

Duties and Functions of New York State's Local Government Historians

The State Historian provides guidance, direction, and training to the network of Local Government Historians in New York State. New York's Local Government Historians have been preserving, interpreting, and presenting local history since the positions were established by law in 1919. Today, they operate under Section 57.07 of the Arts and Cultural Affairs Law.

The network of Local Government Historians consists of:

- * 5 Borough Historians in Greater New York City
 - * 12 Community Historians (in community districts of the Borough of Manhattan)
 - * 62 County Historians
 - * 62 City Historians
 - * 932 Town Historians
 - * 544 Village Historians
- Total: 1,617 jurisdictions

Duties and Functions of Local Government Historians:

The national History Relevance Campaign (HRC) (www.historyrelevance.com) has several excellent suggestions as to why the study, teaching, protection, and promotion of history is vital to a functioning society. In their document "The Value of History: Seven Ways it is Essential," the HRC suggests the following reasons why history is valuable:

- a. **IDENTITY:** History nurtures personal identity in an intercultural world. History enables people to discover their own place in the stories of their families, communities, and nation. They learn the stories of the many individuals and groups that have come before them and shaped the world in which they live. There are stories of freedom and equality, injustice and struggle, loss and achievement, and courage and triumph. Through these varied stories, they create systems of personal values that guide their approach to life and relationships with others.
- b. **CRITICAL SKILLS:** History teaches critical 21st century skills and independent thinking. The practice of history teaches research, judgment of the accuracy and reliability of sources, validation of facts, awareness of multiple perspectives and biases, analysis of conflicting evidence, sequencing to discern causes, synthesis to present a coherent interpretation, clear and persuasive written and oral communication, and other skills that have been identified as critical to a successful and productive life in the 21st century.
- c. **VITAL PLACES TO LIVE AND WORK:** History lays the groundwork for strong, resilient communities. No place really becomes a community until it is wrapped in human memory: family stories, tribal traditions, civic commemorations. No place is a community until it has awareness of its history. Our connections and commitment to one another are strengthened when we share stories and experiences.

d. **ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT:** History is a catalyst for economic growth. People are drawn to communities that have preserved a strong sense of historical identity and character. Cultural heritage is a demonstrated economic asset and an essential component of any vibrant local economy, providing an infrastructure that attracts talent and enhances business development.

e. **ENGAGED CITIZENS:** History helps people craft better solutions. At the heart of democracy is the practice of individuals coming together to express views and take action. By bringing history into discussions about contemporary issues, we can better understand the origins of and multiple perspectives on the challenges facing our communities and nation. This can clarify misperceptions, reveal complexities, temper volatile viewpoints, open people to new possibilities, and lead to more effective solutions for today's challenges.

f. **LEADERSHIP:** History inspires local and global leaders. History provides leaders with inspiration and role models for meeting the complex challenges that face our communities, nation, and the world. It may be a parent, grandparent or distant ancestor, a local or national hero, or someone famous or someone little known. Their stories reveal how they met the challenges of their day, which can give new leaders the courage and wisdom to confront the challenges of our time.

g. **LEGACY:** History, saved and preserved, is the foundation for future generations. History is crucial to preserving democracy for the future by explaining our shared past. Through the preservation of authentic, meaningful places, documents, artifacts, images, and stories, we leave a foundation upon which future Americans can build. Without the preservation of our histories, future citizens will have no grounding in what it means to be an American.

The work of the Local Government Historian touches on each of these seven points and falls into four broad categories. Where the historian places emphasis will largely be a matter of personal interest and inclination as well as reflect the priorities and interests of the historian's appointing authority.

1. Research and Writing

The first, and primary, responsibility of the Local Government Historian is interpretation of the past. This will involve research and writing on aspects of the history of one's jurisdiction and may include scholarly monographs and articles as well as writing for a more general public audience in magazines and newspapers. On this subject, Dr. Judith M. Wellman has noted: *The best local historians have upheld high standards of gathering and evaluating evidence, making thoughtful and appropriate generalizations, writing well-organized and readable narratives, and sharing their work with others through the most appropriate mediums.*

2. Teaching and Public Presentations

The second category of responsibility for a Local Government Historian involves the interpretation of the history of his or her community through teaching and public presentations. In this regard, the Local Government Historian may teach courses on local and regional history, serve as a resource to local and regional teachers, especially in the fourth, seventh and grade

social studies curriculum, serve as a content consultant for historical agency exhibit and public program planners, speak and lecture to community groups, participate in radio talk shows, maintain blogs and other forms of social media, discuss historical precedents and parallels to current issues and otherwise disseminate knowledge of the history of their locality. In addition, the Local Government Historian may also be asked to work directly with students and other individuals interested in the community's past.

3. Historic Preservation

The third category of activity related to the work of Local Government Historians is that of historic preservation. This embraces not only the preservation of the built environment, but also includes the preservation of manuscripts and records that document a community's past as well as the unique objects and artifacts that make up a community's material culture.

The Local Government Historian is both an advocate for historic preservation and a resource to his or her appointing authority on questions related to history and preservation. As such, the Local Government Historian may be asked to prepare cultural resource surveys of areas scheduled for development, to identify historic structures and districts and to prepare nominations to the State and National Register of Historic Places, to develop and manage local historic marker programs, and to answer questions regarding the historic significance of places and properties within their jurisdiction.

In addition, the Local Government Historian promotes and encourages the preservation of historic manuscripts and other records as well as artifacts by recommending appropriate repositories of historical materials, such as local government archives, local public libraries, or historical agency collections.

