

HSPV 6200: Special Topics in Preservation & Public History: Heritage, Housing and Labor in the United States

University of Pennsylvania, Spring 2026

Wednesdays, 8:30-11:30am, Fisher-Bennett Hall 25



"For Sale" sign for housing rehabilitated by the Historic Savannah Foundation, 1970s.

Instructor: Brian Whetstone
Office: Meyerson Hall, G-16
Office Hours: Wednesdays, 2-3pm or by appointment.
E-mail: bwhet@design.upenn.edu

Teaching Assistant: Augusta Holyfield
E-mail: aholy@design.upenn.edu
Phone: 805-268-2016

COURSE DESCRIPTION

This seminar explores the housing and labor practices of the American heritage sector. Our course will focus closely on the ways museums, national parks, historic sites, and preservation organizations have engaged with real estate, capitalism, and urban development over the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to sustain heritage work in the United States. How does an interdisciplinary analysis of housing and labor rooted in architectural and urban history, material culture, and labor studies offer new insight into the contemporary work of historic preservation and public history? We will visit local historic sites and host guest speakers engaged in historic preservation and public history work that examines the field's housing and labor practices. In surveying the historical and contemporary landscape of the broader heritage sector, our course will interrogate the social and political

responsibilities of heritage sites and professionals working to address issues such as housing justice, labor and pay equity, gentrification, and the interpretation of these topics to public audiences. Finally, our course will explore how the provision of housing has animated the labor arrangements structuring the workplaces of public historians, preservationists, and heritage professionals.

COURSE GOALS AND ANIMATING QUESTIONS

The overall goal of this course is to develop an understanding of the housing and labor issues directly facing heritage professionals today, in addition to what kinds of solutions public historians and preservationists may be able to offer regarding contemporary issues such as the ongoing housing crisis, pay and labor equity, homelessness, and unionization. The questions animating these course goals are as follows:

1. How have the practices of real estate, capitalism, and rentierism shaped the contemporary landscape of public history and preservation?
2. In what way does the provision of housing influence labor practices in the field of public history and historic preservation?
3. How are public historians and preservationists interpreting and connecting public audiences with issues related to housing and labor?
4. How might we offer alternative origin stories of the contemporary landscape of public history and preservation by centering an analysis of housing and labor in our study of the field writ large?

COURSE STRUCTURE AND EXPECTATIONS

Our course is split into three parts: Pre-Histories and Theoretical Groundings; Housing; and Labor. A major assignment will be due at the end of each of these sections of our course (see below). 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 occasionally host guest speakers or heritage professionals during our class time and 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 occasional visits to Philadelphia-area sites and public history institutions. With one notable exception, these class visits will unfold within our appointed class time and will be accessible via local transit and SEPTA routes. I will let you know well in advance if a scheduled visit will run past our 11:30am 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.

The one course field trip that will not take place in Philadelphia is our anticipated trip to the Lower East Side Tenement Museum in New York during Week 6 (February 26). You should anticipate this visit taking up an entire workday (8am or 9am to 4pm or 5pm) to accommodate for travel to/from the Tenement Museum on Amtrak from Philadelphia, our hosted visit and conversations with curators and public historians at the museum, and, most importantly, eating and nourishment! The Department of Historic Preservation will provide funding to cover transit to/from New York and

our entry to the Tenement Museum, but you should expect to pay for lunch or all other non-essential purchases on your own. Likewise, please plan accordingly and make arrangements well in advance with professors, family members, work, or any other prior commitments to accommodate for this field trip. Should you need me to provide a written justification to an employer or professor, please ask. More information will be distributed about this trip in the weeks leading up to our visit.

