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PROFESSIONAL HISTORIANS AND THE CHALLENGE OF REDEFINITION  
Patricia Mooney-Melvin

From the time I entered graduate school, I have been intrigued with the ways in which historians have thought about their profession and their notion of audience as well as the relationship between the history historians make and the history the public receives. My frustration, as I reflect on my years as a historian, is that the profession as a whole, despite the efforts of numerous individuals and a few organizations, has proved remarkably resistant to altering a definition of historian and audience that has grown
static, an artifact of a different time and place. The profession's resistance to change in this area, I believe, has laid the groundwork for its own marginality within American society and has contributed to the general breakdown of the larger civic community.

Michael Kammen, in his introduction to The Past Before Us: Contemporary Historical Writing in the United States, has suggested that ever since the formation of the American Historical Association (AHA) in 1884, the "guild has had a penchant for introspection." As evidence he cites a range of reports sponsored by such groups as the American Historical Association, the Social Science Research Council, and the American Academy of Arts and Sciences that focus on the "state of the discipline" at various points during the twentieth century. Not all of this contemplation has been the result of reports produced by interested organizations. Individual historians have added to this literature as well. Arthur M. Schlesinger's In Retrospect: The History of a Historian (1963), Timothy Donovan's Historical Thought in America: Postwar Patterns (1973), Oscar Handlin's Truth in History (1979), Peter Novick's That Noble Dream: The "Objectivity Question" and the American Historical Profession (1988), and Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt, and Margaret Jacob's Telling the Truth About History (1994), for example, provide windows into more particularistic reflections on the nature of historical study in the United States.

What is striking about virtually all of this introspection is the lack of attention paid to whether or not the prevailing definition of the professional historian should be reexamined in light of changes in both the context and content of the practice of history. Some exceptions, of course, exist. Joan Hoff, in a 1980 article entitled "Is the Historical Profession an 'Endangered Species'?" acknowledged that the way in which contemporary historians thought about their profession left out constituents, such as that of the independent scholar, important during the early years of the profession's development. Hoff exhorts the professional community to return to the "good old days" when the profession was not dominated by academic historians, unfortunately missing the point completely that the presence of amateur or independent historians was merely an accommodation on the part of the professionalizers. Gerda Lerner, in her 1982 presidential address delivered to the Organization of American Historians (OAH), pointed to the necessity to broaden the understanding of "professional roles." Despite her own experience with marginalization, Lerner fails to portray this broadening as little more than pragmatic, band-aid reform. Her vision is the world of add-ons, rather than of reexamination and overhaul.

Even in studies such as Theodore S. Hamerow's Reflections on History and Historians, with its focus on "what it is like to be a professional historian" as opposed to an examination of the nature of historical scholarship, the definition of historian is treated as a fixed category, unrelated to time and place. The only time and place of importance in the defining process, at least as far as the professional historical community is concerned, is that of the period when the professionalizers' construct of historian emerged and took root. Given the way in which we subject everything else to reinterpretation and contextualization, I find it curious that we are so loath to examine—even at the most superficial level—the appropriateness of this definition in light of other aspects of the profession's past and present experiences.

What characterizes a profession? The literature on professions suggests that very few professions actually conform to any particular model. At the same time, however, it is clear that most analysts agree that professions generally possess certain attributes. In addition, those studying the professions point out that very few professions are able to monopolize completely the market for their services. Balancing the desire of any group to exercise control is the level of public acceptance of the arguments put forward by professional marketing campaigns. Often a tension exists between the desire for monopolistic control, the demand for specialized services, the vision of the professionalizers, and the public's willingness to accept professional claims for status. The result of that tension provides the limits in which any professional activity takes place.

The literature on professionalism identifies four basic attributes. First, professionals receive formal training in a setting—usually academic—to ensure quality and competence. Second, professionals possess knowledge and skills that are demonstrable in some applied fashion. Third, the professional ethos includes some commitment of service to society beyond a desire for personal profit. And fourth, professional organizations have the power to define standards and regulate their own affairs as well as the obligation to ensure that professional knowledge and skill will be used in a "socially responsible" fashion.

