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Public History and Public Memory

DIANE F. BRITTON

Americans are in love with their pasts. The popularity of historical novels by individuals such as Howard Fast and John Jakes, the History Channel’s ability to attract 30 million weekly viewers, increasing sales of computer software games like “The Oregon Trail,” participation in reenactment groups, and the listing of over 800 local historical organizations in a guide published by the Ohio Association of Historical Societies and Museums all attest to a demand in our culture for access to the past. Living rooms are mini-museums with photographs and artifacts that represent what is important about the past on a personal level. In some families, memories,

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traditions, and heirlooms are passed down from generation to generation, thus preserving a sense of continuity. Americans love the past, and they engage it on a daily basis.

How is this love of the past related to what we do as professional public historians? Is it connected to the history we interpret for audiences in historical societies and museums, for example, or for students sitting in our classrooms? Do historic preservation planning, policy analysis, or public and private commemoration have a relationship to it? What role should historians play in assisting the public to understand the past as we move into the twenty-first century? How do we continue to confront the issue of “who owns the past”? Who determines which stories or interpretations are legitimate, what should be remembered and saved? How do the ways that individuals identify with the past influence what we do as professional interpreters of history? These are all questions that we must continue to address as we move toward the millennium. At the same time, we must consider that at the center of all of these issues lies the delicate balance between history and memory.

In the recent blockbuster movie, Star Trek: First Contact, Captain Jean Luc Picard travels back in time with his crew in order to save the future from takeover by a deadly alien force—the Borg. In Picard’s past, the year 2063, he confronts the society of scientists—survivors of World War III—who invent warp speed, and thus make inter-galactic space travel possible. As he enters the missile silo that contains the “Phoenix,” the first warp-drive rocket ship (a converted Titan II missile), a look of fond remembrance comes over Picard’s face. He reverently places his hands on the ship and softly strokes its hull. His android companion, Data, does not understand. Picard explains that by touching something from the past, a real connection is made. Throughout the movie, the visitors from the future remain in awe of Zefram Cochrane, the twenty-first century creator of the warp drive which powers starships to fly at the speed of light and beyond. The engineering staff, especially Lt. Reginald Barkly, follow him around, hoping to shake the famous man’s hand or to speak with him. They tell him about the huge monument, complete with his statue pointing to the stars, built on the side of a Montana mountain. One crew member exuberantly tells Cochrane that he studied about him at Star Fleet Academy. And before that, he attended a school named in his honor. The twenty-first-century man responds to these reports of his impending notoriety in dismay. “That’s not me,” he tells the confused visitors from the future. Cochrane built the warp-drive prototype ship to make money, not to initiate a new era of peace and harmony in

2. A session at the 1996 American Historical Association (AHA) annual meeting entitled “Who Owns History” considered the clash between “histories professionally recounted” and “memories thoughtfully revisited.” Papers from the session are published as a “Noteworthy Forum” in AHA Perspectives 34 (October 1996): 1, 6–10, 26 and AHA Perspectives 34 (November 1996): 1, 4–6.
the universe for all of humanity, as popular historical interpretation has led people in the future to believe. 

This is but one example of how a general understanding of the past is reflected in the popular culture. The lines between memory and history are blurred. Generally speaking, our culture promotes a sense of the past that clashes with what historians have documented to be true. The well-known story of Paul Revere, for example, differs from the historical facts.

Listen, my children, and you shall hear
Of the midnight ride of Paul Revere,
On the eighteenth of April, in Seventy-five;
Hardly a man is now alive
Who remembers that famous day and year.

In 1923, as Warren G. Harding toured the country, a critic pointed out to him that Revere had been captured by the British and never made the ride that Longfellow immortalized in verse. Unfazed, Harding told a crowd, “Suppose he did not; somebody made the ride and stirred the minutemen in the colonies to fight the battle of Lexington, which was the beginning of independence in the new Republic in America. I love the story of Paul Revere whether he rode or not.” Longfellow’s famous lines, and the images they invoke, continue to make up a part of the backdrop of American life and as such contribute to societal understanding of the past. Public history students in my courses have noted similar patterns. When asked to record historical messages that they encounter in their everyday lives in a memory journal, they quickly become overwhelmed with the quantity and variety of those images. Looking for connecting themes that may help to define a public historical consciousness, students conclude that these messages reinforce many of the popular notions about history.

