

Heavy on the Public, Light on the History

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What if we've got it all backwards? Are historians writing history for the public? Or does the public shape history through a variety of media, generationally passed stories, and casual exchanges, and allocation of funds? In her article, "African American Women's Historical Consciousness," Julie Des Jardins relates the unique idea expressed by Ophelia Egypt, a graduate student who interviewed former slaves in 1929. Egypt says that personal, bias, and subjective histories have a special kind of validity that empirical findings cannot begin to hope to achieve. Egypt describes how the perceived reality was important, saying, "the merit of these documents lies not so much in the accurate recording of the historical events, as in the realistic fabrication of the experiential world of the persons themselves."¹ These histories are internalized, accepted, "known" to be true. No amount of factual evidence will ever sway the public the way that the public can now make their perspectives and opinions known. Egypt would likely have agreed with her contemporary Carl Becker, that each person constructs their own history and memory is at the core of how we shape our lives.² This does not take place on this personal level exclusively.

Many groups such as the black bibliophiles worked in a deliberate manner to actively shape their history. In "Bibliophiles, Activists, and Race Men," Tony Martin explains, "The reasons for collecting were not always academic, they were also highly political. These books were being collected with a view to uplifting a downtrodden race of people . . ." The African American community were not the only ones trying to change the way they were viewed as a people by shaping the collections from which their history

¹ Julie Des Jardins, "African American Women's Historical Consciousness," *Women & the Historical Enterprise in America* (2003): 140-141.

² Carl L. Becker, "Everyman His Own Historian," *American Historical Review* 37 (1932): 221-236.

would be written.³ The American Jewish Historical Society also came together with the sole purpose of preserving their history the way they, as Jewish people, thought it should be written and to change the perception of their people within society as a whole. Elizabeth Kaplan uses this group as a prime example to illustrate the concept that archivists have a serious responsibility due to their de facto role in shaping identity.⁴ We may be inclined to look at these incidents of bias shaping of history by marginalized groups, and think that it is fitting since they were treated so unfairly in history as a whole, but where do we then draw the line? Dunbar Rowland sought to form the Mississippi State Archives with a personal agenda as well, he was heavily influenced by “Lost Cause” advocates on the board that hired him. Collecting and writing history in the Jim Crow South his choices reflect the desire to reinforce white supremacy and the idea of the “glorious Confederacy”.⁵ It is important to note here, that among these groups that were dictating what should be collected —they were mostly non-historians.⁶

Mark Greene describes the record keeping paradigm where archives should only be limited to transactions and would therefore be theoretically free of bias. Advocates of the archival paradigm would suggest that it would indeed retain biases against those that get

³ Tony Martin, “Bibliophiles, Activists, and Race Men” in Sinnette, Coates, and Battle, eds., *Black Bibliophiles and Collectors: Preservers of Black History* (1990), 32.

Tara White, Introduction and Chapter 3 of “‘A Shrine of Liberty for the Unborn Generations’: African American Clubwomen and the Preservation of African American Historic Sites.” PhD. Dissertation, MTSU, (2010). White also draws the connection of groups like the NCNW to their political motivations of betterment.

⁴ Elizabeth Kaplan, “We Are What We Collect, We Collect What We Are: Archives and the Construction of Identity,” *American Archivist* 63 (Spring/Summer 2000): 126.

⁵ Patricia Galloway, “Archives, Power, and History: Dunbar Rowland and the Beginning of the State Archives of Mississippi (1902-1936),” *American Archivist* 69 (2006): 79-91.

