

HSPV 5340: Public History of the Built Environment: Theory and Practice

University of Pennsylvania, Spring 2026
Tuesdays, 1:45-4:44pm, McNeil Building 582



Statue of police commissioner and former Philly mayor Frank Rizzo targeted by protesters in 2020.

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COURSE DESCRIPTION

This course explores the ways history is put to work in the world. It focuses primarily on how communities shape their relationship to and understanding of the built environment. A core premise of this course is that practicing public history requires a distinct professional outlook, set of skills, and ethical stance beyond what is required of historians, preservationists, planners, architects, or designers. As such, our course will analyze the role of public historians in shaping the relationship between communities and the built environment through oral history, museums, historic sites, and national parks; on the internet through digital humanities projects and the evolving role of AI; and

explore how the built environment acts as an agent in popular and public understandings of the past through interventions like monuments, memorials, and historic markers. We will consider how versions of the past are created, institutionalized, and communicated through and with the built environment. Ultimately, we will engage key ideas, themes, and practical concerns confronting public historians and preservationists in a variety of professional and institutional settings.

COURSE GOALS AND ANIMATING QUESTIONS

The overall goal of this course is to introduce you to the field of public history, broadly defined. If public history constitutes “the way history is put to work in the world,” much of our class will be devoted to exploring the “world” of public history as it manifests in Philadelphia’s historic, cultural, and preservation institutions and organizations. We will also hear from public history practitioners encountering and navigating the real-world problems public historians face out in the field. Finally, we will *do* public history through a partnership with a local community public history organization. Ultimately, through these visits and interactions with public historians and public history institutions, this class aims to give you a comprehensive understanding of public history, its major theoretical concerns, practical considerations, and equip you with your own professional toolkit as a public historian. Our course is designated as an [Academically Based Community Service](#) (ABCS) course through the Netter Center here at Penn. ABCS courses integrate service, learning, and teaching through community-engaged scholarship. As such, the questions animating these course goals are as follows:

1. What is public history and who is a public historian?
2. How and why is history put to work in the world?
3. Who or what does public history serve? What is the “value,” however we may define it, of public history in our society?
4. What are the major ethical considerations of public historians?
5. What dynamics shape partnerships between public historians and the communities in which they work? What opportunities and challenges shape these partnerships?
6. How does an emphasis on community engagement impact historic preservation goals, methods, and outcomes?

COURSE STRUCTURE AND EXPECTATIONS

As a graduate seminar, our class will be structured primarily around in-class participation, discussion, and attendance (see below for more detailed explanations). We will make use of Philadelphia’s rich landscape of public history organizations and occasionally host guest speakers or public history professionals during our class time. I will typically assign something written or produced by these guest speakers, making it imperative to arrive to class having read closely the works of these guests to engage in thoughtful and meaningful dialogue with them. **Major Assignments, Penn course administrative dates, or field trips are all highlighted and bolded in the course schedule below.**

Field Trips

Our course will be supplemented with frequent visits to Philadelphia-area sites and public history institutions. On most occasions, these class visits will unfold within our appointed class time and will be accessible via local transit and SEPTA routes. The Netter Center will also help us arrange transportation for some of these visits and any necessary visits to our community partner. I will let you know well in advance if a scheduled visit will run past our 4:44pm end time. It goes without

saying that preparation is essential to these visits, and we will work to set aside class time to discuss the visits in relationship to our course readings.

EVENTS OF INTEREST

There are several (mostly) optional events taking place during the semester you may wish to participate in to enrich and broaden your understanding of current debates and topics of shared concern across the field of public history. These include:

- [Ethics, AI, and the Public Humanities](#): This virtual webinar series is hosted by the National Council on Public History throughout the spring semester and includes four webinars on **January 29; February 12; February 26; and a TBD webinar in mid-March**. The event is free and you can register online. For week 9 (March 17), please come to class having watched one of these webinars.
- The Organization of American Historians (OAH) [Conference on American History](#) is being held in Philadelphia this year from **April 16-19**. This conference is, unfortunately, not free, but there are several panels related to public history that can be seen on the conference program [here](#) (filter results by clicking on panels tagged with “Public History and Memory”).
- Sarah Marsom, a heritage consultant and activist, is giving a public history lecture for HSPV on **Thursday, March 26th** in the Kleinman Forum.

