

Public History Project

The capstone for a graduate student earning a history M.A. with a concentration in public history at Stephen F. Austin State University (SFASU) is a public history project. The project enables the student opportunity to produce a public history project from beginning to end and, as a result, have the experience and product that will widen the student's resume and public history portfolio, enhancing marketability in an increasingly competitive and constricted job market. The public history project is thus intended as both a capstone requirement for the completion of an M.A. degree in history and the production of a public history project that will enhance the student's employment odds. This project equals the traditional thesis in rigor and thus students will need to complete the required six hours in HIS590.

The Anatomy of a Public History Project*

**The following is representative of a typical public history project, broadly conceived. With that said, as projects can be quite diverse, the various parts can differ depending on the specific project and should be determined in consultation with the public history director chairing your project.*

- Part 1: Original Historical Research and Historiography;
- Part 2: Methodological Review and Project Rationalization/Assessment;
- Part 3: The Project Itself.

Part 1: Original Historical Research and Historiography. Like most standard theses in history, the student is expected to craft an original piece of scholarship based on primary and secondary sources. The purpose of this is to display mastery of historical research, as expected of any graduate student of history regardless of concentration, and to establish the historical context for the project itself. The number of chapters in this part can vary depending on the specific project.

Part 2: Methodological Review and Project Rationalization/Assessment. This part of the project is to make clear the student's fluency in and mastery of the relevant public history field(s) literature, theories, methodologies, and best practices (e.g., archives, cultural resources management, historic preservation, oral history, etc.). Of importance here is to incorporate that literature—and the conceptual frameworks and methodologies therein—into the project as a public history practitioner. In addition, the student should explain how the public audience was incorporated into the project's development and execution.

Part 3: The Project Itself. Depending on the project, as noted below and/or in consultation with the public history director chairing your project, the student is to provide a copy of the completed public history project, usually as an appendix.

Types of Public History Projects. The potential types of projects are innumerable. The list below gives only a few examples of some of the more prominent types, noting, again, that these are not all encompassing. To figure out which project type is best for you, consider your own interests and career aspirations, of course, and consult the public history directors.

- Archival.
An archival project would include processing a collection(s), producing, as appropriate, a finding guide with historical context and annotated bibliography related to the collection's content. The first two parts of the project would thus include a historical essay concerning the subject matter within the archival collection (i.e., part 1) and a review of archival best practices, theories, and methodologies along with an explanation of why any one way or theory was utilized in the completion of the project (i.e., part 2).
- Historic Preservation.
A historic preservation project might include completion of a National Register of Historic Places nomination, a historic neighborhood survey, or compiling a condition assessment report and preservation plan. The first two parts would thus include a historical essay concerning subject matter related to the project (i.e., part 1) and a review of best practices, theories, and methodologies along with an explanation of why any one way or theory was utilized in the completion of the project (i.e., part 2).
- Museum.
A museum project could be the processing of a collection similarly to the archival project or a museum project could be the completion of an actual exhibition, including several exhibits and displays. The first two parts would thus include a historical essay concerning subject matter related to the exhibition (i.e., part 1) and a review of best practices, theories, and methodologies along with an explanation of why any one way or theory was utilized in the completion of the exhibition (i.e., part 2).
- Oral History.
An oral history project must include multiple interviews, the transcription of at least half, and accompanying material that follows oral history best practices (i.e., interviewee biographies, context notes, subject guides, release forms, etc.). The interviews should be deposited within an appropriate repository/archive. The first two parts would thus include an historical essay concerning subject matter related to the oral histories (i.e., part 1) and a review of best practices, theories, and methodologies along with an explanation of why any one way or theory was utilized in the completion of the oral histories, their transcriptions, and all accompanying material (i.e., part 2).
- Other.
The above are just some of the possible public history projects open for students to complete. Others could be historical documentaries, an assortment of cultural heritage tourism literature, web-based historical atlases, published historical guidebooks, municipal/institutional policy reports or statements, and more. Please consult the public history directors for more.

