities for historians outside of the teaching field. The pamphlets and brochures listing alternative options should be available to every history student. What they can tell the student and what we history teachers should explain is that teaching should not be considered the major leagues of academe, while a job as a public historian is classified merely a minor league position. As long as our profession perpetuates the image that there is some sort of pyramid of professional progress which has us all trying to scramble up the ladder of success from the "alternative career" to the small college and eventually to universities, there will be a job crisis, because there will be an identity crisis.

Public history must be better understood by all of us. Public history "is the practice of history outside an academic setting, . . . in government, business, museums, archives, libraries, newspapers, or broadcasting organizations."⁹ Public historians work with architects and urban planners in the field of historical preservation; they assist advertisers, land-use planners, formulators of foreign policy, American investors in foreign markets, etc.¹⁰

Martin K. Gordon has noted, for instance, that while he was working as a historian at the office of the Chief of Engineers of the U.S. Army he and other historians were asked to research the origins of the Army's responsibility for the Mississippi River levee system. The levee system was becoming a major burden, and what the Army wanted to know was whether or not they had a legal responsibility, or just a traditional responsibility, for the levees.

Besides holding this position, Gordon works part time as an historical consultant to an advertising agency in Baltimore. One of the accounts the agency has is the National Guard. Before any advertisement is released, Gordon is called in to review it and certify its historical accuracy. This does not

take much of his time, but it justifies a nice little retainer fee, and it guarantees that the history being presented to the public is good history.¹¹

The following is a brief survey of career options in the field of public history:

Careers for Historians with the Federal Government

The National Coordinating Committee for the Promotion of History surveyed federal government agencies in 1977 and found that 125 historical units employed 800 historians. These are historians, as Richard Hewlett describes them, who function as historians at least 50% of their work time. He estimates that there are between 1000 and 2000 historians working for the federal government, but, although many of them have been hired because they had the skills of a historian and those skills were needed by a particular agency, many of them do not "do history" very often. Congressional aides, for example, may only occasionally be required to research the history of a problem or law. Far more time is spent answering constituents requests and devising political justification for their employees' positions.¹² Those who are hired as historians by federal agencies are those "who can provide data the managers need in order to make decisions;" in essence, then, those who can apply "the general knowledge and skills of the research historian to the needs and problems of others."¹³

The future for public historians is bright in regard to the federal government, if historians are able to convince more and more agencies that adequate planning and management require the consideration of not only technical and scientific factors, but also social and institutional factors. The historian, properly trained, can make a valuable contribution to policy research regarding the latter factors. At present, however, the role of the historian in policy research is not understood by most government officials. In fact, there is no agreement among government officials on an operational definition of an historian.¹⁴

The problem lies mostly with the historians themselves. We have failed to articulate clearly the value of history to government and corporate leaders. Historians develop skills during their graduate studies but frequently do not sell themselves to employers as possessors of needed skills. A future employer in government or business is not interested in the fact that a historian has written a brilliant historiographical essay on the causes of the War of 1812. But he very well might be interested in the skills one developed while writing such an essay, such as the ability to know where to find information, to absorb large quantities of information quickly, to appreciate a variety of viewpoints, to communicate clearly both orally and through the written word, and to meet deadlines. These skills are attractive to an employer, while the knowledge of the War of 1812 historiography probably is not.

It might be instructive to review the professional career of public historian Richard A. Baker. Baker, a very personable individual, has constantly created within the minds of employers a feeling of a need for someone to do something and then just happens to be available to fulfill that need. A good example is the present position he holds as head of the U.S. Senate Historical Office. Armed with a M.A. in history and one in Library Science, some experience with various government agencies and Washington think tanks, Baker suggested at the beginning of the 1970s to Senator Mike Mansfield that, given the illustrious history of the Senate, it was a shame that there was no official keeper of Senate documents. The seed grew in Mansfield's mind, and when the Senate established its Historical Office, Baker, of course, was the perfect person to head this office.¹⁵ When Baker left his job to go to the Senate Historical Office, there was an opening created for an historian. Where

there had only been one, now there were two historians. That type of breeding, which requires a certain amount of creativity and knowledge and spunk, is just what we need.

Careers for Historians in Historical Preservation

Since the passage of the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 and particularly since our Bicentennial, historical preservation has become a real bull market. The major concentrations of historians working in the historical preservation field are in the Departments of Interior and Agriculture, but federal legislation has mandated that each state have its own Historic Preservation Office, creating job opportunities on both the federal and state level, and, in some communities, even on the local level.