⁶ With apologies to the memory of Carl Becker, I am using the term non-historian to identify individuals that are not professionally trained historians.

lost in transactions, but also egregiously ignore much of potential historical source material.⁷ While the archivists this concerns are immersed in the field of history, they are not free from bias either. Some archives may be run by professionals, but are dictated by board members that have more interest in image than factual representation. In her article, “The Development of Business Archives in the United States: An Overview and Personal Perspective,” Elizabeth Adkins talks about the importance of preserving business records. She quotes Oliver Holmes saying, “For more than a generation people have spoken of two capitals, Washington and Wall Street. The relations between these two giant concentrations of power are of immense significance to the people. . . We are careful to preserve the records of one capital, but have sadly neglected the records of the other.”⁸ Exxon Mobil is currently under investigation of financial fraud for their records from the seventies showing that they had conducted their own research that confirmed climate change but withheld that information from their investors (and the public at large) while funding research organizations trying to disprove climate change.⁹ Here we have non-historians shaping history by withholding information, but actively archiving the same information privately. Much like the AJHS, black bibliophiles, and the Lost Causers, Exxon Mobil was attempting to shape public perception to their own benefit, all non-historians shaping the information available to future writers of history.

⁷ Mark A. Greene, “The Power of Meaning: The Archival Mission in the Postmodern Age,” *American Archivist* 65 (Spring/Summer 2002): 42-55.

⁸ Elizabeth W. Adkins, “The Development of Business Archives in the United States: An Overview and a Personal Perspective,” *American Archivist* 60 (Winter 1997): 10.

⁹ “Did Exxon Mobil Lie To The Public About The Risks Of Climate Change?,” Renee Montagne hosting Geoff Brumfiel, aired November 6, 2015, on NPR.

What remedy have public historians offered to supplant these biases? Some archivists have suggested that the public archives tradition may provide the distance needed to allow archivists to collect, but not interpret their holdings. While the proponents of the historical manuscripts tradition suggest that the intimate knowledge of a collection would be beneficial to interpretation.¹⁰ Yet another solution, headed by J. Franklin Jameson, was to push for a national standardization and a shift from personalism to professionalism that would take the creation of archives out of non-historians hands and employ professionally trained archivists.¹¹ This trend carried across each field of public history as the professions of each developed.

Historical societies formed as a way for local groups to preserve their local history. These early groups functioned much like libraries as we think of them today and connected them with government agencies and sometimes government funding.¹² Historic preservation experienced a similar shift. Originally we saw the historical societies like the Mount Vernon Ladies Historical Association of the Union (MVLHA) take properties into their care, to later have it removed by professionals.¹³ Hosmer points out that like the MVLHA the professionals that replaced community members were overwhelmingly male and these

¹⁰ Luke J. Gilliland-Swetland, "The Provenance of a Profession: The Permanence of the Public Archives and Historical Manuscripts Traditions in American Archival History," *American Archivist* 54 (1991): 163.

¹¹ Morey D. Rothberg, "The Brahmin as Bureaucrat: J. Franklin Jameson at the Carnegie Institution of Washington, 1905-1928," *The Public Historian* 8,4 (1986): 47-60.; Rebecca Conard, *Benjamin Shambaugh and the Intellectual Foundations of Public History*. (2002): 11. "The 1889 congressional act establishing a legal connection between the federal government and the AHA inherently made the association a quasi-public agency... the act tended to place an expert in the position of adviser to the government in historical matters..."

¹² Leslie W. Dunlap, "Establishment of the Societies," and "The Writing of American History" in Dunlap, *American Historical Societies, 1790-1860* (1974): 12, 128.

¹³ James T. Lindgren, "'A New Departure in Historic, Patriotic Work': Personalism, Professionalism, and Conflicting Concepts of Material Culture in the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries." *The Public Historian* 18 no. 2 (1996): 41-60.

new standards raised the field in one way while narrowing it in another.¹⁴ Barbara Howe further expands on the issue of women faced in the field, using Ann Pamela Cunningham's plight with MVLA as framework.¹⁵ Not all non-professional historians were involved from a purely altruistic place.

