Emerging Professionals
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ON THE COVER
This wordle is created from some of the key words and phrases that guest editor Hope Shannon identified as important to the discussion within this issue.

INSIDE: TECHNICAL LEAFLET
Get to Work: Crafting Cover Letters and Résumés for Emerging Professionals
By Michael Dove and Krista McCracken

History News is a publication of the American Association for State and Local History (AASLH). History News exists to foster publication, scholarly research, and an open forum for discussion of best practices, applicable theories, and professional experiences pertinent to the field of state and local history.

EDITOR Bob Beatty | MANAGING EDITOR Aja Bain | ADVERTISING Darah Fogarty
DESIGN Go Design, LLC: Gerri Winchell Findley, Suzanne Pfeil


Article manuscripts dealing with all aspects of public history are welcome, including current trends, timely issues, and best practices for professional development and the overall improvement of the history field, particularly articles that give a fresh perspective to traditional theories, in-depth case studies that reveal applicable and relevant concepts, and subject matter that has the ability to resonate throughout all levels of the field. For information on article submissions and review, see about.aaslh.org/history-news. Single copies are $10.


2021 21st Avenue S., Suite 320
Nashville, Tennessee 37212
615-320-3203
Fax 615-327-0013
membership@aaslh.org
advertising@aaslh.org
www.aaslh.org
Welcome to the first-ever takeover of History News! While we accept articles from anyone regardless of career stage, this is the first issue written and edited entirely by those who identify themselves as Emerging History Professionals.

We are grateful for the work that guest editors Hope Shannon and Hannah Hethmon put into this edition of History News. They were the ideal people to lead this effort. Hannah was the AASLH staffer who founded the Emerging History Professionals affinity community and Hope was its first chair.

The insight and thought that Hope, Hannah, and these authors bring to their work and our profession reflects people doing relevant, inspired history. You will see from the articles within that the field is in very good hands as the next generation asserts itself in even greater leadership roles in public history.

Many history professionals—whether emerging, emerged, or at another career stage—will no doubt benefit from Michael Dove and Krista McCracken’s Technical Leaflet, “Get to Work: Crafting Cover Letters and Résumés for Emerging Professionals.” Having only recently discovered the wonderful world of podcasts, I was particularly pleased to see Hannah’s review of one of my favorites: Museum People. You are sure to find your own personal favorite(s) as well.

No matter what career stage a person is in, I believe we should grant all of our peers the moniker of “professional” if they take their work as assiduously as these writers and their compatriots do—submitting articles, presenting at conferences, and doing terrific work in communities across the nation.

This issue of History News, conceived, written, and edited entirely by Emerging History Professionals, proves my point. Well done, fellow history professionals. By any standard or measure, you have emerged!

Bob Beatty

The Winter 2018 issue of History News is the result of a vision Bob Beatty had last year for a special takeover or “hack” of AASLH’s long-running magazine. His idea was to hand History News over to the field’s newest practitioners—sometimes called “emerging” professionals—to produce an issue that centers around their perspectives and showcases their thoughts on problems and trends in the field. Emerging professionals include anyone in the early stages of a public history career, from students and new professionals to hobbyists, and their knowledge and insight bring new life to our ever-changing discipline. Bob asked us to lead the project and co-edit the special issue, and we’re pleased to share with you the culmination of these efforts.

From the start, we knew that there had to be a shift in process, not just content, to maximize the impact and success of a History News written almost entirely by emerging professionals. Our primary goal was to produce an issue that highlights their perspectives, but we also wanted to provide a learning experience for everyone who submitted an abstract. For many applicants, submitting proposals for this issue of History News was their first attempt at publication. We provided extensive feedback for the submissions we had to decline and are hopeful that these comments will help applicants prepare for future opportunities.

The articles we ultimately included in this issue reflect how Emerging History Professionals are thinking critically about the field and its sustainability. The authors aren’t afraid to tackle difficult history or push back against practices they believe are unethical or harmful. Jess Lamar Reece Holler addresses pressing labor concerns facing public historians, while Amanda L. Higgins and Patrick A. Lewis consider the role partnerships can play in preparing history Ph.D.s for careers in public history. Cait Johnson, Caroline Gibbons, and Breann Velasco offer their takes on changes and tough conversations happening at their institutions, which should provide insight for readers facing similar problems in their own practice. The columns from Hope Shannon and AASLH’s Diversity and Incusion Task Force, the reviews by Hannah Hethmon and Ty Pierce, and the Technical Leaflet by Michael Dove and Krista McCracken complete this special issue of History News.

We want to thank Bob Beatty and AASLH for inviting us to co-edit the first-ever “hack” of History News, our contributing authors for sharing their experiences and insights, and Carol Kammen for allowing us to take over her “On Doing Local History” column. We hope our collective effort opens doors for the next generation of public historians and provides a model for how other associations and organizations can better support early career professionals.

