



PROJECT MUSE®

---

## Public History and The Big Tent Theory

Jennifer Dickey

The Public Historian, Volume 40, Number 4, November 2018, pp. 37-41 (Article)

Published by University of California Press



➔ For additional information about this article

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/742263>

## Public History and The Big Tent Theory

---

Jennifer Dickey

Those of us who work in this field known in the United States as public history often struggle with how to explain what the term means to those outside the field. In 2007 at the National Council on Public History (NCPH) annual conference in Santa Fe, the NCPH Board announced it had arrived at a definition of public history that read as follows:

Public history is a movement, methodology, and approach that promotes the collaborative study and practice of history; its practitioners embrace a mission to make their special insights accessible and useful to the public.

The response to this proclamation was swift and, for the most part, negative. Conference attendees Kathy Corbett and Dick Miller, both of whom were well-respected, longtime professionals in the field, took decisive action to modify this new definition and, in a typical collaborative, public-historian fashion, asked other public historians to help craft a definition that offered a better description of “what we are and what we do.” On May 21, 2007, they posted a treatise under the subject line “What is public history?” on the H-Public discussion board. Corbett and Miller argued that it was imperative for public historians to have “a description of public history that is realistic, succinct, and immediately intelligible.”<sup>1</sup> The definition proposed by the NCPH Board was, according to Corbett and Miller, none of these things. They questioned whether public history was “a movement, methodology, or even an approach,” noting that none of those terms seemed appropriate. They declared the phrase, “embrace a mission to make their special insights accessible” as “especially unfortunate,” explaining that the statement assigned public historians the role of “missionaries” and denied “lay people a creative role.”<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Kathy Corbett and Dick Miller, “What is public history?,” H-Net Discussion Networks, <http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl?trx=vx&list=H-Public&month=0705&week=c&msg=HAUuHywQGvciGXBxeGKPgw&user=&pw=>.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

In the true spirit of public historians, Corbett and Miller offered their own “description of public history,” which read “Public history is a multidimensional effort by historians and their publics, collaborating in settings beyond traditional classrooms, to make the past useful in the present.” They then called on their fellow practitioners to join in the discussion to help refine and polish this proposed description to reflect “the collaborative character of the enterprise and the shared agency of everyone involved.”<sup>3</sup>

Corbett’s and Miller’s post kicked off a three-month discussion during which nineteen responses were posted to H-Public on the subject. Among the responders was Denise Meringolo, then an assistant professor of history at the University of Maryland. Meringolo offered that “I’ve begun to think of myself as something akin to a community organizer,” explaining that “I became a public historian when I began actively to look for ways to be of service, to listen and learn about the precise needs of a given community, and to gently challenge a community to push its own sense of boundaries and exclusiveness.”<sup>4</sup> Meringolo would go on to publish her award-winning book, *Museums, Monuments, and National Parks: Toward New Genealogy of Public History* in 2012 in which she reexamined the origins of the field of public history in an effort “to shift debates regarding public history away from matters of definition and toward questions regarding the larger value of history as practiced as public service.”<sup>5</sup>

Carl Barna of the Bureau of Land Management and a twenty-five-year veteran of the historic preservation field endorsed Meringolo’s statement stating “when I began to actively look for ways to be of service” as being “the best summation statement of what ‘Public History’ is that I have read on this thread.”<sup>6</sup> Public historian Jane Becker, a long-time practitioner in the field, reminded everyone that “What we now call ‘public history’ was often called ‘applied history’ in the past, but today the term ‘public’ incorporates some monolithic assumptions that go beyond a listing of places that history is created or managed outside of the academy.”<sup>7</sup>

I watched this conversation on H-Public with a combination of interest and dismay. I was in the final throes of writing my dissertation in an effort to become the first PhD graduate from Georgia State University’s public history program.

3 Ibid.

4 Denise Meringolo, “What is public history?,” H-Net Discussion Networks, <http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl?trx=vx&list=H-Public&month=0705&week=e&msg=aVngv/ijbMn6XgpXbtnoiw&user=&pw=>.

5 Denise Meringolo, *Museums, Monuments, and National Parks: Towards a New Genealogy of Public History* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2012), xxxii.

6 Carl Barna, “What is public history?,” H-Net Discussion Networks, <http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl?trx=vx&list=H-Public&month=0706&week=a&msg=CONrlmkPDH7u8fopvwrAiw&user=&pw=>.

7 Jane Becker, “What is public history?,” H-Net Discussion Networks, <http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl?trx=vx&list=H-Public&month=0707&week=a&msg=53JhL%2b48yTRJYhd0L3sBtg&user=&pw=>.

I had spent three years working part time as a historian at the National Park Service, the federal agency that Denise Meringolo cites as instrumental in the foundation of public history as a field, before taking a full-time position as a museum curator at a small, liberal-arts college. Like almost everyone else in the field, I struggled with how to define public history, this field in which I was now working. I would often explain it as an umbrella term that included museum work, historic preservation, and interpretation of historic sites—an unwieldy definition, to be sure. I sometimes described it as applied history, meaning the application of the fruits of historical scholarship in a manner that made history accessible to the public.