Where does the historical profession fit into all of this? Although the basic outlines of the history of the historical profession are generally recognized, the tendency of historians to focus on the nature of historical scholarship and its role as a professionalizing force has left relatively unexamined the relationship between professionalization in history and the changing nature of the social, economic, cultural, and political context in which professional development over time has taken place. We know a lot about the context in which the profession emerged and the goals of the professionalizers. We know much less about the history of the profession in the twentieth century, its relationship to American society, and why historians have clung so tightly to a definition that has lost its utility.
The professionalization of history was part of a larger redefinition and institutionalization of knowledge that took place throughout American society during the late nineteenth century. The organization of the American Historical Association in 1884 was symptomatic of efforts to exert control over particular branches of knowledge. By the beginning of the twentieth century, professional historians—for whom history became a corporate task and a specialized career—were on the ascendancy. As Hoff has suggested, the historical profession was not populated exclusively by academic historians during the early decades of professional development. However, what she sees as an integrated unity of different types was, in fact, a period of staged decline for those for whom history was an avocation. Peter Novick more accurately describes what was happening: the membership of amateurs and their selection as presidents of the AHA during the early years of association growth was not acceptance of equals but rather “a matter of legitimization, and accommodation with a still important constituency.” After 1907 academic historians became more likely to hold the presidency of the AHA, and after 1928 virtually all presidents were academically trained and employed historians.

The definition of the historian that emerged from the formative years of professional growth was one which stressed objectivity, research, the increase of knowledge, and employment within an academic setting. Historians’ allegiance was twofold: to “objective historical truth” and to colleagues committed to the pursuit of that truth. Professional status demanded formal graduate training in history that emphasized technique and the use of primary sources. Supporters of professionalism increasingly stressed the importance of academic employment, which, of course, added teaching to the duties of a professional historian. And finally, professionalism precipitated the redefinition of the historian’s audience from the general reading public to academic colleagues as peer review became the central vehicle for monitoring the quality of historical scholarship. As described by J. H. Hexter, “the life of the professional historian was the life of teaching, silent study, work, and writing, interspersed with brief orgies of gossip” (meaning, in this context, another form of judgment by peers). Any other pattern—while tolerated as in the case of Charles Beard, for example—was suspect, and those involved usually were rendered invisible as far as members of the profession were concerned.

By the end of World War II, professional historians possessed all four attributes associated with professionalism. They received their training in a university setting and, when worthy, were admitted to Novick’s “community of the historically competent.” They demonstrated their

knowledge and skills in the college or university classroom, while training graduate students, and by publishing the results of their research in increasingly specialized publications. Historians had professional organizations to set standards and monitor quality. And finally, there was a commitment, although very lukewarm and expendable, to service. The professional historian, as a 1965 publication of the American Historical Association suggested, possessed two obligations. One was to increase knowledge, through research and writing, by adding new facts about the past or developing new interpretations. The other was to transmit, “by teaching and writing, the existing body of knowledge.” Historians carried out these obligations within the confines of a college or university campus.

Professional historians rarely have enjoyed the sort of monopolistic control associated with the professions of medicine or law. For better or worse, as John Higham has noted, the “fluidity and openness” of history kept it from becoming “an arcane discipline. Although its critical operations were exacting, its fundamental tasks of organizing data into a design and thereby recreating the life of the past did not depend on any systematic methodology. Nor had history a special language of its own. Consequently professional historians were unable to immure themselves completely within a specialized sphere.” But the explosion of academic positions after World War II and the insularity that came with the restricted professional audience gave historians the false luxury to ignore the historical interest and “history-making” that took place outside of academe.

The public’s need for “history-making,” or the “process by which people preserve and interpret the past and then reinterpret it in the light of new questions,” ensured that an engagement with the past on the part of the public continued regardless of the disinterest expressed by the professional historical community. In short, the apparent accessibility of history as well as a need for the understanding that knowledge of the past can provide on the part of the general public exerted limits on the level of control exercised by professional historians over the research, writing, and presentation of history—despite the determined efforts of the professionalizers.

Who was ignored by the “community of the historically competent” during the profession’s halcyon days between 1884 and 1970? As the profession matured, its members paid increasingly less attention to two specific categories of people. The first group was composed of those individuals who possessed the appropriate educational credentials but who for one reason or another worked in historical organizations and archives, for the federal government, or as independent historians. The
second category included groups, most particularly precollegiate educators, the general reading public, and visitors to historic sites.