4. Organization, Advocacy, and Tourism Promotion

The fourth area of activity for Local Government Historians is that of organizer and advocate for their jurisdiction's history. Local Government Historians are often asked by their appointing authorities to support the local Tourism Promotion Agency (TPA). Heritage Tourism is the largest segment of the tourism industry and studies show that heritage tourists spend more time (and more money) on their trips than other tourists. Successfully promoting a location's history depends on an accurate and engaging presentation. Successful efforts continue to have an important positive effect on local and regional economies.

Local Government Historians are often asked to organize and direct the commemoration of historical anniversaries and to participate in other civic observations. Again, providing historical accuracy in an engaging way is important with regards to these events.

The Local Government Historian may be also asked to act as a fund raiser or grant writer to provide resources for historical programs or to use their knowledge of local government to lobby for or introduce legislative initiatives to promote community history. A Local Government Historian should be knowledgeable about where and how to access grant funding as well understand their local, regional, and state governmental structure and political leaders.

County Historians

Organizational abilities are especially important to County Historians who have the added responsibility of providing guidance and support to the municipal historians in their counties and of serving as a conduit of information between the State Historian in Albany and the local historians in their counties. The Local Historian Law reads:

It shall be the duty of the county historian to supervise the activities of the local historians in towns and villages within the county in performing the historical work recommended by the state historian...

County historians hold regular meeting for the local historians in their counties, sponsor in-service training sessions, monitor vacant jurisdictions, propose and carry out co-operative joint projects, and assist the work of their local historians wherever possible.

Public Access

The Local Government Historian is the officer of local government charged with responsibility for matters relating to a community's past. As a public officer access is important and, as such, a regular schedule of business hours that are publicly available is necessary. Ideally, every Local Government Historian would be provided with office space in the offices of their jurisdiction. However, this is sometimes not the case and Local Government Historians are required to maintain offices in public libraries or on the premises of chartered historical agencies. Due to the necessity of public access, Local Government Historians should not conduct business from their home. At a very minimum, Local Government Historians should be provided with an official mailing address at the village, town, or city hall or county office building where they can be contacted and should also have access to an email account.

Annual Reports

Local Government Historians are mandated by §57.09 of the Arts and Cultural Affairs Law to report annually to their appointing authority and to the State Historian. The State Historian is currently reviewing the reporting process and gathering information to streamline it and make reporting available online through the Office of State History website.

A Local Government Historian is Not:

1. **The Local Government Historian is not an antiquarian.** The Local Government Historian should not just collect "facts" about their community without attempting to put this data into a larger historical framework. Nor should Local Government Historians seek to assemble collections. Collections of artifacts or documents should be referred to an appropriate repository, i.e. a museum, library or historical agency, equipped to catalogue, preserve and interpret such materials. Historians should especially eschew time consuming activities like assembling scrapbooks of newspaper clippings. Clippings of newsprint will only survive for a few years and microfilm copies of newspapers are already preserved in several depositories in the state.

2. The Local Government Historian is not an archivist. Local Government Historians have long had to cope with the ambiguous wording of the Local Historians Law relating to archival responsibilities. Local Government Historians must keep in mind the distinction between records collection, preservation, and management, which is the responsibility of the Records Management Officer (most often the village, town, city or county Clerk), and the historian's role as supporter and, most importantly, researcher and user of archival records. This ambiguity was clarified somewhat in 1988 with the passage of the Local Government Records Law, which reads in part:

Each local government historian shall promote the establishment and improvement of programs for the management and preservation of local government records with enduring value for historical or other research; encourage the collection and preservation of non-governmental historical records by libraries, historical societies, and other repositories; and carry out and actively encourage research in such records in order to add to the knowledge, understanding, and appreciation of the community's history.

3. The Local Government Historian is not a genealogist. Local Government Historians receive numerous requests for genealogical research and information. The Local Government Historian must, therefore, clearly understand the distinction between genealogy (the narrow pursuit of an individual's lineage), and family or community history (the use of individual lives to illuminate historical situations). Historians in the course of their work may assemble valuable data on early residents of their community and may share portions of that data, if available, in response to genealogical requests. However, they are not authorized to conduct genealogical research on demand. Local historians have often found it expedient to keep on file a list of contract genealogists who may be contacted to provide such services.

4. The Local Government Historian is not part of an historical agency staff. Many local historians are active members of their local historical society. However, the office of Local Government Historian is a demanding one. It should not be diluted by the appointment of one individual to be local historian and, at the same time, director of an historical agency. Moreover, a strong potential for conflict of interest exists in this practice. The director of an historical agency is primarily responsible to a board of trustees for the direction of a private membership organization. The local historian is a public officer obliged under the Public Officer's Law to provide equal service to all the citizens of his or her jurisdiction. However, it may be possible for a local government historian to serve on a local historical agency's board, though not as President.

5. The Local Government Historian is not a partisan political functionary. Although the Local Government Historian is sometimes a political appointment, he or she must be unbiased in their historical writing and public presentations. The Local Government Historian must adhere to professional standards in striving to produce objective and unbiased history. While it is not inappropriate for the Local Government Historian to write an institutional history of his or her local government, it is inappropriate to write a "puff piece" or apologia for an administration or political party, or to ignore the history of other groups. Furthermore, political campaigning, fund raising, or writing campaign literature is not part of the Local Government Historian's official duties.

Conclusion

The 1,617 local government historians in New York State constitute the largest and most impressive network of Local Government Historians in the country. Such a network offers the potential for an organized and professional community of historians across the entire state utilizing best practices and modern technology to conduct their work. Municipalities should fully understand the role and duties of Local Government Historians to help inform decision makers as they appoint and support local historians in their legislatively mandated work.