Entrepreneurial men like Henry Ford, Henry Mercer, Hubert Howe Bancroft, and John D. Rockefeller were businessmen that, while they had no history or professional training, began collecting buildings and materials for semi-commercial enterprises.¹⁶ "Most histories portray these individuals as members of a brave upper class eager to stem the tide of destruction endemic to a rapidly growing, industrializing, and urbanizing nation."¹⁷ These are all men who shaped histories, had an enormous amount of wealth and influence to shape policy, but as far as our classification of historian or members of the public, would be considered non-historians. Ford is even famously quoted as saying, "History is more or less bunk. It's tradition. We don't want tradition. We want to live in the present and the only history that is worth a tinker's dam is the history we make today."¹⁸ Bancroft, for

¹⁴ Charles B. Hosmer, "The Growth of Professionalism." In *Preservation Comes of Age*, Vol. II, (1981):867-868.

¹⁵ Barbara T. Howe, "Women in Historic Preservation: The Legacy of Ann Pamela Cunningham." *The Public Historian* 12 no. 1 (1990): 31-61.

¹⁶ Caughey, John Walton. "Hubert How Bancroft: Historian of Western America," *American Historical Review* 50, 3 (1945): 461-470. While Caughey refers to Bancroft as a historian and I agree that he did collect and write histories (or at least employ people to do so on his behalf) Caughey also states in the same paragraph that he had no advance schooling or specialized training that would classify him as a professional historian for the purposes of this paper (462); Conn, Steven. "Objects and American History: The Museums of Henry Mercer and Henry Ford," in *Museums and American Intellectual Life, 1876-1926* (1998): 151-191.; Hosmer, 866-952.

¹⁷ Max Page and Randall Mason, "Introduction: Rethinking the Roots of the Historic Preservation Movement." In *Giving Preservation a History*, edited by Max Page and Randall Mason (2004): 7.

¹⁸ Michael Wallace, "Visiting the Past: History Museums in the United States." In *Presenting the Past: Essays on History and the Public*, edited by Susann Porter Benson, Stephen Birer and Roy Rosenzweig (1986) 137-161.

example, is still considered to be the authority on the West from the 1880s to the modern period. He qualifies as such, by being the only substantive voice regardless of accuracy.¹⁹ But returning to Egypt's point- what is accurate? A subjective memory might tell us more than a document that could have been fabricated during its making. Sorting fact from fiction from various accounts is often a historian's goal, but Greene quotes Harris who said, "...a 'good'—reliable, valid, authentic and so on—record can tell a lie, a single quote 'poor' record a truth," and then goes on to say:

"that, in fact, there is no universally valid conception of "truth" that transactional records or other forms of documentation can transmit, only multiple truths. While the notion that a single capital T-truth does not exist is an uncomfortable one for many people, many of us *do* accept that meaning (and memory and need and value) are relative and subjective concepts."²⁰

With the insurance forms of Lincoln's estate, Orser offers an example of a document being very helpful to produce more findings, which can expand the known truth. He also points out that Archeology generally pandered to public interests during the referential period by exploring sites associated with famous individuals.²¹

¹⁹ Though, I think the histories written by Bancroft would not be considered accurate if you were to ask most Native American historians their opinion.

²⁰ Greene, 52.; James Deetz, *In Small Things Forgotten: The Archeology of Early American Life* 2nd ed. (1996): 8-10. Deetz offers a prime example of a transactional record that while may have been accurate, it had euphemisms that could lead to it being misunderstood the known truth.

²¹ Charles E. Orser, *Historical Archaeology* 2nd ed. (2004): 31.

While there many not be an objective truth, there certainly is public opinion on what that objective truth should be. Stephen Weil predicts a change in the relationship of the public to museums. He denotes a changing shift in who controls the content of museums already, saying, “The museum’s role will have been transformed from one of mastery to one of service. Toward what ends that service is to be performed, for whom it is to be rendered, and how, and when— those are all determinations that will be made by the museum’s newly ascendant master, the public.”²² John Cotton Dana made a similar observation in *A Plan for a New Museum*. He points out a New Jersey exhibit on textiles that was focused on what pertained to the lives of the locals that was wildly successful—stressing useful to the public as a main goal of museums.²³ For this same reason, museums in the depression era accommodated the public with educational programs because that was what the public demanded.²⁴ Even the public archaeologists have taken interaction with the public into consideration. Barbara Little suggests that rather offering an assertion, or simply displaying an artifact, historians should try to engage the public.²⁵ Gary Kulik offers an outline of how museums changed to meet the public’s desires over the last century. Some changes have been subtle, like the design styles, or accessibility tweaks.²⁶

²² Weil, Stephen. “The Museum and the Public.” In *Making Museums Matter* (2002): 196.

