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# Public History at UNA

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What is public history? Simply put, public history is history practically applied. Public history takes history outside of the classroom, into museums, archives, libraries, historic sites and homes, to your television, and out into the ever-growing digital world. Public historians are trained as collaborators and as facilitators, as well as historians. They work with communities to develop projects that expand the historical narrative of our world well outside of a typical textbook. They help to give voices to the stories of ordinary (and not so ordinary) people, they help to develop museum exhibits, they work to preserve historic downtowns, they help to archive our written past, and they conduct archeological digs to piece together our material past.

While people have been practicing public history in many different venues stretching back into the eighteenth century, it was not until the 1970s that universities began developing programs to specifically train public historians. The term “public history” was coined by Robert Kelley in 1975. The next year Kelley and others at UC Santa Barbara launched the first public history program in the country. The program helped historians apply the skills they learned in graduate school to a variety of fields outside

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academia, which was suffering from a severe job crisis in the 1970s.<sup>1</sup> Other programs soon followed. Today, there are over 100 graduate programs in public history across the country.

In the fall of 2012, the department of history at the University of North Alabama began offering a concentration in public history within its master's degree program. The concentration option required students to take four courses in public history, including an introduction to public history course. Students could complete additional public history projects for their directed research and study courses if they went down the comprehensive exam path, or could complete a public history related thesis or thesis project to give them additional experience.

Between 2012 and 2015 the department also developed an undergraduate minor and certificate option in public history and a graduate certificate in public history. The department also secured funding for four graduate assistantships. The UNA Public History Center, currently housed within the Muscle Shoals National Heritage Area, hosts two of the graduate assistants and focuses on working on projects to benefit community and state history organizations. Graduate assistants also work with the Muscle Shoals National Heritage Area and the Collier Library Archives and Special Collections.

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<sup>1</sup> Denise Meringolo, *Museums, Monuments and National Parks: Toward a New Genealogy of Public History*. (Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 2012), xiv.

During the 2014-2015 academic year, the department of history developed a proposal for a stand-alone master's degree in public history to replace the graduate concentration in public history. The new program, launched in the fall of 2015, allows students to specialize in two areas of public history: historical administration and historic preservation. The administration track is geared towards students who have an interest in working for archives, museums, heritage areas, or other non-profit institutions. Students in the preservation track take coursework designed to prepare them for careers with cultural resource management firms, state historic preservation offices (SHPOs), city planning departments, and the National Park Service. Both tracks require an internship and also require one course within the College of Business. When speaking with prospective employers during the development phase, many expressed an interest in seeing students prepared to think not just as historians but also in having practical skillsets developed in management courses. The undergraduate minor and certificate programs developed in 2013-2014 also give the students the option to take business courses to prepare them for the many hats public historians wear out in the real world. As with the traditional degree in history, students have the option to complete either a thesis or to complete two smaller research projects and take comprehensive exams. The Masters in Public History at UNA is the second program of its kind in the southeastern United States.

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At the root of the public history program at UNA is a firm belief that the best public history programs are those that work to connect students to their community with projects that give students practical, hands on experience. Completed in public history courses, as assistantship projects, as internships, as thesis projects, and as directed research and study projects, these projects have taken many forms since 2012. Students have developed educational programs for local museums. They have contributed to the Alabama Cultural Resource Survey, a state-wide initiative for the Alabama Bicentennial celebration. Students have helped to develop exhibit panels for Sacred Way Sanctuary, a Native American horse sanctuary in Florence. They have worked on National Register of Historic Places nominations, developed entries for the Encyclopedia of Alabama, conducted oral history interviews, and developed short documentary films. Students have developed strategic plans for local sites, conducted historic site assessments for the Muscle Shoals National Heritage Area, created finding aids for collections housed in the university archives, digitized journals, completed a battlefield preservation project funded through the American Battlefield Protection Program, and have written docent manuals for local museums. All of these projects, and many more, have given students invaluable skills that they can take with them when they leave UNA and have helped local institutions immensely. Public history students have worked with many organizations, including the Florence Historical Board, the Tennessee Valley Historical

Society, the Alabama Bicentennial Commission, Alabama Chanin, Fort Morgan, the Florence City Museum system, the Muscle Shoals National Heritage Area, Heritage Preservation Inc., Florence Main Street, the Florence-Lauderdale Public Library, Pond Springs: The General Joe Wheeler Home, the Berry Library, Belle Mont, the Limestone County Archives, the Morgan County Archives, and Sacred Way Sanctuary. Connections made with these organizations benefit students as they move through their graduate course work and into their professional careers.

Graduates from the UNA Public History program have gone on to successful careers in the field. Students are currently working for the Alabama Department of Archives and History, the Alabama Historical Commission, the Alabama Bicentennial Commission, the Des Plaines Public Library, and the University of Alabama Center for Economic Development.

With many more public history projects in the works and new opportunities like a study abroad trip to Scotland planned for 2017, it is safe to say that studying public history at UNA gives our growing number of students a well-rounded, thorough, and exciting education. You never know what will happen next!