For example, because Americans view themselves as heroic people, they tend to emphasize the lives of great individuals and undervalue social groups and movements. When Michael Frisch asked general-education-level college students to list the first ten names that come to mind with the prompt

6. A regular assignment in my Introduction to Public History class is for students to keep a journal of historical messages that they encounter in their daily lives. These have been as diverse as street names, newspaper and magazine articles, song lyrics, product packaging, advertising, movies and TV, museum exhibits, family photograph albums, etc. After several weeks of reading and discussion, the students write essays which analyze these messages within a discussion of the intersection of memory and history. I believe that it is an essential first step for public historians to understand the mindset and cultural milieu of their audiences before attempting to interpret the past for or with them. For more information about the course or assignment, contact the author.
“American history up to 1865,” they consistently cited men such as George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and Abraham Lincoln. Interestingly, repeating the same exercise with other groups, including museum personnel and history majors, produced similar outcomes. Student memory journals record place names, street signs, monuments, and even currency that pay tribute to larger-than-life figures, mostly men, who have become the symbols of what it means to be an American. This type of cultural reinforcement helps to explain the continuity of public memory, and thus the consistent results of Frisch’s stream-of-consciousness activity. Even in the fictional Star Trek movie, public memory of Zefram Cochrane reflects the kind of hero worship that characterizes an exceptionalist view of a national and local past.

Beyond heroism, Americans value bravery and thus often choose to interpret military struggles in terms of victory and gallantry instead of looking at the victims. Frederick Douglass’s efforts to perpetuate a memory of the Civil War that promoted social justice for the former victims of slavery became overshadowed by the desire to honor the courage and conviction of soldiers who fought on both sides of the cause. World War II, in the public memory, rocketed the United States not only to superpower status but secured its position as the arbiter of morality worldwide. This is ironic, perhaps, in light of the fact that the army incarcerated tens of thousands of United States citizens because of unwarranted suspicions of sabotage. Even Vietnam, which simultaneously invoked support of American policies and vocal criticism of military atrocities while the war raged, can be memorialized with a focus on unity and humanity.

7. Michael Frisch, “American History and the Structures of Collective Memory: A Modest Exercise in Empirical Iconography,” in David Thelen, ed., Memory and American History (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 1–26. Frisch used this exercise with survey-level history classes over a period of eight years at SUNY Buffalo and found little variation in the names recorded. Over the past six years, I have repeated the exercise with a variety of groups, including survey and upper-level history classes, public history students, secondary school teachers and museum professionals. The lists, which result from a stream of consciousness prompt, remain similar to those that Frisch reported in his article.

Americans also perceive themselves as a compassionate people and respond well to places that attest to their involvement with the less fortunate, resulting in more sites commemorating stations on the Underground Railroad than ever existed in the pre-Civil War era. Stories of secret rooms, hidden tunnels, and the courage of white abolitionists who risked their own lives to aid the helpless victims of slavery continue to fascinate. Larry Gara has pointed out that "the legend itself reveals something of the American character" which may explain its popular persistence. He notes that "local pride in northern communities also contributed to the growth of the legend. Traditional accounts were published in many city and county histories as well as in journals of local historical societies. Every barn that had ever housed a fugitive, and some that hadn't, were listed as underground railroad depots.... and there are few sections in the North that cannot boast at least one underground railroad depot."9

During black history month, the Toledo Blade ran a story to highlight underground railroad sites in the area, although the headline could claim only that the city "may have had several stops." Nevertheless, local property owners perpetuate old stories that lend a sense of mystery to the historic houses they inhabit. The article did point out that one rumored site was not constructed until after the Civil War.10 While we extol the underground railroad legend, we choose to ignore or downplay the horror of other events from the past. Colonial Williamsburg has struggled with the issue of how to interpret the history of slavery without disturbing the sensibilities of its guests. One visitor who toured the historic homes of George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, James Monroe, and George Mason noted that whereas tour guides admitted that each of the early patriots had owned slaves, "all were morally opposed to slavery."11

