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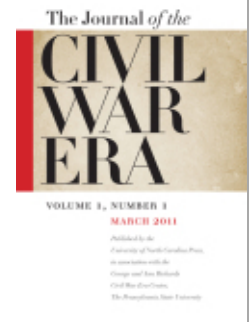
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The Nineteenth-Century U.S. History Job Market, 2000–2009

AARON SHEEHAN-DEAN

Data on the academic job market for nineteenth-century U.S. historians bears out the anecdotal evidence that circulates at conferences and in departments around the country: over the last decade the number of job openings has steadily declined. But the news is not all grim. At the same time that our field has contracted, it has diversified and broadened its reach. Gender, African American, and world history have emerged as leading field specializations, ahead of more traditional designations such as political, legal, or intellectual history. Fifty years ago, a similar analysis would have revealed a narrower range of minor and major fields.

This article is based on an analysis of data on all nineteenth-century U.S. history positions (including academic and non-academic jobs) listed in *Perspectives* from 2000 through 2009. We adopted a core chronological definition of the field because that is the criteria used by the American Historical Association to sort jobs and because it continues to reflect how we organize ourselves professionally. Indeed, the preference for chronologically defined positions in some respects counterbalances the increasing breadth of subspecialties. To understand how those micro-preferences manifested themselves in terms of hiring, we identified all major and minor field specializations by region, topic, or analytical approach.

The broad trends in the job market for nineteenth-century positions since the turn of the twenty-first century do not bode well. From a high of 121 positions advertised through the American Historical Association in 2001, the number of jobs listed has declined significantly each year. The economic crash and its impact on state budgets undoubtedly accounts for much of the disturbingly low number of postings in 2009: 31. But the downward line through the 2000s, with even years averaging in the mid-seventies and odd years slightly higher, suggests a broader trend among institutions. Similar to the patterns for general history and other humanities faculty, nineteenth-century U.S. positions are declining in number. The title of Robert Townsend's most recent *Perspectives*

article summarizes this unusually discouraging year: "A Grim Year on the Academic Job Market."¹

The downward trend in nineteenth-century positions holds true regardless of the type of institution. Community colleges, four-year colleges, and universities of all profiles have witnessed similar declines in the number of nineteenth-century U.S. job postings. Universities whose highest degree is the master's of arts accounted for nearly one-third of the postings over the last decade. Doctoral universities account for nearly 50 percent and baccalaureate colleges just under 20 percent.² Given these statistics, separating the figures by size of institution yields few surprises. Even though the nation boasts many more small than large institutions, more populous schools account for a plurality of the jobs; just over 40 percent of the job postings came from schools with total student enrollments of greater than 15,000. 20 percent came from schools between seven thousand and fifteen thousand and another 20 percent at colleges with fewer than three thousand enrollees. The remaining came at schools of three thousand to seven thousand students.

Of probably the most interest to readers of this column will be the breakdown of data relating to field specialties. One-quarter of the nineteenth-century U.S. history positions listed over the last decade were advertised broadly as "U.S. history." Among analytical or thematic major field designations, "African American" appeared the most often, accounting for 18.4 percent of the postings, compared to 11.9 for "Antebellum," 4.2 for "Civil War," and 3.9 and 3.6, respectively, for "Gender" and "U.S. South." These results appear reasonably consistent over the past decade. The major categories (U.S. history, nineteenth-century, and African American) account for the predominant number of postings in any given year.

The data reveals a historical preference for chronologically, as opposed to topically, defined jobs. Just over 40 percent of the postings fall within the three broad chronological categories of "Nineteenth-Century," "Antebellum," and "Postbellum" U.S. history, while the various analytical field designations ("African American," "Gender," "Military/Diplomatic," etc.) together account for 32 percent. Some departments modify a broad chronological designation with a more specific minor field specialty in their postings (though it is important to note that nearly 60 percent of the job postings over the last decade included either no minor field or designated it as "open"). The most popular designation among minor field listings was "Global/World/Comparative," with 12.5 percent. "African American," "Gender," "Social History," "Western History," "Diplomatic/Military History," and "Cultural History" each garnered more than 3 percent. The