Although the lion’s share of historians resided comfortably in academic departments before 1970, others found themselves using their historical training and applying their knowledge of the past under circumstances quite different from those of the university or college campus. State and local historical societies, archival institutions, and the National Park Service all had academically trained historians as directors or staff members. At institutions such as Colonial Williamsburg, the New York State Historical Association, and the National Archives, as well as within the bureaucracy of the Park Service, historians served as administrators; developed educational materials; researched and wrote exhibitions; engaged in interpretation; and appraised and processed collections. Some of their activities involved skills acquired in addition to their training in history. Other aspects of their employment drew directly upon their ability to undertake research, subject their findings to analysis, and construct a narrative. What made these historians different from those laboring in the academy was their audience, their presentation format, a more regulated work environment, and their limited reliance on peer review. As far as the profession was concerned, they were outside the pale.

The federal government employed historians in a variety of positions in addition to those in the National Park Service and the National Archives. During the 1930s, historians worked in a number of New Deal initiatives. The Department of Agriculture had an active historical program. A number of historians entered government service during World War II, many serving as intelligence analysts for the Office of Strategic Services under the direction of Harvard historian William Langer. Still others were under contract with the State Department and branches of the military. The end of the war sent many of these historians scurrying back to college and university campuses. Others, however, remained in government service and over the next two decades the number of federal historians grew. Useful as their service to the government may have been, most academically based historians questioned the objectivity of their work. In the eyes of the professional historical community, their scholarship was less rigorous, their audiences less discerning, and their work environment less protected from the intrusion of other agendas. With only a few exceptions, the major historical organizations paid scant attention to the needs and accomplishments of these individuals.

The other category ignored by the academically based historical community included groups not necessarily with professionally trained historians in their ranks but for whom history had some importance. During the early years of the profession, historians had hoped to exercise some control over the type of history available in the nation’s elementary and secondary schools. As late as the 1930s, for example, the American Historical Association controlled the editorial board and the financial resources for the magazines produced for high school teachers by the National Council for the Social Studies. The professional historical community contributed articles as well as provided oversight. But such direction was increasingly challenged by educators interested in exerting their own control over what was taught in the schools. As it turned out, the historical profession essentially caved in rather than vigorously contest this challenge.

By the 1950s historians could not agree on whether history should even be a required subject. Some historians were unsure if there existed a convincing rationale to include history in the curricula of primary and secondary schools. Other historians warned that history was used more for indoctrination than understanding. Most historians seemed to care very little if history grew less important in elementary and secondary education. Charles G. Sellers, one of the few historians who appeared to care about this issue, found that his colleagues were indifferent to anything other than the importance of their own courses. Poorly taught history in the precollegiate school system, in their eyes, resulted from inadequately trained teachers, not lack of direction or input from the professional historical community.

Social scientists, Sellers found, showed an interest in working with teachers to develop new learning strategies to facilitate their ability to expose students to the insights garnered through the study of the social sciences. Historians, on the other hand, were unwilling to spend any time on an endeavor that would involve thinking more about teaching, training teachers, or curricular reform. To do so would impinge on their own research. It was easier to do nothing.

Oscar Handlin went so far as to suggest in 1961, for example, that little would be lost if history were removed from the high school curriculum altogether. According to Handlin, it is only possible to teach “facts” in high school. However, observing the level of knowledge of his college students, Handlin concluded that students fail to learn the facts presented to them in high school because the facts possess no meaning for them. Young people, he found, only learn things that appear relevant to them. In his opinion, it would be better to slot instruction in history at the college level. At this point, he argued, students who are bright enough to be admitted to college would be able to see the relevance of facts, and by implication history, to the world around them.

