
DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY
JAMES MADISON UNIVERSITY

Public History at JMU



Professor Darryl Nash and students in the Historic Preservation class
examining an early Rockingham County dwelling

What is Public History?

Public History is generally defined as the practice of history outside of an academic setting. Although researching, evaluating evidence critically and crafting an interpretation are essential parts of any history student's training, historians today often "do history" far beyond the traditional confines of the classroom and library.



Field trip to Belle Grove Plantation

Documentary filmmakers, museum curators, historical archaeologists, archivists, costume historians, historic preservationists, genealogists, and government and business historians utilize many of the same skills that academic historians use. The difference is that they do so outside of a classroom, and they use those skills to serve a public rather than an academic audience.



Student learning to process flax at the Frontier Culture Museum of Virginia

Unlike many academic historians, public historians also often find themselves collaborating on some projects—on museum exhibits or documentary films, for example—with other specialists who may or may not be



Students in the Workshop in Civil War Virginia visiting a recreated trench at Spotsylvania

trained as historians. Consequently, students who aspire to public history careers need the same background in history and historical methods that the history major provides, but they also need exposure to

collaborative learning and to some of the specific skills and issues associated with the various branches of public history such as oral history and historic preservation. "Real world" experience in the form of internships at historic sites, museums, or historical agencies is also critical.

The concentration in Public History trains students in the broad range of skills and issues associated with public history while providing them with a solid general background in history. The concentration provides a foundation for history majors seeking employment as public historians and also prepares students for graduate study in public history. Students pursuing the concentration augment their foundation of traditional history courses by taking introductory and specialized public history courses and completing a semester-long internship.



Historic Preservation student learning to record a historic building with measured drawings

Requirements



Students in the Workshop in Colonial American Life learning to hoe tobacco at Colonial Williamsburg

The History major with a Public History Concentration is 43 credit hours. History majors pursuing the concentration complete eight electives, seven of which must be 300-400-level history courses. The Public History

Concentration consists of five courses (15 credit hours). Students must complete two public

history core courses and three electives. Two of the three electives should be chosen from the group of primary electives. The remaining elective may be chosen from either the primary or secondary group.

History Major with Public History Concentration

Core Requirements

GHIST 101 World History to 1500

GHIST 102 World History Since 1500

GHIST 225 US History

- Any two 200-level history courses

HIST 395 History Seminar

- Eight electives chosen from 300-level and 400-level history courses

Public History Concentration

Required Courses

HIST 340 Internship in History

HIST/ARTH 396 Introduction to Public History

Primary Electives (2 or 3 required)

HIST 310 American Business History

HIST/ANTH 331 Historical Archaeology

HIST 337 Practicum: Selected Topics in Local and Regional History

HIST/ANTH/SCOM 441 Oral History and Social Justice

HIST 491 Editing Historical Documents

HIST/ANTH/ARTH 492 American Material Culture

HIST/ARTH 493 Historic Preservation

HIST/ARTH 494 Introduction to Museum Work

HIST 497 Genealogical Research and Family History

Secondary Electives (0 or 1 required)

HIST 326 The Automobile in Twentieth-Century America

HIST 327 Technology in America

HIST/SOCI 338 US Urban Social History

HIST 360 Research Apprenticeship in History

HIST 391 Travel Studies Seminar:

- The Ancient World and Roman Britain
- Summer in Ghana Program
- Cultural History of Scotland

HIST 402 Workshop in Colonial American Life

HIST 403 Workshop in Civil War Virginia

ANTH 494 Field Techniques in Archaeology



Students in the Summer in Ghana program visiting a Ghanaian pineapple plantation

Internships

The Internship in History (HIST 340)

gives students practical experience in using historical skills in a wide variety of settings ranging from museums to archives and historical research firms. Among other locations, JMU students have recently interned at:



Costumed student interns at Old Fort Jackson, Georgia demonstrating a Civil War-era women's militia organization

- Army Historical Foundation
- Belle Grove Plantation
- Fredericksburg-Spotsylvania National Military Park
- Frontier Culture Museum of Virginia
- George C. Marshall Foundation Library
- George Washington's Mount Vernon
- Harrisonburg Downtown Renaissance
- Historic Lexington Foundation
- Library of Congress American Folklife Center
- Lot's Wife Publishing
- Marine Corps Historical Center
- Museum of the Shenandoah Valley
- National Archives
- National Museum of American History
- Red Hill, Patrick Henry Memorial Foundation
- South Atlantic Humanities Center
- Thomas Jefferson's Poplar Forest
- US Department of State Foreign Service Institute
- Virginia Department of Historic Resources
- Virginia Quilt Museum
- Warren Heritage Society

Opportunities

Hands-on or experiential learning, field trips to museums and historic sites, and collaborative projects form important parts of most public history courses. Public history students also learn to work with a broad range of evidence such as oral histories, objects, archaeological sites, landscapes, and historic buildings.

- Historic Preservation students work each spring to nominate local buildings to the National Register of Historic Places.
- Students in the Workshop in Civil War Virginia visit regional Civil War sites as part of their course work.
- Students working on the Shenandoah Valley Oral History Project have conducted and transcribed dozens of interviews with people whose histories have largely gone untold.
- Students in the Workshop in Colonial American Life examine colonial life through readings, films, lectures, exhibits, research projects, and a four-day visit to Colonial Williamsburg.
- Historical Archaeology Field School students learn field techniques while working with archaeologists from JMU, Montpelier, and the National Trust for Historic Preservation.
- Students in the Introduction to Public History course researched early children's books for an online exhibit.
- Public History Practicum students created a website on the Shenandoah Valley poultry industry and developed public tours highlighting Harrisonburg's industrial past.



Historic Preservation students researched this Augusta County outbuilding



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Historic preservation
student at work