ASSIGNMENTS AND GRADE BREAKDOWN

- **3 Review Essays (30% or 10% per Paper)**: You will produce three short (800-1,000 words) review essays throughout the semester. While these are labeled and identified in the syllabus as review papers 1, 2, and 3, you may turn these in whichever order you would prefer, so long as you complete all three assignments. You are responsible for ensuring you have completed all three assignments:
 - **Review Essay 1**: Write a review of a local history museum or historic house museum tour or exhibit (look at exhibit and public history reviews in *The Public Historian* for guidance). If you are traveling home or elsewhere during breaks or weekends, feel free to explore any exhibit or tour options in those locales to write about.
 - **Review Paper 2**: Review of an additional public history product, be it a digital humanities project; documentary or short film; furnishings, landscape, or general management plan; historic preservation project; or historic structure report. I'm open to suggestions here as to how broadly you'd like to define a “public history product.”
 - **Review Paper 3**: Review of a book about public history. You may choose from any of the books we read in class or from the list of additional readings provided at the end of the syllabus.
- **Participation in a Group Field Service Project (40%)**: Our field service project for the semester is a joint partnership with Treasure Philly! and the Historical Society of Frankford (HSF). More information about the parameters of this field service project can be found in the description below. We will work together with our community partner(s) to define the parameters of a project and a final deliverable that can be completed feasibly within the scope of a single semester. Participation in this project will be based on attendance at community events in addition to a community/public presentation about the project (20%) and a longer reflection paper (20%) reflecting on your experience working with our community partner.

- **Attendance and Participation (30%):** Like most graduate courses, this course is structured primarily around attendance and participation. If you need to miss class for an excused reason, please let me know. Participation will also be required for a few community events with our partner institutions. These will be indicated in the syllabus schedule and transportation will be provided. See below for additional information regarding attendance and participation.

FIELD SERVICE PROJECT OPTIONS

Please review the field service projects below. In the second week of our class, I will ask you for your ranked choices of field service project options and assign you into groups based on your preferences. The field service projects for the 2026 spring semester include:

1. **Church Preservation Initiative:** Participate in 'Treasure Philly!' storytelling and documentation activities at historic churches in Frankford. 'Treasure Philly!' is a new initiative from the Philadelphia Historical Commission to celebrate and preserve cultural resources. You will attend public 'Treasure Philly!' events organized in collaboration with the Historical Society of Frankford, historic churches, and partner organizations including Frankford CDC, the Free Library of Philadelphia, and the Preservation Alliance for Greater Philadelphia. Activities may include conducting interviews with community members, participating in field surveys, and researching historic churches. A central question you may explore during this project is: How does an emphasis on community engagement impact historic preservation goals, methods, and outcomes?
2. **Archives and Collections Management:** Engage in 'The Historical Society of Frankford's' mission to preserve and present the history of Frankford. Currently operated by volunteer leadership, HSF is like many other small historical institutions around the country. The challenges of being a relevant public resource while preserving historic materials and a historic building are many. Our current partnership with 'Treasure Philly!' is creating new enthusiasm about our building and the unique materials housed there. Yet, trained volunteers are vital to our mission of professionally preserving and making those materials accessible. This field study project consists of an introduction to the basic tenets of archival arrangement and description. Working individually or in a small group, you will organize a small manuscript collection, create a standard finding aid, and catalog the collection in HSF's PastPerfect database. If you're interested in picking up tangible archival skills, this is the field service project for you!
3. **HSF Artifact Analysis and Display:** This project consists of an introduction to HSF's museum collections and the institution's goal of professionalizing its displays and signage. Working individually or in a small group, you will choose a museum object (and small related objects, if relevant); catalog it in PastPerfect, if necessary; research the history of the object's use and Frankford context; and create a small museum display and signage for the materials. Research on the object will be maintained with its collection record. Ultimately, this project will ask you to think about the intersection between material culture and the built environment by connecting museum artifacts to the broader architectural, social, and cultural history of Frankford.