As the 1960s drew to a close, educators and social studies replaced historians and history in providing what concern with the past remained
in the curriculum after the expansion of math and science offerings in the “post-Sputnik” world of precollegiate education. Sellers asked if historians even cared that history was “on its way out of the schools.” He wondered if society would have to rest its hopes on the American Legion to save the teaching of history in the schools.22

Professional historians also seemed uninterested in the loss of the general reading public. Despite a campaign by Allan Nevins in the late 1930s for a popular history magazine, funding difficulties and the outbreak of World War II essentially rendered the project stillborn. In the meantime, the American Association for State and Local History inaugurated a popular, and ultimately successful, history magazine of its own, American Heritage. When taken over by Time-Life in 1954, American Heritage blossomed into a glossy, highly visual, popular magazine that brought history to the public. Few academic historians rushed to be included in the pages of American Heritage. Instead, journalists, military personnel, and history aficionados narrated tidy stories about the American past. While their articles explored a variety of topics, they were often devoid of context and usually lay outside of the historiographical trends that characterized the scholarly interests of the historical profession. However, read over the years by millions of Americans, American Heritage’s approach to the study and interpretation of the past—not that of the professional historical community—has influenced a sizeable number of the history-reading public’s view of what constitutes history and historical writing. In addition, the expansion of the paperback market, which brought historians’ monographs into the classroom during the 1950s, further rendered this segment of the book-buying public less important for academics.23 They did not need to depend on the general public to swell the market for their books.

And finally, the professional historical community abdicated any responsibility it may have felt for the millions of Americans who received their education in history at the nation’s historic sites. After World War II, all the ingredients were in place for a public interested in combining education and entertainment: “good roads, millions of motor cars, a working class that had won two-week vacations, a better educated citizenry, a national preoccupation with historical origins, and a growing number of historical exhibition areas offering a variety of experiences to put twentieth-century families in direct touch with their past.”24 Americans took to the road and visited historic sites, shrines, monuments, and museums as well as fished, swam, hiked, and shopped. Their sense of history was often inaccurate, but their adventures provided them with a sense of the past and an opportunity to “experience a way of life” no longer contemporary.25 As in the case of the readership of American Heritage, the history portrayed to

these visitors often did not reflect an understanding of the dynamic interpretive construct of the past discussed within the confines of the professional historical community.

Abandonment of these groups represents a reflection, in part, of professional historians’ declining commitment to the larger society of which they were a part. Unlike some professions, the historical profession’s adoption of the service component associated with professional status had been problematic at best, and service was not “widely accepted as a part of the profession’s corporate responsibility.”26 Charles Beard and Carl Becker, unlike many of their colleagues, believed that history possessed a social purpose. History existed for society; it was not just the property of individual historians.27 But such views represented a minority position within the profession. The majority of the members of the guild concurred with Thomas Cochran’s position as expressed in a letter to Richard Hofstadter: “the public be damned.”28 It was much more liberating to write for a small circle of friends.

And then came the period of crisis in the 1970s. Some historians agreed with Oscar Handlin that the crisis was one of scholarship and internal control within the profession. According to Handlin, the discipline had fragmented. No longer did the historical community possess a sense of common purpose. Instead, historians chased fads and relied too much on social science method. They wrote monographs with little concern for their place within the “canon.” How could anyone possibly assess such work? The profession had accepted affirmative action. It had compromised the search for “truth.”29

For many other historians the 1970s brought an employment crisis. All of a sudden there seemed to be too many historians for too few jobs in academe. The historical profession’s lesson in “humility,” wrote Hamerow in the mid-1980s, meant that a whole “generation of young scholars” was “decimated. Anyone training graduate students knows what a tragic experience it is to see dedicated and talented men and women go through . . . years of advanced study only to find, after they get their doctorates, that there is no need for them.”30 Should this have been such a surprise when the profession had worked very hard to keep the definition of what it meant to be a professional historian so narrow as to almost ensure its senescence?31

Richard Kirkendall, then executive secretary of the Organization of American Historians, wrote in a report prepared for the OAH in 1976 on the status of history in the schools that “history is in crisis and history’s crisis is not merely a part of the larger difficulties of academic life at the present time. History’s crisis has proportions of its own.”32 And the central element that made history’s crisis “its own” was the issue of definition. The
job crisis in history existed not because historians were not needed nor because there were too many of them. More to the point was the fact that most historians believed that historians could only reside in the world of academe. They had left themselves only one choice. “If the current employment crisis provokes an identity crisis in the historical profession,” wrote Arnita Jones in 1978, “it may be to the lasting benefit of both historians and the public.”