Bob Beatty

From the Editor
The academic job market, particularly in the humanities, has been in crisis for nearly five decades. The overproduction of doctoral degrees, shifting funding priorities, and a growing reliance on contingent or part-time instructors has dramatically reshaped the higher education landscape. The jobs crisis has also produced a genre of academic writing known as “Quit Lit,” in which academics on and off the tenure track write think pieces explaining their decision to leave academia.

“Quit Lit” contains some consistent tropes: the exploitative power of the neoliberal academy, administrative burdens associated with teaching in the academy, and the consistent call to leave that world behind for better opportunities elsewhere.1

1 Ecosystem Investing

Kentucky Historical Society is hosting a series of programs based on the temporary exhibit, Photographing Freetowns: African American Life in Depression-era Kentucky, at the Kentucky Historical Society in downtown Frankfort, KY.

A Kentucky Journey: The Kentucky Historical Society’s signature exhibit, A Kentucky Journey, invites visitors to explore 12,000 years of the state’s history. It is located inside the Kentucky Historical Society headquarters in downtown Frankfort, KY.

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In a recent Quit Lit article for *Inside Higher Ed*, Claire Potter, a tenured professor of history at the New School, suggested, “No one should work as an adjunct,” and called on graduate departments to track non-academic employment. Potter’s article received swift and accurate blowback for her glib suggestion that adjuncts quit teaching and, germane to this issue of *History News*, her presumption that humanities-trained Ph.D.s could seamlessly move from academic training to “alt-ac” or non-academic jobs.

Potter and other Quit Lit writers often suggest that history Ph.D.s can solve the academic jobs crisis by simply applying for and gaining positions in public history, museums, archives, and libraries—as though those careers have no field-specific training or job experience required. While it may not be obvious to well-meaning tenured and tenure-track faculty in history departments around the country, public historians know that most Ph.D. programs are neither equipped nor interested in helping students cultivate the variety of skills and experiences necessary in finding a fulfilling career outside of academia.

While learning to read, write, research, and analyze are foundational and imperative skills, being successful public historians requires communication, constituent management, long-range institutional planning, exhibit design, curatorial, and development skills.

The problem is systemic, while the solutions proposed by both academic and public history commentators and program administrators are individualistic. Get skills. Make connections. Move across the country. Get hired. Don’t become a statistic. Look for happiness in a few years. Unwilling or unable to do any of that? Good luck!

These individualistic solutions come from a position of powerlessness on the part of academic advisors of graduate students. They aren’t employers. They aren’t hiring. They react to the market offered by practicing public history professionals. Academic advisors have been trying—with varying levels of success—to make better job candidates. Why don’t we emerging professionals who find ourselves in positions of increasing influence at our organizations make a better market?

As the professionals who began careers after the recession become managers and leaders, we need to open more doors for people like us. One of the greatest weaknesses of public history career advice literature is the assumption that our paths are replicable. This is not necessarily so; we depend on circumstance and seizing opportunity.

We must both create the opportunity and make sure we reach outside of our organizations to develop emerging professionals who can capitalize on it. These are people whose energy and creativity expand the mission of our history organizations into driving meaningful social change, people who find new audiences for our organizations’ work, people who have learned to be financially nimble in the era of austerity instead of the current leadership that in many ways still reeks from the loss of the largesse of the 1990s.

Hiring good people isn’t just about creating positions within your organization. It’s about developing cooperative ecosystems that build better candidates while they’re still in graduate school. Working locally, you can build relationships that allow talented young people to attend regional universities and work with you. They come to the organization pre-invested in the mission of improving lives in their communities through history because they are from and of those communities. They give struggling regional history departments new energy and a corps of young alumni who are employed, productive, and ready to give back to their department in innumerable ways. Through their success, they prove to their departments that public history isn’t a backup plan but a specialized career that demands skills over and above those taught by conventional academics.

The authors of this article got our respective breaks from a program designed to create better professional candidates. Now that we have converted that opportunity into careers, we are working to develop a better academic/public history ecosystem that develops talent for our organization, opens the path to long-term retention of that talent, and provides enviable, intangible benefits for emerging professionals who want to integrate their careers into their lives, not put one on hold for the other.

Before the American Historical Association and the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation began funding “Career Diversity for Historians” grants, the Kentucky Historical Society (KHS) and the history department of the University of Kentucky developed the Graduate Editorial Assistantship. It was launched in 2010 to meet the needs of three principal parties: a public history institution, an academic department, and Ph.D. candidates soon to be on the job market. The position’s salary is raised through private donations to the KHS Foundation, and benefits are paid and administered by the university. The position is based in academic editing and publishing, but involves the candidate in the much broader work of a well-rounded public history institution.