²³ John Cotton Dana, *A Plan for a New Museum* (1920): 24.

²⁴ Schwarzer, Majorie. “Introduction.” *Riches, Rivals & Radicals: 100 years of Museums in America* (2006): 14.

²⁵ Barbara J. Little, “Considering the Context of Historical Archaeology for Museum interpretation,” In *The Public Historian* (1998): 111-117.

²⁶ Gary Kulik, “Designing the Past: History-Museum Exhibitions from Peale to the Present.” In *History Museums in the United States*, edited by Warren Leon and Roy Rosenzweig (1989): 27-29.; Barbara J. Little, ed. “Public Benefits of Archaeology” (2002). She discusses Civic Engagement within the National Park Service.

Sometimes though, this public input can become more radical and influence becomes censorship. In *Historians in Public*, Ian Tyrrell gives us a few examples of such occurrences. When attempting to provide an update for schoolchildren's textbooks, historians submitted an account with a large degree of 'historiographical diversity' the "checklist of required knowledge sent a shudder through conservative ranks." The Senate condemned the standards unanimously and would not fund them. "The result indicated that the nation's politicians dismissed the new social and cultural history and seemed to anticipate the claims of the Historical Society that academic history was politically irrelevant." Another equally appalling incident:

"A second case concerned the cancellation of the proposed Enola Gay exhibition at the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of American History in January 1995 ... The museum's attempt to present a multidimensional story of the dropping of the first atomic bomb, including the effects of the bomb on Japanese civilians, produced a massive outcry, in which the American Legion and the Air Force Association were vocal. Forced to back down, the museum lost some of its aura of academic independence from the Washington political machinery. The planned exhibit on the Enola Gay was abandoned, and the aircraft itself simply displayed without commentary. Again, as in the National History Standards debate, attacks on the political correctness of academic historiography flooded the media. Academics were allegedly 'unable to view American history as anything other than a woeful catalogue of crimes.' Popular patriotism and nationalism

prevailed. Only a pro-American position could have been presented in the museum without criticism.”²⁷

While these are excellent examples of government or organizational silencing, shaping, or influencing, they are nowhere near isolated events. Since National Parks rely on federal funding they too are subject to the budgeting whims of politicians. Linenthal discusses civic engagement as a way of connecting with the public and likewise Freeman discusses the work of appealing to the public, but Hosmer and Whisnant talk about the National Park Service boom and busting with the ebb and flow of government allocations, the new deal brought new jobs, and when budgets are slashed in Congress, the NPS is often an early cut.²⁸ The government giveth and the government taketh away so to speak.

So if the public²⁹ is the one holding sway over what buildings are preserved, what exhibits are displayed in museums, which parks receive funding, where do they get their information? It would appear that film, cultural exchanges, and social media have a substantive impact on the public’s thoughts and opinion of history even if the information they are taking in is inaccurate or unsubstantiated.

The documentary series *The Story of Film: An Odyssey* talks about a lie to tell a truth. They give the example of the film *Saving Private Ryan* depicting the storming of the beaches of

²⁷ Ian Tyrell, *Historians in Public* (2005): 18-19.

²⁸ Freeman Tilden, *Interpreting Our Heritage* (2009).; Charles B. Hosmer, “Verne Chatelain and the Development of the Branch of History of the National Park Service” In *The Public Historian* Vol 16 (1994): 30-32.; Edward T. Linenthal, “The National Park Service and Civic Engagement.” *The Public Historian* 28 no.1 (2006): 123-129.; Anne Whisnant, Marla Miller, David Thelen, and Gary Nash. *Imperiled Promise: The State of History in the National Park Service. Organization of American Historians and the National Park Service*,(2011).