Historians in this field work with architects, architectural historians, art historians, and archeologists. All too frequently, according to David Clary, historians take a back seat to architectural and art historians. Frequently what is saved is what is significant in terms of architecture and not always in terms of social or cultural history. Historians need to be more self-assertive and creative here too.¹⁶

Because many federally-funded projects are funded by law to be studied not only in terms of environmental impact, but also historical impact, there are opportunities for historians as consultants. Indeed, a 1981 publication of the National Coordinating Committee For The Promotion of History lists 32 historical consultant firms, with staff members numbering almost 100, and 75 additional historians, offering their services as historical consultants to communities, ethnic groups, corporations, individuals, and others.¹⁷

Careers for Historians in Museums

Before World War II, museums were elitist institutions. But the present generation of museum directors has gradually transformed museums into more populist institutions, hoping to create an enriching experience and an alternative to rigid classroom education.¹⁸ There are over 5500 museums in America, ranging from the Smithsonian Institution which employes hundreds to small museums like those dedicated to the potato or spider. Most of the smaller museums are staffed by volunteers. According to Jane R. Glaser, program manager of the Smithsonian's Office of Museum Programs and chairman of several committees of the American Association of Museums, opportunities for volunteer work abound in museums, but opportunities for well-paying positions are narrow. Museum budgets continue to grow, however, and if this trend continues the future will be brighter than the past.¹⁹

Careers for Historians in Archives

Archivists are primarily concerned with the preservation and protection of public and private records and making such records accessible to researchers. Historians are used as consultants in archives, helping to determine the importance of documents, in other words, deciding what should be saved and what should be thrown out. (The National Archives, for instance, saves only about 3% of the documents that agencies send to it.) Historians also prepare exhibits; edit summaries of collections; and advise researchers where to look for answers to their historical questions.

Opportunities for employment are not bright presently. According to J. Samuel Walker, an education specialist at the National Archives, the largest employer of historian/archivists in America, the National Archives hires only about twenty or thirty persons a year, a very small group given the number of

applicants.²⁰ There are archives in local and state historical societies, but many of these are staffed by either part-time or volunteer workers.

Preparing for a Career in History

Communication and research skills should be (and frequently are) the major products of graduate history work. But are these skills channelled in a way necessary for employment? A history student, for instance, who is considering a career in the field of historical preservation, should be able to describe the history of physical culture items. Instead of writing a half dozen papers in graduate school that involve mostly a tracing of the history of a diplomatic principle or political movement, it would be better if that student wrote at least one paper describing the history of a building--and not what went on in the building itself. The discipline of precise writing would be learned quickly during such an assignment.

Flexibility is one of the most important qualities needed by the traditional historian. Most employers do not have dissertation-length projects for the historian to pursue leisurely over a long period of time. An employer is looking for a person who can accomplish on time a series of projects in a variety of areas. Some of these projects might involve team work, where an historian might work with an architect, engineer, and economist. Experience in team work is essential.

Designing an academic program in order to acquire the experience necessary to become a traditional historian is the responsibility of the student and his or her advisor. In addition to excelling in the classroom and seminar setting, one should seek a variety of internship experiences. Although many internships may pay little or nothing, their advantage is that they are an investment in one's future career. They give one experience and a source of a letter of recommendation. An intern who is not satisfied with a single assignment, but seeks out a variety of tasks will be able to demonstrate flexibility easily to future employers.

Whether to major exclusively in history and earn a doctorate in history, or to earn a Master's degree in history and one in some other field, such as archival work, conservation science, or business administration is an important decision. Being trained to think along several channels, and not just one, such as an historian, is extremely important to acquiring an entrance level position. Advancement beyond a certain middle level position, however, at times is dependent in part on one's holding a doctorate degree. Thus, the dilemma of whether or not to pursue the doctorate exclusively must be faced. Eventually one may need it, but only after one is progressing in a career for which a doctorate is not needed initially.

The experience of one public historian may be valuable to keep in mind. John T. Greenwood, an historian with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, complained at a recent AHA meeting that even his graduate training in military history did not fully prepare him to work as a historian with the Department of Defense. The overwhelming quantity of research that he had to finish before frequently occurring deadlines was not an experience he had met in graduate school.²¹

A succinct description of a public historian's needs has been made by G. Wesley Johnson, director of the public history program at Santa Barbara. He has said that public historians need training in "teamwork, meeting deadlines, and searching out primary sources."²² These skills are important, of course, even for the history graduate who goes into teaching, given the growing popularity of interdisciplinary courses, committee work, and "publish or perish" standards.

Once a field is selected, such as preservation or museum work, it is extremely important to choose the correct graduate program. Professional organizations will frequently offer valuable advice. The American Association of Museums accredits some programs and does not accredit others. They even suggest in some cases that "museum training programs are not and should not be considered the only or necessarily the best routes into the museum profession."²³

Logically, some careers require more than just training in history. The American Association for State and Local History recommends that for the historic preservation field, in addition to a strong background in history, academic training in "engineering, economics, business administration, architecture, law, urban planning, (and) geography" would be valuable.²⁴

One could go on, but what basically is needed for each graduate student is a good advisor, and each of us who are advisors had better know our field. Our field is much broader than many of us thought. And our field cannot afford for us to be turning out just our own clones.