Choosing a Project Chair and Committee Members. Choosing a project committee is a critical step in the completion of any capstone requirement, from a traditional history thesis to a public history project. Any student completing a public history project will need to work with one of the public history directors as the committee chair. The student will then need to select at least two more committee members from the history faculty (which can include the other public history director if desired; but not required) and one member from outside the history department. Concerning the other members from the history department, the student is to seek out any of the diverse and large pool of faculty, with expertise, skills, and insights into a variety of topics and fields. It is thus crucial for any student to familiarize themselves with the faculty in the department. About the committee member outside the department, the student needs to find a graduate faculty member whose expertise and specialization complements the public history project itself and/or subject matter related to the project. For example, if working on an archival project, students can approach the lead archivist with the East Texas Research Center or, if working on something concerning race and ethnicity, just as an example, approach a sociologist or anthropologist who specializes in such. The pool of related faculty across the university is obviously deep (and that is a good thing), so be sure to consult with the other committee members when looking for one.

Know Why You Are Doing What You Are Doing. It cannot be stressed enough that a public history project, as opposed to a traditional history thesis, is both what the majority of public history programs across the world require and what best serves the interests of the graduate student seeking employment. Firstly, familiarizing yourself with examples of other public history projects helps students narrow in on a project of their own and stay abreast of the latest trends in the field of public history, which is vitally important in procuring a healthy resume and set of experiences most likely to attract future employers. Secondly, what makes the public history project so unique from a traditional history thesis, and hence its foremost value, is that it does indeed provide the student with an opportunity to apply public history knowledge and skills.

How to Seek Out Examples of Other Public History Projects. A good place to begin when thinking about a public history project, besides consulting with the public history directors, is to peruse past projects completed by students at SFASU. It is also smart to peruse other students' projects from other programs, especially if they are more aligned to the type of project and/or subject matter you are considering. A good place to start is the National Council on Public History's website for other programs (<http://ncph.org/cms/education/graduate-and-undergraduate/program-review-process/>) whose websites also often include titles and descriptions of their students' public history projects. You can obtain the theses and projects electronically or as a hardcopy thru the R. W. Steen Library.

The Project Proposal. Once you have selected a public history project topic, a student must first turn in a project proposal in compliance with the standards of the public history directors, the history department, and SFASU. Essentially, the proposal has seven parts.

- (1) Title. The statement of title at this stage of the project may be tentative; however, it should reflect the central purpose of the project in a brief but accurate and comprehensive manner.
- (2) Introduction. Several paragraphs should introduce the overall project, explicitly identifying the important fields and some of the authoritative sources for the proposed project.
- (3) Objectives. The student should state clearly the central purpose of the proposed project and the specific objectives to be addressed.
- (4) Literature Review. This section should indicate the extent to which the student has become acquainted with the relevant literature and other resources available on both the historical context of part 1 of the project listed above AND the specific public historical fields related to the project (e.g., archival, historical preservation, oral history, museum exhibition, etc.).
- (5) Justification / Significance / Contribution. The student should justify the proposed project and explain how it will both add to present knowledge and/or modify existing theory or practice within public history generally and a specific historical field or fields AND serve as a culminating project displaying mastery of a related public history field.
- (6) Proposed Methods of Study. This statement should explain how the student will undertake the project; including a step-by-step procedure delineating the proverbial how's, where's, and with whom [e.g., if working at a museum or archive] the project will be completed, a timetable, and outline of various phases.
- (7) Notes and Bibliography. First, the sources that the student used in the proposal should be formatted according to the *Chicago Manual of Style*. A bibliography of major sources to be used in completion of the project must be included as well.

- For examples of previous proposals, please see the public history directors.

The Completed Project. Like any historical work, the written materials must follow the *Chicago Manual of Style*, as well as the specific layout and arrangement requirements of the graduate school at SFASU (to view such, please visit <http://www.sfasu.edu/graduate/>). Part three, unless abnormally large or too difficult to print, must be included in hardcopy as an appendix to the first two parts of the completed project. A digital copy of the actual project, i.e., part three, must also be included.

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