Americans see themselves as progressive people and therefore enshrine the artifacts of technological advancement and invention while they tear down the vestiges of conflict and strife. Thus, the National Air and Space Museum serves as a symbol of pride "in the unmistakable triumph of American technology" while it ignores failure, controversy, and the voices of groups that might provide a fuller picture of the past.12 In Toledo, a group of prominent citizens is working to create "Toledo’s Attic," a museum of

10. Nara Schoenberg, "Running on the Road to Freedom: Toledo may have had several stops on the Underground Railroad," Toledo Blade, 16 February 1997.
twentieth-century industrial progress in that city. While a colloquium of scholars and planning committee members discussed and debated the relative merits of various themes that might be included in the interpretive focus, city-hired demolition crews turned the Historic Elm Street Bridge into a pile of rubble in order to make way for the Buckeye Basin Greenbelt Parkway. Throughout the summer of 1996, historic preservationists, neighborhood activists, and labor leaders had struggled to save the bridge, or at least have it carefully dismantled for use in a labor memorial. The site became famous during the Auto-Lite strike of 1934, one of the events that contributed to the passage of the Wagner Act and the founding of the CIO. The bridge connected factory grounds to a huge scrap yard where workers had gathered prior to rushing the plant gates. Control of the area became vital for national guardsmen who placed a machine-gun nest overlooking the bridge where some of the fiercest fighting broke out. Two young workers eventually died in the conflict. More than sixty years later, the site still evokes emotional responses, as evidenced by the debate over its interpretation for Toledo's Attic. One colloquium member referred to the bridge as a "plague" that should not be included for fear of fanning the flames of old controversy. Others view the bridge as a symbol of Toledo's labor history and its connection to larger national struggles to gain rights for working people. For now, the remains of the bridge sit in dumpsters in the corner of a city maintenance yard.13

Americans still see their country as a refuge for oppressed people, the great "melting pot" of the world's cultures, and tend to associate their immigrant past with symbols like the Statue of Liberty and Ellis Island. John Bodnar has pointed out that these icons "represent a distinctive view of American history. They stand for the notion that immigration to this country was essentially a strike for personal freedom and the enhancement of individual opportunity; they reaffirm the belief that this nation is today what it has always been: a place of hope and opportunity for diverse and less fortunate people throughout the world." These symbols help to define national values and encourage patriotism, but by themselves they do not reflect the complexity of historical experiences for individual immigrants and their families over time and space.14

13. Timothy Messer-Kruse, “Bulldozing Labor History: The Demolition of Toledo’s Historic Elm Street Bridge,” *Northwest Ohio Quarterly* 68 (Summer/Autumn 1996): 144–47 provides a good summary of the bridge’s significance and the events surrounding its destruction. The Toledo’s Attic Colloquium, organized by Professor Roger Ray, head of the Humanities Institute at the University of Toledo, includes scholars from history, political science, and urban affairs; local historians; and members of a larger planning group who represent city businesses.

14. John Bodnar, “Symbols and Servants: Immigrant America and the Limits of Public History,” *Journal of American History* 73 (June 1986): 137. In a roundtable discussion, “Government-Sponsored Research: A Sanitized Past?” *The Public Historian* 10 (Summer 1988): 31–58, historians familiar with the dilemmas of presenting history to public audiences commented on Bodnar’s view that use of these sites by the National Park Service to interpret immigrant history encouraged an official view of the past. My comments here are not meant to reopen that debate, but merely to cite familiar public symbols that evoke particular memories about the American past.
Americans define the United States as a classless society and extol the accomplishments of the individual. Many public schools emphasize the land of opportunity theme and ignore the complexities of this diverse and stratified society. James Loewen examined twelve American history textbooks commonly used in secondary-level classrooms and discovered that “the conflicting desires to promote inquiry and to indoctrinate blind patriotism” resulted in lack of interest among students who do not see history as relevant to their lives. In the textbooks, he identified hero worship that distorts the lives of real people and portrays them as “melodramatic stick figures” without inner struggles, lack of cultural diversity in the story of European exploration and exploitation of America, avoidance of any discussion of the relationship between history and racism, Justifications for inequality, and a positive view of government that reflects a sense of idealism. In addition, textbooks tend to neglect the recent past, making it difficult for students “to draw connections between the study of the past, their lives today, and the issues they will face in the future.” Loewen concludes that “students are left with no resources to understand, accept, or rebut historical referents used in arguments by candidates for office, sociology professors, or newspaper journalists. If knowledge is power, ignorance cannot be bliss.”