NOTES

¹ Martin K. Gordon, "Careers As A Public Historian," Conference on Careers for Historians, Emmitsburg, Maryland, March 24, 1979.

² Richard G. Hewlett, "Careers As A Public Historian," Conference on Careers for Historians, Emmitsburg, Maryland, March 24, 1979.

³ David A. Clary, "Historic Preservation and Environmental Protection: The Role of the Historian," Conference on Cultural Resources Management and Public Historian, sponsored by the Public Historical Studies Program, University of California, Santa Barbara, California, April 21-22, 1978.

⁴ David A. Clary, "Write When You Find Words: Advice For Graduate Faculty On Training Employable Historians," The History Teacher, XII (November, 1978), 69.

⁵ Ibid., 71-72.

⁶ The period October 1980 to October 1981 was used because the AHA-EIB employs the October to October period for statistical purposes.

⁷ AHA, Employment Information Bulletin, IX (June, 1980), 1.

⁸ AHA, Employment Information Bulletin, IX and X.

⁹ Ellen K. Coughlin, "Where Are the Jobs? Outside Academia, More and More Historians Find," The Chronicle of Higher Education, XVII (January 8, 1979), 1.

¹⁰ Clary, The History Teacher, 75-76.

¹¹ Gordon, "Careers As A Public Historian."

¹² Hewlett, "Careers As A Public Historian."

¹³ Clary, The History Teacher, 74.

¹⁴ Hewlett, "Careers As A Public Historian."

- ¹⁵Richard A. Baker, "Careers As A Public Historian," Conference on Careers for Historians, Emmitsburg, Maryland, March 24, 1979.
- ¹⁶David A. Clary, "Careers in Historical Preservation," Conference on Careers for Historians, Emmitsburg, Maryland, March 24, 1979.
- ¹⁷National Coordinating Committee for the Promotion of History, Directory of Historical Consultants (Washington, D.C.: American Historical Association, 1981).
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- ¹⁹Ibid.
- ²⁰Samuel Walker, "Careers in Archives," Conference on Careers for Historians, Emmitsburg, Maryland, March 24, 1979.
- ²¹Coughlin, 11.
- ²²Ibid.
- ²³American Association of Museums, Statement on Preparation for Professional Museum Careers, November/December, 1978.
- ²⁴American Association for State and Local History, So You've Chosen to Be a History Professional (Nashville, Tennessee, n.d.), 6-7.

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This bibliography lists agencies and groups, addresses, and titles of publications that will be useful to the counselor or student interested in careers for historians.

1. American Association of Museums
1055 Thomas Jefferson St., N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20007

Museum News
2. American Association for State and Local History
1400 Eighth Ave. South
Nashville, Tennessee 37203

History News
So You've Chosen To Be A History Professional
3. American Historical Association
400 A. Street
Washington, D.C. 20003

AHA Employment Information Bulletin
Careers for Students of History
Grants and Fellowships of Interest to Historians

4. Commandant of the Marine Corps
Code HD
Headquarters, U.S.M.C
Washington, D.C. 20380

The United States Marine Corps Historical Center
5. Government Printing Office
Washington, D.C. 20402

Beyond the B.A.: Federal Jobs for Graduates with Advanced Degrees or Experience #006-000-01047-7
Guide to Federal Career Literature #006-000-01047-7
Opportunities Abroad for Teachers #017-080-01897-7
6. History Office
NASA Headquarters
Washington, D.C. 20546

Alex Roland's A Guide to Research in NASA History
7. National Coordinating Committee for the Promotion of History
400 A Street
Washington, DC 20003

Directory and Survey of Historical Offices and Programs in the Federal Government
Historians' Skills and Business Needs
8. National Endowment for the Arts
Washington, D.C. 20560

Museums and Historical Organizations Program
Museum Education and Cooperative Programs Grants
Museums, USA
9. National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior
Washington, DC 20240

Career Outlines
Park Areas & Employment Opportunities
Seasonal Employment, National Park Service
10. Education Services Division
National Trust for Historical Preservation
740-748 Jackson Pl., N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20006

Guide to Degree Programs in Historical Preservation
Historic Preservation
Preservation News
11. Naval History Division of the Naval Historical Center
Department of the Navy
Washington, D.C. 20374

Functions of the Naval History Division, U.S. Navy

12. Senate Historical Office
Office of the Secretary
U.S. Senate
Washington, D.C. 20510

Senate History

13. Museum Reference Center
Office of Museum Programs
Arts & Industries Bldg.
Room 2235
Smithsonian Institution
Washington, D.C. 20560

Museum Studies Programs in the United States and Abroad

14. The State Education Department
Office of the Doctoral Project
Albany, New York 12230

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15. Department of History
University of California
Santa Barbara, California 93106

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