Public History Field School

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The time is now for public history programs across the nation to begin incorporating the public history field school as an integral and required curricular component for undergraduate and graduate training. Immersing students into a historic setting, complete with staff professionals working to restore, curate, and interpret an existing historic facility, offers students instruction and experience that enriches their public history training and enhances their employment opportunities inside and outside the academy.

professors must expose "historians in training" to primary sources that exist outside of the closed, confined, organized, processed, and exclusive traditional domains. The internship serves a valuable function, but too often it is narrow, targeted, and limited in scope. The antidote to the overly relied upon white gloved, library/archives approach is the field school which can place the shy, nervous, library/archive-dependent historian into an animated world where practitioners are writing interpretive plans, designing exhibits using on-site collections, or recreating various forms of historic technology. The field school places students into a dynamic setting where they are surrounded daily by specialists trained in a variety of fields—material culture, archaeology, historic preservation, living history, and interpretation, just to name a few.

In conjunction with the Montana Heritage Commission at Virginia City, Montana, the public history program at Washington State University offered its third field school in May 2010. It focused primarily on researching and writing draft interpretive plans for the future remaking of the unratified Treaty with the Shoshones, Bannacks, and Sheepeaters of September 24, 1868. Known also as the Virginia City Treaty, it was negotiated and signed at Larrin, Montana Territory, fifteen miles north of Virginia City with Chief Tendoy and eleven subchiefs. Now referred to as the Lemhi Shoshones who are affiliated with the Shoshone-Bannock Tribes of Idaho, these people are the descendants of Sacajawea, the Apsai Dika woman who accompanied Lewis and Clark.

To advance its relevance, public history needs to develop its own versions of archaeology's "paleo motel" field schools such as those at the Meadowcroft Rockshelter in Pennsylvania or the Ozette Indian Village site on the Olympic Peninsula in Washington. It is our conviction that the field school is a vital component for training public historians for the competitive world they are about to enter. Public history

Links to Liberty Field Trip

This summer, the NCPH sponsored the third and final "Links to Liberty" Teaching American History Grant summer field trip, which took fourteen elementary through high school social studies teachers on a five-day field trip through western Pennsylvania. Focusing on the history of the steel and oil industries, both born in Pennsylvania, and designed to improve teacher understanding of American economic, labor, and environmental history, the field trip included visits to the Johnstown Heritage and Johnstown Flood museums, the Braddock Carnegie Library, the site of the 1909 Pressed Steel Car Company strike at McKee's Rock, Old Economy Village, Saint Nicholas Croatian Church in Millvale, the Drake Well and Pithole City historical sites, the Ida Tarbell House, and the first natural gas lateral drill wells and pump sites in Fayette County. Charles Hardy III, a professor of history at West Chester University and the Supervising Historian of ExplorePittsburgh.com organized and led the tour. Its instructors included Charles McCollester, Professor Emeritus of Industrial and Labor Relations, Indiana University of Pennsylvania; Brian Black, a professor of history and environmental studies at Penn State University's Altoona College; and Richard Burkett, president of the Johnstown Area Heritage Association.

Pennsylvania teachers at a Marcellus Shale vertical gas well site in Ridstone Township, Fayette County, PA, with representatives of the Atlas Drill Company, the Penn State Weatherized County Extension, and field trip coordinator Charles Hardy III (black hat, far right).
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Forbes drainage of southwestern Montana to set the stage for understanding the Lemhi Shoshones' historical and cultural ties to the region that prompted the federal government's interest in treaty negotiations. The second week was devoted to researching and understanding the September 1868 treaty negotiations conducted at Laurin, Montana Territory. Three hundred Lemhi Shoshones attended the signing, as well as a large turnout from Virginia City, then the territorial capital. The final week focused on researching, writing, and planning an interpretive event that will recreate that treaty signing.

The value of the field school is incalculable, for it provided students the opportunity to work within a collaborative laboratory environment involving academic instruction, a working historic site setting, and non-Indian and Indian specialists. Student work days began at 8:30 a.m. and ended with a 6:00 p.m. debriefing before dinner. Many continued their research, writing, and website construction afterwards. (See osvigen.org for syllabi, draft assignments, You Tube interviews, and field school photographs.)

The Montana Heritage Commission benefits as well, with its being the beneficiary of theses and dissertation potential, conference presentations by students, MHC staff, and WSU faculty, newspaper and internet coverage, interpretive material development, and the expansion of the history of Virginia City beyond its traditional focus on western mining history. WSU delivers benefits the field school provides students with real world, collaborative, team oriented training that is essential to success in the field of public history. Historic sites visits, collaborative research and writing projects with fellow students, interaction with MHC site professionals and Lemhi Shoshones equip students with skills, training, and experience they would never receive in the classroom or even in an internship posting. Students attending the field school, especially graduate students, are positioned to talk about designing a field school of their own at future job interviews.

In May, Professor John Mann, public history director at University of Wisconsin, Eau Claire, attended the field school, intent on experiencing it for himself as he contemplates developing his own field school. We invite others to do the same.


What's happening “Off the Wall”

"Off the Wall," NCPH’s new exhibit review blog, has explored a variety of dimensions of contemporary history exhibit display in its first couple of months. Not surprisingly, digital display has been featured in more than one review. Marta Shea pondered the social and historiographical dynamics of Flickr’s “Looking into the Past” PhotoStream, while Will Walker examined the community-oriented web presence of the Dulwich Picture Gallery in England. Various other media came into play in the first reviews: Margaret Middleton wrote about a California pirate festival, Melissa Boyajan reflected on ways that visual artists are mining historical archives for materials, and Larry Gebula assessed the radio presence of the academic historians who anchor BackStory Radio. Most recently, Vanessa Macias looked at a conventional history exhibit in a somewhat unconventional setting—a small mall run as a “social purpose business” in El Paso.

New reviews are posted every week or so. Join us at www.ncphoffthewall.blogspot.com, see what’s new, and share your thoughts about what this all means for the present and future of historical exhibit!