Classroom teachers, state social studies administrators, academic historians, representatives of professional organizations, public interest groups, and parents spent four years devising the National Standards for History under the co-directorship of Gary B. Nash and Charlotte Crabtree. While a political battle raged over what should be included in these guidelines for history education, the basic premise that “knowledge of history is the precondition of political intelligence” remained unscathed. The authors of the National Standards defended the significance of history for the educated citizen:

History opens to students the great record of human experience, revealing the vast range of accommodations individuals and societies have made to the problems confronting them, and disclosing the consequences that have followed the various choices that have been made. By studying the choices and decisions of the past, students can confront today’s problems and choices with a deeper awareness of the alternatives before them and the likely consequences of each.

15. James W. Loewen, *Lies My Teacher Told Me: Everything Your American History Textbook Got Wrong* (New York: The New Press, 1995), 1–7, 26, 62, 67–68, 138, 207, 209–210, 246 and 294. Loewen’s new project involves a consideration of how the memory of the past is depicted in historic markers and monuments. In a post to pubhist, the NCPH-sponsored Internet public history discussion list, he notes finding “at least a dozen markers and monuments celebrating the KKK or KKK founders, but no marker or monument celebrating a defeat of the KKK or noting anything wrong with it.”

16. National Standards for History (Los Angeles, Calif.: National Center for History in the Schools, 1996), 41. For information about the controversy over development of the standards see Gary B. Nash, “National Standards in U.S. History: A Note from the President.” *OAH Newsletter* 22 (November 1994): 1, 16; Lynne V. Cheney, “The End of
This is, of course, a basic assumption of the discipline. Yet the substance of historical lessons remains contested territory. In the novel *The Giver*, winner of the 1994 Newbery Medal, author Lois Lowry examines the ramifications of a society that seeks perfection through the denial of memory. Young readers encounter a central character who discovers that an awareness of history’s complexity—a knowledge of both the painful and pleasurable aspects of the past—is what provides true meaning for life in the present. Yet, how is this concept reflected in the history that students learn in the classroom?

What we choose to touch from the past invokes the memory of how we see ourselves as a society. The images that we preserve to remember our collective past are reflected in the historical messages that confront us in our daily lives, thus reinforcing a sense of shared historical consciousness. Perhaps with honest contemplation we can admit that the same process occurs in our personal lives—what we save as individuals defines a sense of self-identity that tends to focus on pleasant nostalgia. Students asked to list what their families save from the past and then to analyze what we know about history from these items described themes of survival, family heroism, compassion, and progress, and noted that these topics mirrored historical memory on a larger societal scale. These anecdotal observations indicate the necessity for a better understanding of the ways in which Americans perceive history. David Thelen and Roy Rosenzweig’s upcoming publication, *How Americans Use and Understand the Past*, addresses “the need to know more about popular perspectives on the past.” The authors’ motivations include a desire to “converse more clearly” with increasingly diverse audiences that have resulted from ongoing efforts “to create more democratic historical content and practice,” encourage a consideration of the past as “a source of empowerment, identity, and instruction in making a better future,” and contribute to the growing scholarly literature concerned with popular historical consciousness. The study begins with the premise, postulated years ago by Carl Becker, that Americans are active users of the past and therefore participate in an enterprise similar to that of professional historians. This is a notion not seriously investigated, so a new national survey provides the raw data to examine ways that Americans engage the past in their everyday lives. This publication may help us to begin to

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17. The exercise of listing what individuals save from the past is part of a humanities class, *Transformation of Memory*, that I teach at the University of Toledo.

address the questions posed earlier by connecting personal memory with popular historical understanding.

