

The Historian in Government

The subject of our session today is historic preservation in the 1970's: a view from within. As the preceding papers have emphasized, historic preservation is a large and growing business in America, and this upward trend is not likely to change in the future. Today, it is increasingly evident that government, business, and private individuals are interested in history and the preservation of the past, be it the nation's story or an American Family's odyssey. As a nation, we have long invoked the image of our founding fathers and recited the glories and lessons of the past. Yet in spite of these influences, there is supposedly a crisis in the history profession, more specifically a job crisis for recent Ph.D recipients, graduating in large numbers but ill prepared to work within the realities of the modern world. I would like to address the topic, of the historian in government and discuss the relationship between the Ph.D.recipient and Historic Preservation and History within the Federal Government.

Traditionally, historians have filled an important place in government. Leopold Von Ranke, the 19th century founder of the scientific school of history in Germany, was well aware that the success of his ideas would be judged by their impact on his students who chose to work as businessmen, military officers, and government bureaucrats. In fact, statistics show that only a small fraction of the many historians trained by Ranke

returned to the universities as teachers. Most went into other professions--usually government service. Although these men were not called historians, they still used their research tools and knowledge to serve their country while furthering their own careers.. At that time, there were no historic preservation laws in Germany; yet trained historians and other students sensitive to history could be found in all ranks of the German Government. They collected information, analyzed data and prepared reports for their superiors. Their pervasive influence was felt in the formation of German government policy both on the domestic and foreign scene. Through these men the Rankean concept of the nation state was translated into reality, as the German Empire emerged in the 1870's.

It is now time for American Historians to return to their philosophical roots. This is not to say that we are all disciples of the philosophical system of Leopold Von Ranke, but in a sense we are all inheritors of his methodology, the use of the seminar and the critical examination of primary sources. Ranke believed that the historian was important because he could apply his knowledge of the past to the problems and issues of the present. Somehow modern historians have lost this message. Why spend years in school learning research techniques, foreign languages, comparative methods of data analysis and a broad knowledge of the past and not apply this learning to the service of the public? History does not exist in an intellectual vacuum. It is a discipline that is very much a part of today's world, and we, its practitioners, are responsible

for participating in this world and making use of our skills. The role of the history teacher is an honorable role but it is not the only one that we can aspire to today. If there is a current crisis in the history profession, it is not because the American people are uninvolved in their history, but because the historian has narrowed his vision to include only one profession-that of the academic historian. It is time for historians to return to their traditional roots and look for careers in business and government.

I would like to make some suggestions to the graduate students of today. First, do not overspecialize. It is just as good to have a broad knowledge of many disciplines as it is to have a detailed knowledge of one narrow speciality.

If you are preparing for a university professorship then perhaps it is wise to specialize. But even here there are exceptions, declining enrollments having forced schools to reduce staff numbers and utilize remaining faculty members to teach lower level, more generalized courses. In any other career, the historian should be primarily a generalist. For example, in addition to history courses, a broad knowledge of foreign languages, art, architecture, geography, political science and philosophy are also helpful. A good dose of mathematics, science and economics will also prove useful. Many historians in government prepare budgets and financial programs to justify their activities. It is important to be able to do many jobs which require a wide diversity of knowledge.

Second, I would urge graduate students to think seriously about more practical topics for their research papers. Many government agencies have identified wide areas of history where basic research is needed to accomplish the mission of the agency. In the National Park Service, many national parks require basic research to properly interpret their historic themes to the public. These research needs can be easily ascertained through a visit to the appropriate park, and may be of advantage to all concerned parties i.e., the student produces a well defined, valuable end product; the park obtains basic knowledge needed to carry out its mission to the public. An added advantage is that many parks and agencies will have research materials on hand or a staffer who will know where to find them.

This is practical research and illustrates the useful role, the important impact the young historian can have today. An added advantage is that once you have become an expert on a topic pertinent to a government agency the chance of employment with that agency will most likely increase.. After all, no agency likes to lose its resident expert and even if no offer of employment materializes, the young historian still has gained practical experience and made contacts that can prove useful at a later time.

Historians employed by the government have interesting careers and can be found doing a wide variety of tasks. Some may not have the title of historian, but they are still involved in essentially the same type of exercises. Historians gather information, analyze problems and recommend

solutions. They provide a depth of knowledge useful to government agencies deciding how to spend millions of dollars. They can also make managers aware of current legislation bearing on topical issues. Historians are problem solvers who prepare reports based on information not easily available to the public. They are trained researchers who bring knowledge of a wide variety of fields to bear on current problems. The number of government agencies employing historians are endless, the largest number of historians being found in those agencies that administer government Historic Preservation Programs. These agencies are the Heritage Conservation and Recreation Service, the National Park Service, and the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation. Historians can also be found in almost every other government agency that has a land management function, such as the U.S. Forest Service, the Bureau of Land Management, the Fish and Wildlife Service, the Tennessee Valley Authority, the Department of Defense, and many others.

Government is a large business in our country. Employees are always leaving, being transferred, or undergoing reorganizations within existing government units. Prospective historians who wish to make the most of their government career should realize all government hiring is done through the Civil Service Commission, or the Office of Personnel Management, as it is now called. This means that the prospective government historian must learn and adhere to the procedures of the government hiring system taking the PACE exam, or completing the papers for the Mid-Level Register. All of this involves filling out a seemingly endless

series of forms and following the instructions on these forms carefully. Fortunately, we now have xerox machines, so once the process is mastered, it rarely has to be repeated.