ATTENDANCE AND PARTICIPATION

Our class works best not only when all of us are present, but when we are all involved and engaged in discussing and learning the material. It is thus very important that you come prepared to each class meeting by having completed each week's readings prior to our class. Ultimately, this class will be more interesting and meaningful for all of us when we all participate. Participation means more than simply being physically present in class, however. When assessing participation, I primarily consider your level of thoughtful engagement with one another that demonstrates comprehensive understanding of assigned readings and course materials. Additionally, much of this engagement will happen through group work, short in-class writing exercises, answering questions posed by myself or your peers, or asking questions of your peers. Ultimately, there are multiple ways to "participate," and I will try to take these into account throughout the semester and when assessing your overall participation grade.

PLAGIARISM AND AI

Cheating and plagiarism are completely unacceptable and will not be tolerated under any circumstances. I have zero tolerance for this. If you're unsure whether something should be cited, go ahead and cite it. If you are unsure about how to cite or attribute something or the proper way to paraphrase, please ask me. Also, please see <https://catalog.upenn.edu/pennbook/code-of-academic-integrity/> for more detailed information about academic dishonesty, plagiarism, and Penn's policy on such.

While I acknowledge AI can be a useful or productive tool, AI—particularly generative AI—has no place in this course. Using generative AI to assist in the writing or completion of assignments for this course constitutes plagiarism and will not be tolerated. AI use in class on personal devices will likewise not be allowed or tolerated. ***Use of AI for assignments may result in receiving a zero for that respective assignment.***

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Per the University of Pennsylvania's Code of Academic Integrity, students are not allowed to make unauthorized recordings of class sessions without my express permission. If authorized to make a recording of our class session, you cannot distribute it to any parties not enrolled in our class.

COURSE READINGS AND SCHEDULE

Please note that readings are assigned with the expectation that you arrive to class having read the content listed under that course meeting. I reserve the right to change this syllabus at any time, so please always refer to our course Canvas page and consider it the most up-to-date version of our course schedule and syllabus.

Week 1 (January 20): What is Public History?

- **Readings:** NCPH, [What is Public History](#) (2026); Ronald J. Grele, “Whose Public? Whose History? What is the Goal of a Public Historian?” *The Public Historian* 3, no. 1 (Winter 1981): 40-48; Katherine T. Corbett and Howard S. Miller, “A Shared Inquiry into Shared Inquiry,” *The Public Historian* 28, no. 1 (Winter 2006): 15-38.
- **Assignment:** Go to NCPH’s blog, [History@Work](#), and read several posts of your choosing. Be prepared to discuss: what seem to be the current shared topics of interest or concern among public historians? How would you define the work of a public historian based on the blog posts you selected?

Week 2 (January 27): The Power of History and Memory

- **Readings:** Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (1995) (On reserve at the library; this is a short book, but if you don’t get to the whole thing, please focus on Chapters 1, 2, and 4) and Pierre Nora, “Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire,” *Representations*, no. 26 (Spring 1989): 7–24.

Course Selection Period Ends 1/27/26

Ranked Choice for Field Service Projects Due to Canvas 1/27/26 at 11:59pm

Week 3 (February 3): NAGPRA and Decolonial Methodologies

Site Visit: Class meets at the Penn Museum, 3260 South Street, Philadelphia, PA 19104.