National historical consciousness has undergone continual change as Americans seek to define themselves based on a shared perception of the past. Michael Kammen, in his seminal work *Mystic Chords of Memory*, explores the roles of tradition, collective memory, and patriotism in American society and the transformations that they have undergone, especially in the generations since 1870. His book analyzes the ways in which the American people have acquired their sense of the past, how they have ascribed symbolic meaning to it, and how their perceptions and uses of the past have changed over time. Those constructions are based on struggles over identity and memory. Recent studies of memory define it as an act of construction, undertaken in support of identity. Conflicting constructions of memory form the epicenter of contested public historical interpretations.19 Americans are in love with the past because it defines who they are as individuals and what they value as a society. When professional historians interpret and thus challenge that identity, they threaten a structure of beliefs that provides meaning and significance to the lives of individuals and groups.

So who speaks for history? Is history a collective memory or something more? As professionals, we seem to understand the importance of studying the past, yet even at the most basic level—the teaching of history in the schools—we are challenged by popular notions of what the past should be. In 1997, on the doorstep of the millennium, we live under the threat of political influences that would sever us from the benefits of a discipline that is grounded in a rich and honored heritage. The cancellation of the original *Enola Gay* exhibit at the National Air and Space Museum after pressure from veterans’ groups, the attack by Congress on the first edition of the

National Standards for history education in the United States, the scaling back of the National Endowment for the Humanities in response to conservative criticism, and the withdrawal of state subsidy from history Ph.D. programs in Ohio are just a few of the more outstanding examples of the assault on the professional practice of history.

As issues of scholarship and interpretation have entered the public discourse, professional historians must come to terms with the ramifications of society’s scrutiny of their work. Alfred Young has suggested the development and adoption of a code that would protect “the integrity of historical research and interpretation in museums and historic sites.” His suggestions stimulated a meeting held in Washington, D.C. in conjunction with the Organization of American Historians’ (OAH) 1995 annual meeting. Participants discussed the need for a code, similar to the principle of academic freedom enjoyed by the professoriate, to protect historians who practice history in the public arena. Robert R. Archibald, as president of the American Association for State and Local History (AASLH), however, took issue with the development of a code of interpretive freedom and defined the problem instead as “how historians can be publicly accountable for the narratives they have chosen to present.” He maintained that although a code “may sell well to historians,” it “will not be acceptable to public audiences,” who are required to visit neither our institutions nor our classrooms. The question, according to Archibald, “is not whether historians will subscribe to such a code, but whether the public will.” He has stated that authority over public interpretation should not be based solely on a code of academic freedom but should be developed “primarily through internal agreement and broad public discussion.” Although such a procedure does not guarantee avoidance of controversy, it ensures a broad enough base of support to survive it “with our interpretive integrity intact.”20

Amid the controversies and debates, professional historians who support public history adhere to the goal of reaching out to various audiences with the newest historical scholarship, as Leon Litwack explains:

The study of the past has never been more inclusive, more varied in its focus, more imaginative in its methodology or more sensitive to the range of cultural documentation. . . . Voices long stifled, peoples once marginalized are now being heard and integrated into the study of history. Over the past three decades, this has clearly been the most important and far reaching development in the writing and teaching of history. The inclusion of new voices, dialogues, and experiences has profoundly transformed how we think, talk, and write about the past.