²⁹ Here I include government agents as members of the public, a Senator may vote on historical matters, but are not historians, and therefore belong with the public.

Normandy while being filmed in Ireland.³⁰ This seems like a small thing, but for a generation that saw the film, but not the war- their collective memory of this event will likely reflect the cinematic representation. Ian Tyrrell delineates the impact of film on history via social learning and how history is represented.³¹ In Tyrrell's *Historians in Public* Edgar Dale's research on morality offers the idea that the increase in drinking and smoking in early film changed the basic concept of what was considered socially acceptable, making room for other lascivious activities.³² The idea that these norms seep into the collective unconscious begs the question of how this relates to the public perception of history. Jeffrey Stewart and Fath Ruffins called the television miniseries *Roots* "the single most important public history event of the 1970s."³³ For my purposes it doesn't matter if the series was made in response to the climate created by the civil rights movement or if *Roots* was responsible for a resurgence of interest in African American history. The result was following the debut of the miniseries the historical landscape changed in the minds of Americans.

³⁰ *The Story of Film: An Odyssey*, directed by Mark Cousins (Hopscotch Films, 2011); *Saving Private Ryan*, directed by Stephen Spielberg (Amblin Entertainment, 1998).

³¹ Tyrrell, 56-58. *Chronicles of America* pioneered writing history to be palatable for the public. "All volumes were to spare the 'traditional sensibility of the general reader' by 'the almost complete absence of footnotes.'" Written to entertain, the *Chronicles* not only preceded history films, but Tyrrell attributes them to making the Pageant of America possible.

³² *Ibid.*, 75-78.; Malcolm Gladwell, "Thresholds of Violence," *The New Yorker*. October 19, 2015. This article focuses on school shootings, but frames them in the context of a building riot. The threshold for participating in violence is lowered with each additional participant- an interesting update to the concept from the 1920s. Historical films are more in vogue than ever and most of them depict the most violent periods in our history. The fixation on war could make us more war like. This raises the question of what the constant media coverage of violence is doing to the modern psyche.

³³ Jeffrey C. Stewart, and Fath Davis Ruffins. "A Faithful Witness: Afro-American Public History in Historical Perspective, 1828-1984." In *Presenting the Past: Essays on History and the Public*, edited by Benson, Brier, and Rosenweig, eds. (1986): 333. *Roots* addressed the issue of American slavery through the story of an enslaved family.

While *Roots* brought about increased awareness, there is a serious flaw in cinematic historical depictions. Often, the story needs heroes and villains- in order to not confuse the audience with circumstance or complexities one group is usually made into a caricature while historic heroes are stripped of vice and fault. Tyrrell cites the films *The Birth of a Nation*, *Dixie*, and *Gone With the Wind* as pandering “to regional and national historical consciousness and to popular conceptions of American history without providing any serious intellectual challenges to dominant themes... African Americans deplored these films for their unrealistic portrayals of southern society, just as academic historians did for the historical pictures as a whole.”³⁴

Film isn't the only fiction that that affects the public consciousness. The Greeks wrote plays that were depicted as histories with the supernatural mingled in. In 1907, before film was widely available, O. Henry wrote *The Ransom of Red Chief*, a short story in which a little boy “playing Indians” attempts to scalp someone.³⁵ Two small time criminals kidnap a wealthy man's son in Alabama. The child pretends to be an Indian Chief and repeatedly injures his capture until they agree to pay his father to take him back. This is an insight into the public perception of Native Americans in a time predating spaghetti westerns and echoes the idea of the collective consciousness, perhaps Bancroft's one-sided accounts fed into the legend of savages taking scalps. “Plainly we may make choice from among many ideals. If, now, we strive to reduce them to some kind of order, we find that in each age a different ideal of history has prevailed. To the savage history is the painted scalp, with its symbolic representations of the victims of his valor; or it is the legend of the gods and heroes of his

³⁴ Tyrrell, 82-83.