- **Readings:** Amy Lonetree, “Introduction,” in *Decolonizing Museums: Representing Native America in National and Tribal Museums* (2012); Marge Bruchac, “Lost and Found: NAGPRA, Scattered Relics, and Restorative Methodologies,” *Museum Anthropology* (2010); Chip Colwell, “Can Repatriation Heal the Wounds of History?” *The Public Historian* 41, no. 1 (2019).
- **Assignment:** Explore the Penn Museum’s [page on compliance with NAGPRA](#).

Week 4 (February 10): Oral History and the Built Environment

Class Visit: Sarah Lopez, Associate Professor in HSPV and CPLN

- **Readings:** Alessandro Portelli, “The Death of Luigi Trastulli: Memory and the Event,” in *The Death of Luigi Trastulli*, pp. 1-26; Michael Anne Williams, “Introduction,” in *Homeplace: The Social Use and Meaning of the Folk Dwelling in Southwestern North Carolina* (2004); Sarah Lopez, “A Personal Reflection on People as ‘Subjects’ for Built Environment Research,” *Buildings and Landscapes* (2022).

Review Paper 1 Due 2/10/2026 at 11:59pm to Canvas

Week 5 (February 17): Preserving Black History

Site Visit: Class meets at Paul Robeson House and Museum, 4951 Walnut Street, Philadelphia, PA 19139

- **Readings:** Andrea Burns, Introduction and Chapter 1 in *From Storefront to Monument: Tracing the Public History of the Black Museum Movement* (2013); Pero Dagbovie, “Reflections on Black Public History: Past, Present, Future,” in *Radical Roots: Public History and a Tradition of Social Justice Activism* (2021); Paul Robeson House reading TBD.

Drop Period Ends: 2/23/26

Week 6 (February 24): Reimagining Historic Preservation's Toolkit

Site Visit: Class meets for second half (3:15-4:45) at Historical Society of Frankford (transportation provided).

- **Readings:** Max Page and Marla Miller, "Introduction," in *Bending the Future: 50 Ideas for the Next 50 Years of Historic Preservation in the United States* (2016); Erica Avrami, "Social Consequences," in *Second-Order Preservation: Social Justice and Climate Action Through Heritage Policy* (2024).
- **Assignment:** Select and read 3-4 of the "manifestos" in *Bending the Future* and come prepared to discuss the divergent visions these authors imagine for preservation's future.

Week 7 (March 3): Monuments and Memory

Class Visit: Visit from staff of Monument Lab

- **Readings:** "[Memorials and Monuments](#)" entry in *The Inclusive Historian's Handbook*; Monument Lab, "National Monument Audit," (2021); Megan Kate Nelson, "Americans Need to Know the Hard Truth About Union Monuments in the West," *The Atlantic*, July 10, 2020; Executive Order on the National Garden of American Heroes.

Week 8 (March 10): NO CLASS, SPRING BREAK

Week 9 (March 17): Digital Humanities and New Tech

- **Readings:** Francesca Ammon, "Digital Humanities and the Urban Built Environment: Preserving the Histories of Urban Renewal and Historic Preservation," *Preservation Education and Research* (2018); watch National Trust for Historic Preservation webinar, "[The Promise and Perils of AI in Historic Preservation](#)," (2025); by this date, please have attended or watched one of the four webinars in the [NCPH series on Ethics, AI, and the Public Humanities](#).
- **Assignment:** Explore Dr. Ammon's digital humanities project, "[Preserving Society Hill](#)."
- **If you are interested:** Kristin O'Brassill-Kulfan is visiting my other graduate seminar, Heritage, Housing, and Labor in the United States March 18th from 8:30-11:30am (see readings under Week 11).

Review Paper 2 Due 3/17/2026 at 11:59pm to Canvas

Week 10 (March 24): The National Park Service

Site Visit: Class hosted at Independence Hall NHP by Holly Boyer

- **Readings:** Anne Mitchell Whisnant, et al, *Imperiled Promise: The State of History in the National Park Service* (focus most closely on Part 1: Executive Summary and skim Part 3); [Restoring Truth and Sanity to American History – The White House](#); and skim through the [Independence National Historical Park Foundation Document](#).