ASSIGNMENTS AND GRADE BREAKDOWN

- **Reflection Paper 1 (10%)**: This assignment, due in Week 4 of our course, will ask you to reflect on the historical ties between preservation, public history, and capitalism and the way these ties manifest in present-day practice. You'll be encouraged to draw from your own observations or experiences of the field of public history and preservation for this assignment.
- **Wyck Caretaker Interview (25%)**: This assignment will require you to develop and exercise original research skills to research, interview, and provide a short write-up of a former caretaker/tenant at Wyck, a historic house museum in the Germantown neighborhood of Philadelphia. Working solo or in pairs (TBD based on course enrollment and available archival resources at Wyck), you will conduct research in the Wyck institutional archives and conduct a short interview with a former Wyck caretaker as identified by current curatorial staff. The period our oral histories will focus on is from 2000-2010 and several caretakers are still located in the Philadelphia area. This assignment will be submitted in two parts: a draft list of interview questions **(10%)** and a typed interview transcript and any additional data you've collected **(15%, including photographs, newspaper articles, etc.)**. Wyck's institutional archives are located on site at Wyck, 6026 Germantown Avenue, Philadelphia, PA 19144. More detailed information about this assignment will be posted to our course's Canvas page.
- **Final Reflection Paper (30%)**: This paper asks you to offer your reflection on the state of labor conditions and practices in the field of public history and historic preservation. To gather data for this reflection, you will be required to conduct 1-2 informational interviews with current practitioners in an area of the field of your choosing (historic preservation, public history, economic development, nonprofit management, preservation trades, history museums, and so on). How do your interviewee's experiences on the job market, working in the field, and biggest challenges they identify cohere with the labor conditions we've observed in class? This assignment will consist of a write-up of approximately 1,500-2,000 words. More detailed information about this assignment will be available via Canvas.
- **Attendance and Participation (35%)**: 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. See below for additional information regarding attendance and participation.

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.***

COPYRIGHT AND RECORDING STATEMENT

Any of my course materials, including but not limited to PowerPoint presentations, videos, assignments, tests, outlines and similar materials, and all course recordings, are protected by U.S. copyright laws and by university policy. I am the exclusive owner of the copyright in materials I create. You may take notes and make copies of course materials for your own use in this class. You may also share those materials with another student who is registered and enrolled in this course. You may NOT reproduce, distribute, upload, or display any notes or recordings or course materials in any other way — whether or not a fee is charged — without my express written consent. Similarly, you own the copyright to your original papers and exam essays. If I am interested in posting your answers or papers on the course web site, I will ask for your written permission.

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.

Part 1: Pre-Histories and Theoretical Groundings

Week 1 (January 21): Course Introduction (class meets at 10am)

Course Selection Period Ends 1/27/26

Week 2 (January 28): Thinking at the Intersection of Housing and Labor

- **Readings:** Elizabeth Blackmar, Introduction and Chapter 2 in *Manhattan for Rent, 1785-1850* (1989); Benjamin Holtzman, Chapter 1 in *The Long Crisis: New York and the Path to Neoliberalism* (2021); David Madden and Peter Marcuse, "[The Permanent Crisis of Housing](#)," *Jacobin*, October 2, 2016.

Week 3 (February 4): Moralizing the Market for Heritage

Class Visit: Whitney Martinko, associate professor of history at Villanova.

- **Readings:** Whitney Martinko, *Historic Real Estate: Market Morality and the Politics of Preservation in the Early United States* (2020). On reserve at the library; if you don't get to read the whole book, please focus on the Introduction and chapters 2, 3, 4, and Conclusion.

Week 4 (February 11): The Gendered Politics and Labor of House Museums

- **Readings:** Patricia West, *Domesticating History: The Political Origins of America's House Museums* (1999). On reserve at the library; this is a short book, but if you don't get to the whole thing focus on the Introduction and chapters 1, 3, and 4.

Reflection Paper Due 2/11/26 at 11:59pm to Canvas

Part 2: Housing

Week 5 (February 18): Unlikely Landlords

Site Visit: Class meets at Wyck House and Garden, 6026 Germantown Avenue, Philadelphia, PA 19144

- **Readings:** Brian Whetstone, "Renting History: Housing and Labor on Public History's Front Lines," *The Public Historian* (2025); Marc Ferris, "At Home With History: For Live-In Caretakers, the Rent is Low, but the Bathroom Can Be Very Busy," *New York Times*, March 30, 2003; Mercedes de Miranda et al, "The Philadelphia Society for the Preservation of Landmarks: An Evaluation of the Site Management Role," (1990).

Drop Period Ends: 2/23/26

Week 6 (February 25): Interpreting Housing at the Tenement Museum

Site Visit: Class will be hosted at the Lower East Side Tenement Museum, 97 Orchard Street, New York, NY. Travel will be coordinated through HSPV, expect to be in NYC all day and arrange with other professors or commitments accordingly.