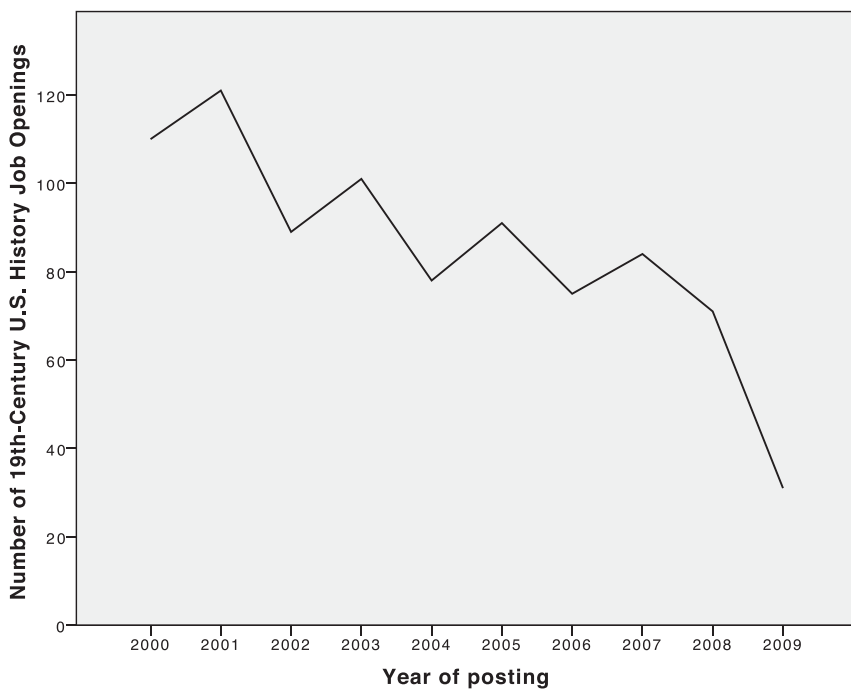


Figure 1
19th Century U.S. Job Openings, 2000–2009.

remainder were distributed among other analytical categories, such as “Political History,” “Intellectual History,” and “Public History.”

Several other aspects of the data deserve closer scrutiny. On the positive side, the trend toward hiring legions of adjunct instructors seems not to define our field as it does some others. Fully 90 percent of the jobs advertised over the past decade have been tenure-track positions. Only 10 percent have been listed as temporary or visiting lines. However, it is important to note that many adjunct positions are irregularly advertised and may not appear in *Perspectives*. As a result, the proportion of adjunct positions in nineteenth-century history may well be higher than this data reflects. As expected, the vast majority of positions are listed at the assistant professor level. The temptation to achieve budget savings by replacing senior moves or retirements with junior faculty appears hard to resist for deans and department chairs. On the other hand, nearly twice as many nineteenth-century U.S. positions were posted as endowed chairs as were listed at the full professor level (4.5 versus 2.6 percent). This may reflect

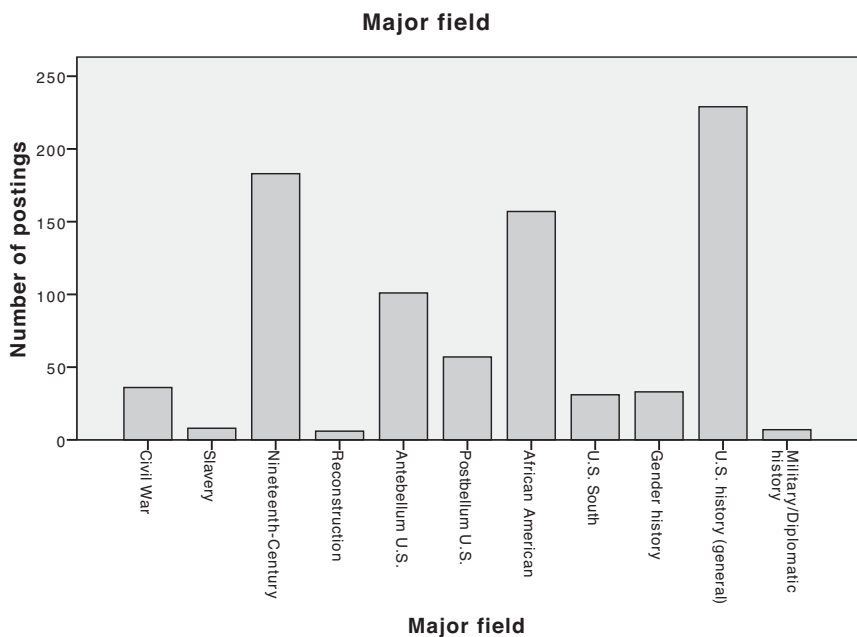


Figure 2
Major Fields in 19th Century U.S. History.

ongoing institutional support for the field, faculty preferences for lines that can be variably defined, or the creation of new endowed positions over the last decade.

The regional distribution of nineteenth-century U.S. history jobs is concentrated in Middle Atlantic, Southeast, and Midwest states. Over 60 percent of the jobs over the last decade came in one of these three regions. At the risk of suggesting a kind of historical determinism, these were the regions that participated most robustly in the Civil War. Yankee partisans will be quick to note that their states sent many men into battle, which is true, but New York, Pennsylvania, and Ohio together account for nearly half of all the Union enlistments. The stronger evidence for this interpretation of the data is the smaller number of such positions at schools in states settled after the Civil War ended. The concentration of schools in the eastern United States also helps shape this pattern in the data.