At the time I was blissfully unaware that the term “applied history,” which had been used interchangeably with the term “public history” in the twentieth century in the United States, had become more narrowly defined by the Applied History Project at Harvard Kennedy School’s Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs as “the explicit attempt to illuminate current challenges and choices by analyzing historical precedents and analogues.”<sup>8</sup> Graham Allison and Niall Ferguson, in their “Applied History Manifesto” for the Applied History Project, explain that “Mainstream historians begin with a past event or era and attempt to provide an account of what happened and why. Applied historians begin with a current choice or predicament and attempt to analyze the historical record to provide perspective, stimulate imagination, find clues about what is likely to happen, suggest possible policy interventions, and assess probable consequences.”<sup>9</sup>

Although many public historians aspire to “stimulate imagination,” we generally are driven more by a desire to help the public understand the past than we are by the prospect of driving changes in public policy. Perhaps this seems like a distinction between action and consequence, but further exploration of the Applied History Project reveals “applied history” has taken on quite a different meaning than what it once had when used interchangeably with the term “public history” back in the 1970s.<sup>10</sup> Applied history has become the province of historians concerned with politics and public policy, whereas public history is the more frequently used term by those doing collaborative, community-engaged history work. According to NCPH, although the terms were used interchangeably in the past, “public history has gained ascendance in recent years as the preferred nomenclature.” NCPH offers as a definition of the term public history, “the many and diverse ways in which history is put to work in the world.”<sup>11</sup> The NCPH Guide

8 Applied History Project, <https://www.belfercenter.org/project/applied-history-project>.

9 Graham Allison and Niall Ferguson, “Applied History Manifesto,” <https://www.belfercenter.org/project/applied-history-project#!manifesto>.

10 The University of South Carolina began its Applied History Program in 1975. The program, one of the oldest in the country, is now known as the Public History Program.

11 “How do we define public history?” NCPH, accessed 11/24/2017, <http://ncph.org/what-is-public-history/about-the-field/>

to Public History Programs lists 152 graduate public history programs and 94 undergraduate public history programs. A subset of ten institutions incorporate the term “applied history” into their degree program.<sup>12</sup> Clearly “public history” has won the day as the term most of us use to describe what we do, even if we are not quite sure what it means.

In Germany, it seems, the debate about how to define this work is much newer and less settled than it is in the United States. And, as Jacqueline Nießer and Juliane Tomann note, the term “applied history” in Germany carries with it the taint of Heinrich Wolf’s use of the term in conjunction with his virulently anti-Semitic “Applied History” series from the early 1900s. Whether “applied history” can be cleansed of its association with Wolf’s work remains to be seen, although indications are that it can be. Nießer’s and Tomann’s hinge analogy that divides history into forms (public history) and agents (applied history), while useful to a point seems to demand a separation that, in fact, does not always exist. Their further distinction of public historians as translators who help lay people “know about history” and applied historians as moderators and facilitators who facilitate the participation of lay people in producing historical knowledge was troubling in its limitations. As a public historian, I strive to do both those things. I help lay people access history and also help them produce historical knowledge. I do history *for* the public and *with* the public.

Public history in the United States remains a fuzzy term, even for those of us who have followed the debate over its definition and who describe ourselves as public historians. The parsing of language to define the field and to agree upon a proper nomenclature may seem like a pointless, self-reflexive exercise; however, the thoughtful postings from the 2007 H-Public thread present an example of why such discussion is important. Most of the postings were aspirational and inspirational, and as an emerging scholar and practitioner in the field at that time, such concepts motivated me to be a better public historian. Jay Price of Wichita State University wrote, “Perhaps at its heart, public history is more of a ‘spirit’ that sees historical scholarship as part of a larger sense that includes both professionals of academic and nonacademic stripes as well as various segments of the public at large.”<sup>13</sup> Benjamin Filene, then at the University of North Carolina Greensboro, noted that public history activities “embrace the belief that history is not just the realm of the experts but of all of us.” Filene cautioned, however, that too much self-reflection might be counterproductive. “It would be unfortunate and ironic,” he wrote, “if our definitional efforts were to isolate us from any domains where audiences encounter the past and experience that flush of excitement: ‘Hey,

<sup>12</sup> “Guide to Public History Programs,” NCPH, <http://ncph.org/program-guide/>.

<sup>13</sup> Jay Price, “What is public history?,” H-Net Discussion Networks, <http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl?trx=vx&list=H-Public&month=0707&week=a&msg=53JhL%2b48yTRJYhd0L3sBtg&user=&pw=>.

history is mine, too!”<sup>14</sup> Ultimately, whatever term we use to describe our field, our goal should be exactly that—to help facilitate that “flush of excitement” when audiences realize that they are part of a larger story and that the history tent is big enough for us all.

• • • • •

*Jennifer Dickey* is associate professor of history and coordinator of the Public History Program at Kennesaw State University. Her publications include *Memories of the Mansion: A History of Georgia’s Governor’s Mansion* (2015), *A Tough Little Patch of History: Gone with the Wind and the Politics of Memory* (2014), and *Museums in a Global Context* (2013).

<sup>14</sup> Benjamin Filene, “What is public history?,” H-Net Discussion Networks, <http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl?trx=vx&list=H-Public&month=0707&week=a&msg=53JhL%2b48yTRJYhdoL3sBtg&user=&pw=>.