Litwack sees this trend as a reason for self-congratulation, but points out that it is marked by a serious shortcoming—the failure to make that scholarship more accessible and explicable to public audiences. By doing so we might move public interpretations beyond our own society and culture and forego versions of the past that merely serve the interests of the present or the needs of particular groups. According to Litwack, “That kind of history may be good therapy, it may even make for more patriotic citizens, but it has never been good history.” Litwack views academic freedom, “our freedom to question and probe various versions of reality, to experiment with new ideas, and to examine critically old dogmas and values, even to insult proprieties and expose absurdities,” as the “indispensable strength of this nation.” Historians, he says, must speak for history and “exert every effort to protect that right from all intrusion, whether by government agencies, school boards, university regents, textbook commissions, self-appointed censors, or political partisans.” A more humane future depends on our ability “to preserve our past and communicate it freely, clearly and effectively.”

What can we do? We must move ourselves beyond the political debate and concentrate on learning more about the ways that memory and history intersect. We must find a balance between memory and professional historical interpretation. Only in that way can we serve society. Only in that way can we assure the future of the historical profession. Without an understanding of the relationships between memory, identity, and history, arguments about academic freedom mean nothing, and public interpretation of the past is at best sentimental, and at worst useless. Public historians need the security of academic freedom to seek the historical truth objectively—a fundamental precept of this field of study. But at the same time, they need to be cognizant of the diversity of views that audiences bring to interpretations of the past if their constituencies are to be served effectively. Professional historical scholarship can be perceived as elitist by individuals who filter the past through private and shared memories. We must construct a bridge that can span the gulf between these different understandings of history.

Material culture and memories are two vehicles that allow direct access to the past, as demonstrated so aptly by Captain Picard when he encountered an artifact significant not only to his own life but to the very existence of his world. It is important to understand Picard’s emotional response to triggered memories that provided a meaningful identity for him. At the

22. David Glassberg’s essay, “Public History and the Study of Memory,” The Public Historian 18 (Spring 1996):7–23, provides a good starting point for historians to consider the scholarship of memory and its relevance to the teaching and practice of public history. Glassberg’s article won the 1997 G. Wesley Johnson Prize as an outstanding contribution to the public history literature.
same time, however, rigorous historical methodology could have revealed a
more complex portrait of Zefram Cochrane and his invention of a warp-
drive rocket ship, and thereby helped the future understand his significance
beyond the simple hero worship demonstrated by the crew members of the
U.S.S. Enterprise—an interpretation of the inventor that they had gained
through memories reinforced by popular culture.

At a National Council on Public History-sponsored session held during
the 1997 meeting of the American Historical Association (AHA), Organi-
ation of American Historians (OAH) President Linda Kerber characterized
the recent crises in the profession as “tragically energizing” in that they have
had the ironically good effect of helping to diminish some of the artificial
boundaries between historians who, in fact, share common goals. Joyce
Appleby, current AHA president, recently suggested that all historians
become public historians. She acknowledged that public history has en-
gaged the public realm in a variety of ways for some time but emphasized
that beyond interpreting the past, we should “seek every possible opportu-
nity to talk to a nonhistorian . . . about how history is produced.” Appleby
points out that many of the controversies over public historical interpreta-
tion occur because “there is a pervasive popular opinion that somehow the
past lingers on to force the hand of those who reconstruct it. To insist that
historical knowledge begins with someone’s questions destroys that illu-
sion.” She contends that professional historians have a responsibility to their
communities not only to interpret the past, but to promote a better under-
standing of “how historians go about creating historical scholarship in the
first place.”23 At the same time, however, if we choose as professionals to
ignore the knowledge inherent in the cultural memories that surround us,
our message falls on deaf ears, and we remain captives in an ivory tower,
regardless of where we practice our craft.

23. “Public History and Professional Organizations,” NCPH-sponsored session held at the
annual meeting of the American Historical Association, New York City, 4 January 1997, and
Joyce Appleby, “Should We All Become Public Historians?” AHA Perspectives 35 (March
1997): 3–4. The current paper addresses the need to explain to audiences the methodology that
undergirds professional historical interpretations. A related issue is one of presentation of
historical information. In a recent issue of Discover magazine, Jared Diamond comments on
and criticizes the disdain directed toward Carl Sagan by the professional scientific community
because of his efforts to reach broad audiences. There may be a lesson here that we should well
heed in the history profession. Jared Diamond, “Kinship With the Stars,” Discover 18 (May