Week 11 (March 31): Housing and Labor

- **Readings:** Brian Whetstone, "Renting History: Housing and Labor on Public History's Front Lines," *The Public Historian* (2025); Kristin O'Brassill-Kulfan, "People First: Interpreting and Commemorating Houselessness and Poverty," *The Public Historian* (2023); Elizabeth Blasius, "The Passion Tax is History," *MAS Context* (2018).

Week 12 (April 7): The Politics and Material Culture of Commemoration

Site Visit: Class hosted at Atwater Kent Collection, Drexel University Archives

- **Readings:** Tammy Gordon, “The Sellebration: Entrepreneurs as the New Revolutionaries,” in *The Spirit of 1976: Commerce, Community, and the Politics of Commemoration* (2013); selection from Marc Stein, “Philadelphia Renaissance,” in *Bicentennial: A Revolutionary History of the 1970s* (2026); Jack Noe, “White Southerners and African Americans at the 1876 Centennial,” in *Contesting Commemoration: The 1876 Centennial, Independence Day, and the Reconstruction-Era South* (2021).

Review Paper 3 Due 4/7/2026 at 11:59pm to Canvas

Week 13 (April 14): NO CLASS

- **Assignment:** Please attend the ACE Mellon Fellows Symposium co-hosted by Penn.

Evening Lecture at HSF at 7:30pm

Week 14 (April 21): Navigating Climate Change

Class Visit: TBD.

- **Readings:** Tiya Miles, “Nantucket Doesn’t Belong to the Preppies,” *The Atlantic*, August 30, 2021; read through selections from History@Work’s series on climate change: David Glassberg, “Practicing Heritage Justice: Helping Your Community Decide Which Places to Protect from the Impact of Climate Change (and Which to Let Go),” History@Work; Braden Paynter, “Historic Sites and the Root Causes of Environmental Injustice,” History@Work; Kathryn Rogers Merlino, “[Re]Evaluating Significance: The Environmental and Cultural Value in Older and Historic Buildings,” *The Public Historian* 36, (2014).

Week 15 (April 28): Course Wrap-Up and Reflections

- We will use this time to discuss and prepare for your final presentations in addition to any remaining loose ends from your field service projects.

Final Presentation 5/5/26 in Kleinman Forum, 12:00-1:30pm

Final Reflection Due 5/11/26 at 11:59pm to Canvas

Bibliography of Options for Book Review

- Avrami, Erica. *Second-Order Preservation: Social Justice and Climate Action through Heritage Policy*. University of Minnesota Press, 2024.
- Bruggeman, Seth C. *Lost on the Freedom Trail: The National Park Service and Urban Renewal in Postwar Boston*. University of Massachusetts Press, 2022.
- Brundage, William Fitzhugh. *Where these Memories Grow: History, Memory and Southern Identity*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000.
- Burns, Andrea A. *From Storefront to Monument: Tracing the Public History of the Black Museum Movement*. University of Massachusetts Press, 2013.
- Conn, Steven. *Museums and American Intellectual Life, 1876-1926*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998.
- De Groot, Jerome. *Consuming History: Historians and Heritage in Contemporary Popular Culture*. London; New York: Routledge, 2009.
- Edgerton, Gary. & Rollins, Peter, eds., *Television Histories: Shaping Collective Memory in the Media Age*. Lexington: University of Kentucky, 2003.
- Erekson, Keith. *Everybody's History: Indiana's Lincoln Inquiry and the Quest to Reclaim a President's Past*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2013.
- Ferentinos, Susan. *Interpreting LGBT History at Museums and Historic Sites*. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2014.
- Foote, Kenneth E. *Shadowed Ground: America's Landscapes of Violence and Tragedy*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2003.
- Frisch, Michael H. *A Shared Authority: Essays on the Craft and Meaning of Oral and Public History*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990.
- Glassberg, David. *Sense of History: The Place of the Past in American Life*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2001.
- Gordon, Tammy. *Private History in Public: Exhibition and the Settings of Everyday Life*. Lanham, Maryland: AltaMira Press, a division of Rowman Littlefield, 2010.
- Green, James R. *Taking History to Heart: The Power of the Past in Building Social Movements*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2000.
- Griffith, Sally F. *Serving History in a Changing World: The Historical Society of Pennsylvania in the Twentieth Century*. Philadelphia: Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Distributed by The University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001.