Unfortunately, I believe, it did not provide enough of a jolt to force an insular profession into productive introspection about its identity. However, because the dimensions of the crisis seemed so great, the major historical associations felt they had to do something, and the result was the formation of the National Coordinating Committee for the Promotion of History (NCC) in 1977. The NCC argued that “public perceptions about the value of historical knowledge and skills were inseparable from the problem of the employment of historians.” In this context, the goal was not just to find places for historians to combat the short-run crisis. Instead, attention needed to be focused on “building bridges” between the university and the world outside the academy on one hand and on forging “closer ties” between academic and nonacademic historians on the other.

This was certainly progress, but it sidestepped the issue of definition rather than confronting it directly. This approach allowed the profession to focus on employment as opposed to identity. The discussion that ensued framed the issue as Lerner later did—as an add-on issue rather than a reconceptualization. Established professional organizations and history departments talked not of a new vision of the professional historian but of “alternative” careers.

By the late 1970s public history entered the professional vocabulary. Advocates of public history argued that professional historians were individuals who possessed certain qualifications and who could put their knowledge and skills to use in the world. Place of employment was not the defining issue; training was. Public history became an organizing principle for those who were already employed as historians in nonacademic settings, historians who believed in the importance of communication with a broader public, as well as those individuals interested in pursuing history as a career but not inside the academy. By the early 1980s a variety of history departments introduced public history into their curricula, and by the mid-1980s the first graduates of these programs emerged.

Reaction of the historical profession to public history was mixed. Some historians were hostile and unwilling to accept the proposition that “real” historians worked outside of academe. A number of individuals with professional credentials already working outside of the academy bristled at the notion that public history was “new,” for they had been using their training in a wide range of institutional settings for years. Concerns were raised about ethical issues relating to the practice of history outside of the university. Yet other historians welcomed public history, with its emphasis on a dynamic combination of historical training, expansion of traditional notions of locale and audience, and service to society.

In her 1992 “Viewpoint” in The Public Historian, “Reflections on the Public History Movement,” Page Putnam Miller argued that public history had accomplished a great deal since 1982. And, of course, there is a lot of truth in what Miller said. The American Historical Association’s current “Statement on Standards of Professional Conduct” clearly states that “the historical profession is diverse, composed of people who work in a variety of institutional settings and also as independent professionals.” It further defines the range of scholarship and teaching more inclusively than in the past, although I question the depth of the membership’s knowledge of or commitment to this position.

Miller pointed to four other accomplishments as well. First, new professional associations, such as the National Council on Public History and the Society for History in the Federal Government, were formed and have provided arenas for public historians to share information, discuss their research, and focus on issues of mutual concern. Second, the establishment of new journals, such as The Public Historian, have offered new venues for sharing methodological approaches and showcasing public history-related research and analysis. Third, editorial policy changes in established journals like the Journal of American History have allowed for the inclusion of new features that reflect the legitimization of different approaches to communicating information about the past. And finally, Miller applauded the “pioneering research initiatives undertaken by public historians,” such as the development of a “methodology for the historical investigation of land use at toxic waste sites.”

Perhaps I am too demanding. Perhaps I should be happier that some change for the better has occurred within the profession. And perhaps I am unreasonable. Nonetheless, I am not satisfied. I continue to find my colleagues in the academy more than willing to let me know that public history is not “real” history and that my students must be less talented because they opted for public history rather than “traditional” history. I see graduate students being trained in ways that replicate the narrow vision of history that the profession has so lovingly crafted over the years, a vision that may be tattered around the edges but incredibly resilient despite the “job crisis” of the relatively recent past. Change has come to the two major historical associations although only barely so to the AHA if the 1995 annual convention was any indication of its vision of the history profession.
If we revisit the two categories of people ignored by the profession before the crisis period of the 1970s, it is clear that some improvement has occurred since I entered the profession as a graduate student in 1971. There is greater acceptance of those folks who inhabit the world of the first category, i.e., those individuals who possess the appropriate educational credentials but who for one reason or another work in historical organizations, archives, the National Park Service, for the federal government, or as independent historians. These historians are more integrated into the academy than they were twenty years ago. There are positive signs that our understanding of what constitutes scholarly research and publication has become more inclusive, thus enhancing the profession’s ability to increase and disseminate information about the past. And while the redefining may appear on the surface to have more of an impact on the academy, it also serves to focus attention on the fact that the increase of knowledge can occur under a variety of different conditions.