The Graduate Editorial Assistant (GEA) serves as the book review editor for the *Register of the Kentucky Historical Society*, the journal of record for Kentucky history. Like other graduate assistantships at history journals, the GEA chooses books for review, cultivates relationships with reviewers, edits sub-
missions, and participates in editorial meetings with Register staff. What makes the position different from editorial assistantships at other journals is the publisher. The Register is published by the Kentucky Historical Society. Register staff work within the KHS functional team devoted to research and access. The team houses KHS’s award-winning digital humanities project, the Civil War Governors of Kentucky Digital Documentary Edition, and the institution’s research library. For twenty hours a week, the Graduate Editorial Assistant works as a peer on the KHS Research Experience team and has the opportunity to work throughout the institution to gain skills in archival processing, communications, exhibit research, and engagement. These opportunities are only possible because the GEA works in a dynamic public history institution that has reaped the benefits of motivated, skilled, and place-based Ph.D. students for seven years.

Since the position was established, five have completed their degrees. All of these GEAs are employed in public history or in tenure-track positions. The authors of this piece are former Graduate Editorial Assistants as well. Each of us leveraged the skills, experience, and contacts we acquired into supervisory positions at KHS. Both of us have found personally fulfilling and intellectually challenging work in communities that we care deeply about. We create change in our home state. We can show the impact of our work to our families and our hometowns. We are repaying the state’s investment in us as its best and brightest.

Like any system, this partnership requires maintenance. Complacency, budget cuts, and staff turnover happen. Institutional memory gets lost. As its beneficiaries, we are committed to maintaining the effectiveness of the concept, articulating its value to current stakeholders, and advocating the expansion of this model to other places and institutional settings. The position was conceived as an act of practical pedagogy and service to the fields of public and academic history, not just as a self-serving way to fund another graduate student and perform editorial labor. There were and are easier, less expensive ways to have gotten the work done.

It is important to note that this is not an internship or an assistantship. When, on occasion, administrators on both sides of the relationship have slipped into calling the position this, those closest to it have pushed back forcefully. Appropriate language is very important for how Graduate Editorial Assistants conduct themselves and how aggressively they make the position work for their career. An intern has expectations set for them. Emerging professionals hustle, network, and position themselves for the next evolution in their careers. This language works as internal motivation for employees, but it also cues those around them into the purpose of the position. It encourages KHS managers to bring the GEA into important conversations with key collaborators not just as an observer but as a participant whose opinion is welcomed and valued.

While the position has placed all of its holders, it does not guarantee placement. Instead, it places ambitious and talented early career professionals into situations that expand their portfolios of marketable skills and their body of professional contacts. But it depends on the talent of the individual to make the most of those opportunities at the time and when they are on the job market.

Maintaining excellence is not guaranteed. Much of what makes the idea work for KHS and the university involves the motivations of the students chosen for the position. If the Graduate Editorial Assistant only devotes the twenty hours required, only focuses on the book reviews, and/or only talks to colleagues on the Register staff, the position becomes another line on a CV. A lack of curiosity about public history and about KHS can make the position stale and the expe-
rience unfulfilling. So much of what has made the position work is an understanding of KHS and its role within the Commonwealth. Some of that understanding was implicit: four of the five GEAs are Kentuckians who felt deeply connected to the state and its history before they came to KHS. All five saw the value of a public history institution in developing their own careers and in fostering change.

Most importantly, the position has allowed talented Kentuckians to do excellent work on Kentucky in Kentucky. The power of the GEA position comes with keeping Kentuckians in the Commonwealth and providing them skills and training for fulfilling careers wherever they chose to make their lives. We chose to stay in Kentucky. We chose to be here; to make change here; and to believe in our state, our place, and our abilities. The skills we gained, the opportunities we seized kept us doing what we love in the place that matters the most to us.

This model may not work for your institution, but a program like it—one based on recruiting and retaining local or regional students—can help energize state and local history organizations, by reminding talented, local folks that fulfilling public history work is available to them at home. As young professionals, we’re committed to continuing to invest in our ecosystem and encourage you to create and maintain your own.

A Kentuckian by birth and by choice, Amanda L. Higgins earned her Ph.D. in American history from the University of Kentucky in 2013. She joined the staff of the Kentucky Historical Society in 2015 as the Associate Editor of the Register of the Kentucky Historical Society and is now KHS’s Community Engagement Administrator. You can find her on Twitter (@Doc_Higgs) and working with communities throughout the Commonwealth to preserve and promote their histories.

Patrick A. Lewis (Twitter @KyPLewis) has been an NPS park ranger, teacher, editor, and digital humanist. After completing his Ph.D. at the University of Kentucky in 2012, Lewis joined the staff of the Civil War Governors of Kentucky, which he now directs. Through NEH and NHPRC funding, CWGK digitally publishes the voices of diverse Kentuckians who interacted with the state government during the Civil War era. He is author of For Slavery and Union: Benjamin Buckner and Kentucky Loyalties in the Civil War (Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky Press, 2015).

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3 The American Historical Association and the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation began their Career Diversity in History initiative in 2014. For more information, visit: www.historians.org/jobs-and-professional-development/career-diversity-for-historians/about-career-diversity.