The number of postings for the 2010 and 2011 job cycles are likely to remain below average as public and private institutions recover from the financial crisis of 2008–2009. The scarcity of resources makes hiring decisions all the more crucial and will reveal, over time, the preferences and attitudes of current historians about the future. For instance, the strength

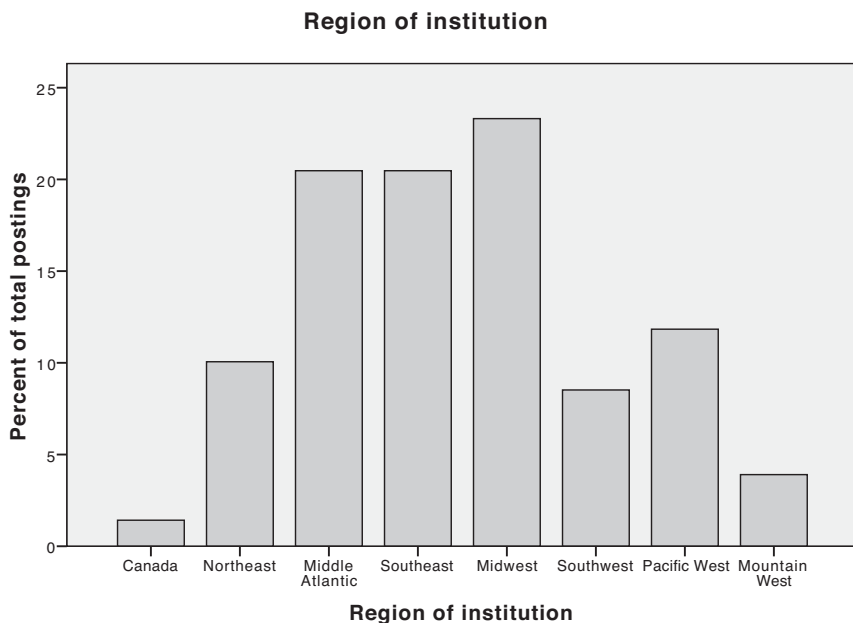


Figure 3
Regional Distribution of 19th Century history jobs.

of “Global/World/Comparative History” as a minor field will likely continue to grow as more departments shift their introductory-level “Western Civilization” courses toward “World History.” Whether this happens at the expense of more traditional field designations, such as “Political History” or “Social History,” remains to be seen. What does appear certain is that successful job applicants in the future will need the ability to teach a broader range of U.S. history and offer a deeper engagement between the United States and the rest of the world.

The data on jobs should inform rather than discourage graduate students and those who train them. Aside from those lucky few trained in the mythically job-rich 1970s, caution has always conditioned the advice we give to prospective historians. When students approach me to ask about a career as a historian, my instinct is to simultaneously encourage and caution. Their enthusiasm rekindles my own love of the discipline, and their expectations about the career reawakens my sense of the possibilities open to someone trained as a historian. Then I remember the job market. I remember that I have a professional obligation to tell them horror stories about unfulfilled promises and dreams deferred. I tell myself that every prospective graduate student needs this bracing dose of realism, but

really, it is intended to inoculate me against any responsibility for negative outcomes that may result from the pursuit of a Ph.D. Because I know so many nineteenth-century U.S. historians doing interesting research and good, important teaching I usually tack back to the virtues and rewards of post-graduate study and working as a professional historian. I suspect that most current historians received similarly conflicting advice when they sought recommendations and advice about becoming an academic. Today's job market offers a sobering but not unprecedented reminder that the fortunes of our profession wax and wane in response to both external and internal factors.

Most states are forecasting a modest economic recovery this year, which should spur a rise in 2010 job listings, though they are unlikely to reach the level of the previous decade without more sustained economic growth. The sesquicentennial years of the U.S. Civil War (2011–15) may also affect the hiring strategies of history departments by encouraging more attention to nineteenth-century fields. As a part of our mission to explore the intellectual and professional aspects of nineteenth-century history, the *Journal* will continue to gather information related to the job market for nineteenth-century U.S. history positions and offer analysis of the data to readers.

NOTES

1. Robert B. Townsend, "A Grim Year on the Academic Job Market," *Perspectives* 48 (January 2010): 5–7.
2. The Carnegie Institution now classifies doctorate-granting institutions into three categories (doctoral-granting, high research, and very high research). The figure given in the text combines all three subcategories.