- Hamilton, Paula and Shopes, Linda. eds. *Oral History and Public Memories*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2008.
- Hayashi, Robert. *Haunted by Waters: A Journey through Race and Place in the American West*. University of Iowa Press, 2007.
- Hayden, Delores. *The Power of Place: Urban Landscapes as Public History*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1995.
- Horton, James Oliver and Lois E. Horton, eds. *Slavery and Public History: The Tough Stuff of American Memory*. New York: New Press, Distributed by Norton, 2006.
- Horwitz, Tony. *Confederates in the Attic: Dispatches from the Unfinished Civil War*. N.Y.: Vintage, 1999.
- Hurley, Andrew. *Beyond Preservation: Using Public History to Revitalize Inner Cities* Phila: Temple University Press, 2010.
- Kelland, Lara Leigh, *Clio's Foot Soldiers: Twentieth-Century U.S. Social Movements and Collective Memory*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2018.
- Kelman, Ari. *A Misplaced Massacre: Struggling over the Memory of Sand Creek* Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2013.
- Leuchtenburg, William E., ed. *American Places: Encounters with History*. Oxford, UK; New York: Oxford University Press, 2000.
- Lewis, Catherine. *The Changing Face of Public History The Chicago Historical Society and the Transformation of an American Museum*. DeKalb: NIUP, 2005.
- Linenthal, Edward T., and TomEngelhardt, ed. *History Wars: The Enola Gay and other Battles for the American Past*. New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1996.
- Lipsitz, George. *Time Passages: Collective Memory and American Popular Culture*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990.
- Lonetree, Amy. *Decolonizing Museums: Representing Native America in National and Tribal Museums*. University of North Carolina Press, 2012.
- Martinko, Whitney. *Historic Real Estate: Market Morality and the Politics of Preservation in the Early United States*. University of Pennsylvania Press, 2020.
- Meringolo, Denise D. *Museums, Monuments, and National Parks: Toward a New Genealogy of Public History*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2012.
- Miles, Tiya. *Tales From the Haunted South: Dark Tourism and Memories of Slavery from the Civil War Era*. Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 2015.

- Page, Max. *Why Preservation Matters*. New Haven: Yale, 2016.
- Pirok, Alena. *The Spirit of Colonial Williamsburg: Ghosts and Interpreting the Recreated Past*. University of Massachusetts Press, 2022.
- Rosenzweig, Roy and David Thelen. *The Presence of the Past: Popular Uses of History in American Life*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1998.
- Stanton, Cathy. *The Lowell Experiment: Public History in a Postindustrial City*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press.
- Swigger, Jessie. "History is Bunk": *Assembling the Past at Henry Ford's Greenfield Village*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2014.
- Turner, Hannah. *Cataloguing Culture: Legacies of Colonialism in Museum Documentation*. UBC Press, 2020.
- Tyrrell, Ian R. *Historians in Public: The Practice of American History, 1890-1970*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005.
- Tyson, Amy. *The Wages of History: Emotional Labor on Public History's Front Lines*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2013.
- Van Wagenen, Michael. *Remembering the Forgotten War: The Enduring Legacies of the U.S./Mexican War*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2012.
- West, Patricia. *Domesticating History: The Political Origins of America's House Museums*. Washington D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1999.
- Wilson, Mabel O. *Negro Building: Black Americans in the World of Fairs and Museums*. University of California Press, 2012.