It is with the fate of the second category that I find myself concerned, for it is in the profession’s relationship to the larger world that the unwillingness of the profession to confront the vision of what it means to be a professional historian directly relates to marginality, abdication of civic responsibility, and, in the end, professional angst. When I listen to all the verbiage surrounding the National Standards for History, or the controversy over the Smithsonian’s exhibition of the Enola Gay, or the agitation over the proposed Disney’s America theme park, I see a profession that has made little progress in confronting the fact that it possesses so little understanding of the audiences it so blithely cast aside before the 1970s. I see, as well, a profession that has forgotten that history matters.

What will our legacy to future generations of historians be? Will we leave them a past that provides them with a very narrow vision of what it means to be a historian? Will we trap them with a mindset that continues to suggest that the boundaries of their professional status represent the world of the academic community? Or, will we bequeath them a world in which they, as professional historians, practice their craft in a range of different contexts?

Historians must do more than bemoan the desire of the public for a past that bears precious little relationship to the past of historians. If the professional historical community cared about what the public learned about the past, it would participate more directly and visibly in the efforts to present responsible interpretation to visitors at historic sites, museums, historical societies, and monuments. Doing so would allow the public to better see historians as integral players in the definition, preservation, and interpretation of America’s historical experience. Jamil Zainaldin, president of the Federation of State Humanities Councils, summed up the situation nicely in a recent discussion of service and scholarship. According to Zainaldin, “the more that our publics know about us, the more they will come to share our values for our craft and help support the practitioners, the higher education institutions, museums, historical societies, and similar institutions that share our mission.”

We need to be concerned as well about the world of precollege education. In one sense Oscar Handlin was right. Relevance or relationship to one’s life is important in stimulating a desire to broaden one’s understanding of history. His solution, however, to leave the introduction to history to more intellectually prepared population is not the best approach. History can and should be introduced in primary and secondary school classrooms. It should be done, however, in such a way as to lay the foundation for learning how to learn, ask questions, and seek answers. In the process students not only will gather the “facts” but also will begin to understand them and remember them.

Students’ lack of historical knowledge about the past results in an inability to see themselves, their families, and their communities as part of the larger process of American history. If students fail to see their own histories as important, they do not believe that they can have an impact on their environments. One of the ways in which people “learn to be members of society” is to feel engaged in it. History is central to identifying, analyzing, and interpreting the values upon which civil society depends. All historians should remember that they are citizens as well as scholars and that they possess some responsibility to the larger civic community.

None of this can happen, however, unless the profession as a whole confronts the issue of professional definition. We need to use the same scrutiny we employ when we examine other aspects of the past when we look at the way in which the professionalizers defined historian during the early years of professional growth. The prevailing “official” definition is a social construct not a truth. If we approach the study of our profession with the understanding that the only constants should be evolving characteristics and changing contexts instead of fixed categories, then it might be easier for the profession to embrace the idea that the definition of the professional historian we inherited need not be static, that the natural order of things suggests redefinition. If this were to happen, the conditions responsible for the angst and dissatisfaction felt by the historians replying to the Journal of American History’s survey on the practice of American history would largely evaporate. History and historians would emerge as more important components of our civic culture and, as a result, possess more opportunity to participate in the various conversations about our past and its meaning today.
NOTES

1. This article appeared in a slightly different form as "Professional Historians and 'Destiny's Gate',' The Public Historian 17 (Summer 1995): 9–24. See this version for a fuller discussion of sources, especially on background material on the various arenas where historians work outside of university settings.


8. Hatch, Professions, 1–5; Geison, Professions, 5–8; and Parsons, "Professions," 596.


10. Wilson, "Historical Profession," 5–7; and Novick, Noble Dream, 49.

11. Novick, Noble Dream, 47–52; Higham, History, 6–7; and J. H. Hexter, Doing History (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1971), 82–85. See Bender, Intel-


17. Novick, Noble Dream, 52.


28. Thomas Cochran to Richard Hofstadter, 13 April 1948, Cochran Papers, Box 1 as quoted in Novick, Noble Dream, 374.
35. Ibid., 53.
46. “The Practice of American History: A Special Issue,” *Journal of American History* 81 (December 1994). For all the agitation expressed about practicing history today, only one commentator, Fabio Pozzi, mentioned that it might be time “to rethink the profession itself” (1111).