- **Readings:** Rebecca Amato, “Crossing the Gentrification Frontier: The Lower East Side Tenement Museum and the Blind Spots of Social History,” in *Radical Roots: Public History and a Tradition of Social Justice Activism* (2021); Minju Bae, “Unraveling ‘Under One Roof’: The Tenement Museum and Its Discontents,” *Labor: Studies in Working-Class History* (2020).

Draft of Interview Questions Due 2/25/26 at 11:59pm to Canvas

Week 7 (March 4): Preservation and Gentrification

- **Readings:** Suleiman Osman, “What Time is Gentrification?” *City and Community* (2016); Francesca Russello Ammon, “Resisting Gentrification Amid Historic Preservation: Society Hill, Philadelphia, and the Fight for Low-Income Housing,” *Change Over Time* (2018); Cameron Logan, Chapter 4 in *Historic Capital: Preservation, Race, and Real Estate in Washington, D.C.* (2017); Aaron Shkuda, “Exciting Alternatives to Demolition: The Shifting Meanings of Preservation in New York’s SoHo,” *Giving Preservation a History: Histories of Historic Preservation in the United States* (2019).

Week 8 (March 11): NO CLASS, SPRING BREAK

Week 9 (March 18): Housing as a Human Right

Class visit: Visit from Kristin O’Brassill-Kulfan, assistant professor of history at Rutgers University.

- **Readings:** Kristin O’Brassill-Kulfan, “‘People First’: Interpreting and Commemorating Houselessness and Poverty,” *The Public Historian* (2023); Caroline S. Cheong, “Connecting Preservation and Affordable Housing,” in *Preservation and Social Inclusion* (2020); Lisa Yun Lee, “The Stories We Collect: Promoting Housing as a Human Right at the National Public Housing Museum,” *Forum Journal* (2017).

Part 3: Labor

Week 10 (March 25): Moving Beyond the Passion Tax

Class visit: Visit from Sarah Marsom, heritage consultant and activist.

- **Readings:** Elizabeth Blasius, “The Passion Tax is History,” *MAS Context* (2018); selections from Amy Tyson, *The Wages of History: Emotional Labor on Public History’s Front Lines* (2013) (on reserve at the library).

Interview and Transcript with Wyck Caretaker Due 3/25/26 at 11:59pm to Canvas

Week 11 (April 1): Unionization and a Living Wage

Class visit: Visit from representatives of the Philadelphia Museum of Art Union, AFSCME Local 397.

- **Readings:** Johnna Henry, “‘You Can’t Eat Prestige’: A Consideration of Unionization in the Museum Sector,” *Washington University Journal of Law and Policy* (2024); R.E. Fulton et al, “‘We Are Workers in a Workplace Who Have Rights’: Unionization, COVID-19, and the Place of Labor at the Lower East Side Tenement Museum,” *The Public Historian* (2021).

Week 12 (April 8): Domestic Labor and the Public History Workplace

Site Visit: Cliveden of the National Trust, 6401 Germantown Avenue, Philadelphia, PA 19144.

Note that class meets from 10am-noon at Cliveden.

- **Readings:** Brian Whetstone, “Maids, Tenants, and Curators: Domestic Labor and New England’s House Museums,” *Buildings and Landscapes* (Spring 2026); selection from Jennifer Pustz, *Voices from the Back Stairs: Interpreting Servants’ Lives at Historic House Museums* (2010); Oral histories with Almira and Russell Saunders, January 1990.

Week 13 (April 15): TBD, Holding for Shared Activities with Mellon Humanities Fellows

Week 14 (April 22): Heritage Workers and the New Social History

- **Readings:** Richard Handler and Eric Gable, Chapters 1, 6, and 7 in *The New History in an Old Museum: Creating the Past at Colonial Williamsburg* (1997) (on reserve at the library); “‘Ask a Slave’ and Interpreting Race on Public History’s Front Line: Interview with Azie Mira Dungey,” *The Public Historian* 36, no. 1 (February 2014), 36-60.

Week 15 (April 29): Course Wrap-Up and Reflections

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