³⁵ O. Henry, *Ransom of RedChief*, (1910).

race,” Frederick Jackson Turner goes on to discuss the mingling of “mythologies, folklore, and legends, which science, history, fiction, are all blended together, judgment and imagination inextricably confused.”³⁶ Robinson didn’t hold a much higher opinion of historians writing history concerning long dead events, “The portentously serious alternates with the lightest gossip. A dissipated courtier maybe allotted a chapter and the destruction of a race be left unrecorded.”³⁷

We’ve reached a new point in the information age where social media, blogs, and link sharing sites³⁸ are archived daily and will tell the story of almost everyone in the developed world. On social media sites like facebook, twitter, instagram, tumblr the information exchange is constant and growing exponentially. Entire lives from infancy are being catalogued. No historian has ever had the wealth of riches like the ones that might look back on our lives. This doesn’t even being to touch the information being freely given for purposed of data mining. Further, I’m curious if they will be made publicly available 50 years after someone’s death like other public records. The one that I am most interested for these purposes is reddit: the front page of the internet.³⁹ There are thousands of subreddits tailored to specific interests. One such subreddit is r/askhistorians- where members of the

³⁶ Frederick Jackson Turner, “The Significance of History,” *Wisconsin Journal of Education* 21 (1891): 15. “Plainly we may make choice from among many ideals. If, now, we strive to reduce them to some kind of order, we find that in each age a different ideal of history has prevailed. To the savage history is the painted scalp, with its symbolic representations of the victims of his valor; or it is the legend of the gods and heroes of his race- attempts to explain the origin of things. Hence the vast body of mythologies, folklore, and legends, which science, history, fiction, are all blended together, judgment and imagination inextricably confused.”

³⁷ James Harvey Robinson, “The New History”, In *The New History: Illustrating the Modern Historical Outlook*, (1912): 2.; Clare Haeussler Bohan, “Introduction: Lucy Maynard Salmon, 1853-1927,” in *Go to the Sources: Lucy Maynard Salmon and the Teaching of History* (Peter Lang, 2004), 1-8.; Lucy Salmon, “History in a Back Yard” (1912), in Nicholas Adams and Bonnie G. Smith, eds., *History and the Texture of Modern Life: Selected Essays of Lucy Maynard Salmon* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001), 76-84. I connected Salmon’s methods and point most closely here. The principle of writing the histories of every one, every where fits in line with Robinson’s democratic view of history.

³⁹ Reddit: The Front Page of the Internet. “r/AskHistorians.”

general public can ask any question pertaining to history and have it answered by a diverse array of experts in the different fields of history (who have been verified by moderators). Click bait sites like BuzzFeed often use r/askreddit to write their articles for them. r/askreddit is a subreddit where one may pose a question to anyone and people discuss at length. This site has millions of international users from every walk of life. These conversations are being permanently archived and could be an amazing source of information in the years to come. But most importantly, sites like this and the social media sites lessen the reliance on news organizations for information- a monopoly on information that could be proven to be deteriorating with the rise of social media.

The public controls information, as it never has before.⁴⁰ Through open source file sharing they are now keeping that information and exchanging it in significant quantities. The combined storage of every user engaging in file sharing would make it the largest archive in the world.

It would appear that Rebecca Conard was right in saying, "At its core, the public history impulse springs from fundamental in the utility of history and a persistent quest to apply historical knowledge to the contemporary needs of society."⁴¹ From film and television to stories passed down history, with the rise of democratic systems with people essentially voting on what is included in our histories, the public is constantly shaping history, as it never has before.

⁴⁰ The public also keeps it. The interconnectedness offered by the internet has made file sharing an often illegal, but easy thing to do. Websites like The Pirate Bay have participants that allow files on their computers to be upload (called seeders) to individuals (called leechers) and at any given time hundreds of people may be offering the same file. This effectively creates a collective storage system and computer power that is larger than any given archive in the world. These are largely nonprofessionals.

⁴¹ Rebecca Conard, "The Pragmatic Roots of Public History Education in the United States," *The Public Historian*, Vol. 37, No. 1 (2015): 119.