The Civil Service Commission has its own standard by which historians are judged and rated. This standard includes credit for both education and experience. Wide latitude in the interpretation of this standard has resulted in many job seekers with a minimal degree of formal training in history. This is due in part to the fact that historians shunned government service so long time that people with other qualifications were accepted. Now the correction of this problem can only come with the passage of time, and the employment of more academically trained historians in professional positions.

We can see that historians are employed in a wide variety of ways within the federal establishment. In discussing the role of the historian in Cultural Resources Management for the National Park Service, Ron Johnson indicated that Cultural Resources Management is the most obvious role for the historian in the National Park Service but it is not the only role. Historians are employed in other areas such as interpretation and management. Interpretation is the National Park Service code word for the "story" told to park visitors. Historians help to research research facts for interpretive talks and in many cases to give these talks. Since the National Park Service has over one hundred historical parks as well as many other natural and recreational areas with important cultural resources, the interpretation of these resources is a large important function.

Historians may also be found in management positions as park superintendents where they oversee the daily operations of a park and its staff. Park Superintendents are responsible for everything that occurs in their parks including the management and preservation of cultural and natural resources, community relations, visitor protection, meeting of legislative and administrative requirements, maintenance services, and the preparation of the annual budget.

Historians also hold management positions in the regional offices of the National Park Service, in Washington, and in the Denver Service Center. These regional historians are responsible for the establishment and formulation of policy, for answers to public and congressional inquiries, for review and preparation of park research papers, filling out the numerous forms required by legislation and for serving as resource people to other managers in areas of history and historic preservation.

Finally, many historians are employed by the National Park Service in essentially research positions. These historians are located at the Denver Service Center, which is responsible for most of the National Park Service research and planning functions. These historians work on projects identified by other historians as necessary for park operations. The National Park Service requires a wide variety of annual research reports including, Historic Resource Studies, Historic Structures Reports, Park Administrative Histories, Historic Furnishing Plans, and Historical Handbooks, as well as many others.

While the National Park Service handles the management of Cultural Resources within the national parks, the management of major government programs at the state and local levels is the responsibility of the newly established Heritage Conservation and Recreation Service-(HCRS). The operative office within HCRS that is responsible for this function is the Office Archeology and Historic Preservation.

The mission of OAHP is to provide for the preservation of architectural, historic, archeological and cultural resources. To accomplish this task OAHP is divided into seven areas of responsibility. Perhaps the best known of these is the maintenance of the National Register of Historic Places. Though the office of the Register has a variety of related interests, it is chiefly concerned with determining the eligibility of properties nominated for inclusion in the national "inventory". Determinations are made on the basis of continually refined criteria and professional standards for assessing the significance of those nominated properties.

Other areas of activity with OAHP include the Historic American Buildings Survey, the Historic American Engineering Record, Interagency Archeological Services, and the Grants-Administration and Technical Preservation Services.

All of these offices encourage increased public awareness through projects carried out in cooperation with state and local governments, preservation groups, educational institutions, historical societies, and private individuals. Taken together, they represent highly specialized and professional efforts to identify, classify, and evaluate the nation's material past. In a word, OAHP performs essential research and inventory functions.

In contrast, the Advisory Council on Historical Preservation is charged with planning and protective review and compliance responsibilities. Advising the President and Congress on policy matters, encouraging public interest and preservation education, conducting or recommending studies relating to state and local legislation, developing special reports on issues of importance to preservationists, and guiding United States participation in international preservation activities, all are duties charged to the ACHP by the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966.

All other land managing agencies of the Federal Government have similar responsibilities. The Historic Preservation Act of 1966 and other preservation legislation applies to all agencies of the government, not just to the National Park Service or to HCRS. Historians can be found doing preservation work for the U.S. Forest Service, the Bureau of Land Management, the Fish and Wildlife Service, the Tennessee Valley Authority, the Department of Defense, and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. In addition to this list almost every large government agency employs an official or unofficial agency historian to manage its records and record its history. People holding these positions may be classified as archivists, writers, or media specialists though many of them are performing the functions of the historian.

It is important to remember that having a BA or MA degree in history enables historians to find work in areas outside of their degree title. A quick glance through the Federal Career Directory reveals some of these sources

of employment skills and abilities rarely needed by government. They provide a sense of perspective on current affairs, an awareness of the trends and currents of the past that give a proper orientation to present events. Historians are trained to think in a clear and logical manner, to get the facts and write their reports, "wie es eigentlich gewesen" (essentially as it happened) as Ranke would say. Given the rush of present day life, this is not an inconsiderable talent. Historians in government and business can imbue their college with a sense of respect for the both the artifacts and ideas of the past. We do not exist in a vacuum. Every thing we are today results from the past action of some individual or set of individuals. Historians are the interpreters of the nation, and as such, bear a deep responsibility to practice their craft wisely.

The present "Job Crisis" in the profession is very real for those historians who persist in the folly that the only true profession of the historian is that of the academic. This is certainly important, but the real importance of history today lies outside the ivy halls of the university. Government offers such a challenge. The job crisis will vanish once historians return to their roots and enter the real life of the nation. It is given only to a few historians to write the massive books dealing with the specialized topic of our various fields. For most of us, our importance and impact will come with how we conduct our lives and use the tools of our craft to enrich our professional careers.

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